

# What I've Learned: Laird Small

## Pebble Beach Golf Academy, Pebble Beach, CA

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



Laird Small is still celebrating the January 2014 grand opening of the new Pebble Beach Golf Academy and Practice Facility. With such a long tenure at the famed Monterey destination, he more than anyone felt the frustration of having to serve golfers with outmoded practice and learning spaces. Asked to comment on the facility a month or so after it opened, he didn't hold back. "This is beyond a home run for the Pebble Beach Company," Small told a re-

porter. "It's truly a grand slam."

A longtime and valued Proponent Group member, Small has served as director of the Pebble Beach Golf Academy for almost 20 years, going back to 1996. That was the year he was recognized by his section peers with the NCPGA's Northern California Teacher of the Year award. This was topped for Laird in 2003, when he claimed the National PGA Teacher of the Year Award. Attracting attention from the industry's top print publications, he was named one of America's 50 Best Teachers by Golf Digest in 2013/2014. In that same timeframe Small was cited as one of the Top 100 Teachers in America by GOLF Magazine.

In a recent conversation with member/interviewer Paul Ramee, the veteran coach, teacher and academy operator shared his reflections and insights.

**Laird, could you talk about your career path in golf and how you took your early steps?**

I had plans to play the game of golf professionally and compete at the top level. Then, at a certain point, I realized I didn't have

the necessary passion. I thought the passion was in me, but as I moved from one horizon to the next, I found that competing didn't captivate my interest. I didn't get true fulfillment from it.

**How did that realization make you feel?**

I had to pause and reflect and get a sense of what I really wanted to do. At that point in time I was 22 or 23. I knew that teaching and coaching interested me. It seemed to me that the great coaches provided value to people's lives. I felt teaching was something I would like to do.

**Given that things ended up quite well, can we assume you got off to a good start?**

I was fortunate. At the time I started looking around, the owner of Quail Lodge in Carmel Valley was offering a deal whereby golf professionals who were trying to make it on tour could practice for free, provided they picked the driving range one night a week. I was lucky to land one of these jobs. Before too long I heard they were looking for some extra help in the golf shop. I expressed interest and they brought me in. It was a setting that provided me full exposure to the golf business, including a good introduction to teaching. I stayed in that role for three years and then moved up to become director of golf.

**How about your next career opportunity?**

I realized I wanted to move to a bigger operation, so when the head job at Spyglass Hill opened up, I applied to the Pebble Beach Company and was fortunate to be selected. Spyglass was definitely on a larger scale than the job I had come from. Along with golf operations I also oversaw food-and-beverage. I was covering the general business aspect and I was managing a larger workforce.



Laird Small is closing in on 20 years as the Director of the Pebble Beach Golf Academy. This year he celebrated opening a brand new practice facility.

**What factors do you feel accelerated your development as a coach and a teacher?**

During my time at Quail Lodge I was fortunate to be involved with the Golf Digest Schools. We were a host site and this gave me a chance to meet great guys like Chuck Cook, John Elliott, Charlie Epps, Jim Flick, Bob Toski and Mark Wood. I helped Golf Digest put the schools together and saw first-hand how to run them properly. Shortly after that, Jim Flick went out on his own to start the Nicklaus-Flick Golf Schools. Jim asked me to be on the team and we ran several schools at Pebble Beach. At this point I was working with and learning from guys like Mike Malaska and Martin Hall, as well. It truly kept my learning process going.

**And it got the wheels turning in your head, correct?**

Well, it gave me the idea that we should put together the Pebble Beach Golf Schools. This was during the period of Japanese ownership of Pebble Beach, so we launched the schools in Japan. In Japan at that time, businessmen were learning golf at five-tier driving ranges and we introduced the American way of teaching at the golf course. They would generally play nine holes, stop, have a big lunch and then play another 9 holes. Under that format our schools program did very well. We also benefitted because those same Japanese would come to Pebble Beach on corporate retreats.

**You served on the PGA's National Education Committee. What do you see in the current landscape that is lacking?**

Golf does not have a common language. The terminology we are currently using is poor. The swing positions we talk about make sense to us but they don't get through to the golfer. We really have a tough time communicating concepts, ideas and motion. Golf is already difficult, and the lack of a common language makes it harder. Let's be honest, 99 percent of the information on how to swing the club has already been discovered, the issue that remains is how to communicate it. Look at method teachers. You may or may not agree with their method, but give them credit in one respect. They have sat down and coordinated their thinking and language and their explanation processes and made it all compatible among multiple professionals. The benefit to the student is that confusion gets avoided. The person can understand what's presented and then start to try and accomplish the tasks.

**Any other observations along those lines?**

Well, if player development is so important and growing the game is the focus of the PGA, why do we use our least experienced instructors to teach our new, incoming golfers? Students of all levels need a clear pathway for development. They deserve to be able to develop skills and move from level to level. They need a way that they can self-correct and cut down frustration. We haven't supplied that yet.

**How has physical fitness worked into your instruction mode?**

I realized it was really important after giving a golf lesson to Red Sox outfielder Jim Rice. Jim was a guy who several times in his career broke his bat just on a check-swing. Jim was obviously a muscular guy and it intrigued me how he could create so much bat speed. I saw how the swinging motion of a bat and a golf club had similarities.

**How did you pursue this interest?**

I started a conversation with Mike Malaska and Peter Egoscue about it. Pete is the author and clinic founder who has helped Nicklaus and so many others. Those two were a great help. We talked about the dysfunction of the body and its inability to move. As a result of the body's reduced range of motion in an industrial-



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**-Laird Small**

ized society something like the golf swing is definitely affected.

**How does that translate to your work with students?**

Typically now when I prepare for a lesson, I study carefully how the individual looks as he or she walks toward me. What is their body profile? Are their hips aligned? Then, can they make certain motions? It goes into an evaluation that guides us along. I can explain to a student that their body won't allow them to do certain things. So we can either fix the dysfunction or create a different motion to allow them to do the task.

**We've seen a fair amount of publicity about the new academy complex at Pebble Beach. How would you evaluate it, six months in?**

There really are not enough adjectives to describe the finished product. I often say: I thought we were going to hit a home run, instead we hit a grand slam. Going in, we had a lot of different ideas about location and design and configuration, but it really turned out great. You have to walk through the building to get to the learning areas, so everyone who walks in is greeted properly and made to feel welcome.

**Talk about the equipment that is in there to guide the game-improvement process.**

Right now, we have three studios. The first is the putting studio, which is equipped with a SAM PuttLab plus a Quintic Launch Monitor and Video Analysis. Our main studio has an AMM 3D Motion Analysis, Force Plates and V1 High Speed and high-def cameras. It also contains a Robo Golf golf robot which allows golfers to feel a correct swing motion while they are actually swinging. The third studio has an AboutGolf Simulator, which we use for clubfitting as well as ball-fitting. And it gets used for recreational experiences, as well.

**So, that must mean...**

Yes, it does. Golfers do really come in and play Pebble on the simulator and then go across the street and play the real thing.

**What books have you been reading lately?**

I recently received Manuel de la Torre's book, "Understanding the

Golf Swing,” which is a modern interpretation of Ernest Jones’ classic “Swing the Clubhead.” I’ve also recently enjoyed Jim Hardy’s book on the 1-plane and 2-plane golf swing. “The Golfing Machine” by Homer Kelley is great to go back to because it catalogues everything. Also, Mike Malaska recently sent me his new book “I Feel Your Pain.”

#### **Good choices. How about outside reading?**

As far as non-golf books, I have started to read about human self-awareness while performing an action. For example, “Winning the Battle Within” by Dr. Glen Albaugh. Also, “Mastery” by George Leonard and “Awareness” by Anthony DeMello. Those are great books for my students. I have the student read them and then ask them to produce a book report for me. Book reports are great conversation starters and they allow us to discuss the student’s self-awareness.

#### **You live in an area where there are many noted experts in personal and spiritual development. Does that intersect with your practice as a coach and teacher?**

Yes, very much so. I’m fortunate to have spent a lot of time with Fred Shoemaker, who is just up the road. Another resource I use regularly is HeartMath, which specializes in emotional management. HeartMath basically deals with the emotional landscape. It’s about helping people remain neutral through stressful situations. The idea is to provide tools for individuals to remain neutral. The great thing is that it works in golf and life in general.

#### **What is an on-course learning experience with you like?**

One exercise I like is to take a student out to the course and try to create pressure situations. For example, I might have them hit shots from behind a tree and see how they handle the situation. After each scenario I take the opportunity to have a conversation with them and see how they felt. Unlike football, in golf we can’t simulate a “two-minute drill” so we have to become creative in how we simulate practice. For example, we can force them to make 10 five-footers in a row. Or, once they have addressed the ball, disrupt them and see how they handle it. I have even wagered money with a student to see how they handle the situation. You can also go and watch them play. That adds pressure.

#### **You worked with Kirk Triplett for many years. What was it like teaching a top player for that extended period?**

Kirk and I have worked together for over two decades and we have discussed many concepts over those long hours on the tee. I will never forget one of our early sessions, in which Kirk said to me: “I can do what you are asking me to do and still put food on the table.” That was a very profound statement and I felt a great responsibility to not ruin his ability to put food on the table.

#### **This takes us to another good topic—the coaching plan a teacher and student create.**

With regard to Kirk, what I found interesting is that we have the same agenda. We talk about the same things. He has told me that he “appreciates that I am not changing the agenda” and I am honoring his request. Not staying on the agenda is one of a teacher’s worst pitfalls. If we move too quickly to the next item we may hurt progress. Kirk became a Top 30 Player and got an invite to Augusta, so he came to me two months before the Masters and we identified five things he needed to work on before the tournament. The first session we worked on the curve of the ball and trajectory. After the session he told me, “I can do these two items, but I can’t do the other three. We can work on them tomorrow and that is okay. I don’t own them yet, but we will work on them every day and I will be fine when the tournament arrives.” He had to be able to “put them in play.”

#### **Is this applicable for golfers at all skill levels?**

If you take a beginner, that lesson may be about grip, posture, setup and maybe an “L to L” motion. All fine, but then we introduce another item too quickly. We’re ready to move on, but maybe they aren’t. And really, most of the time they aren’t. I’ve found that we often make assumptions about the player’s skills. Once you get a little ahead of them, you’ve lost them.

#### **You work with many celebrities. What has that been like?**

It’s been a lot of fun. They tend to want to do things at a high level. But I’ve never looked at them as celebrities. I’ve looked at them as human beings and students. They truly are just like you and me—the enjoy golf and would like to play better. If you focus on the celebrity then you are not focusing on the student.



Laird has been honored as a PGA of America National Teacher of the Year, a Golf Digest Top 50 Best Teacher and a GOLF Magazine Top 100 Teacher.