

What I've Learned: J.D. Turner

J.D. Turner Golf Group, Savannah, GA

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



J.D. Turner's name has been on the GOLF Magazine list of Top 100 Teachers for 20-plus years. For sheer skill in teaching and coaching, he is duly recognized by his peers and by industry observers. What particularly sets Turner apart is his parallel skill set in promotion, marketing and profitable golf management. Widely recognized as an innovative businessman, he first shared his unique acumen to a wide audience in the late 1980s. That's when Golf Shop Operations magazine ran a cover story authored by Turner called "25 Ways to Grow Your Teaching Business." The article, published at a time when few were focusing on maximizing instruction revenue, grew out of Turner's PGA Master Professional thesis—written not long after the Master Professional program began.

Asked about the sources of his business success, J.D. will often say that he tended not to be fearful of the calculated risk. His Midwestern work ethic coupled with his innate business sense has made Turner an outstanding role model for all instructors who have the entrepreneurial gene. It certainly makes him worthy of a turn in the interview seat with Proponent Group member and part-time journalist Paul Ramee, Jr. The transcript of their Q & A is provided here as a member service.

Let's start with a description of your childhood and early memories of golf.

I grew up in a little railroad town in central Iowa, called Perry. My father was a high school teacher and coach. I was born in 1940 and when I was nine years old polio was a pretty common disease, so kids were not playing baseball or tennis and certainly no one was swimming—all because of fear of the disease. So, golf was a good idea. We had a nine-hole golf course, which my dad joined for \$75 a year. The golf course was wide open and some days we would play 36 or even 45 holes.

I got to be pretty good and attended Graceland University for two years before transferring to the University of Iowa where I played for my last two years of eligibility. I played well there and finished fourth in the Big 10 Championship my senior year.

Your college years coincided with the beginning of the Palmer-Nicklaus era, which was good timing. What did you do after graduating?

After college I got into teaching and played some amateur golf in my home state of Iowa. I was able to develop as a player and hold my own. One day while

playing with some members at a club I had joined I shot a very nice round of golf. They got convinced that I should head out on tour and one of them agreed to back me. I gave it a try. As happens with a lot of players it didn't work out.

What happened after that?

I knew I wanted to be in golf so I looked around for opportunities. The same gentleman who backed me owned a golf course and thought I could help him promote it. He was able to make me an employee of his corporation. We ultimately went into business together. On one section of his property was an old farmhouse that we remodeled to use as a dorm. That gave us the idea to create a junior golf academy.

I'm going to guess you had that market all to yourselves.

That's true. Iowa had basically no junior golf schools or academies at that time. To recruit players I would travel the state, going town to town. When I'd arrive in a new place I would ask the local banker who the golfers in town were. I would look them up, start a conversation and see if I could convince the parents to send their kids to our Junior Academy.

Eventually you held some head-professional jobs. Where were they?

After the promoting position, I got an offer from Lakeshore Country Club to become their head professional. After five years at Lakeshore, the Des Moines Golf & Country Club opened and I submitted an application and finished runner-up. Three years later the job opened up again and I got hired. I was there for 14 years until I turned 53, which is when I started Turner Golf Group which catered to major corporations.

How did you manage to get a TV show off the ground in the days before the Golf Channel?

In 1980 cable was just getting started and I met two young guys who were involved with Heritage Cable. I was aware that the cable networks were desperate for programming. I approached them about a show and they said, "Let's do it."

You must have found yourself going up a learning curve quickly.

The most important thing I learned, early on, was that to do this right you really needed to own the show and produce it yourself. I started out calling it "The Iowa Golf Show." I later changed the name to "The J.D. Turner Golf University." We would produce and air 13 half-hour shows a year. I footed the bill for everything—the production, air time and so on. Of course, I also

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took in the advertising revenue. We did well generating revenue, in part because I had a ready-made audience at Des Moines C.C. to whom I could sell my ad slots.

Apparently you had a shrewd arrangement with the people who bought air time.

My deal was that I would let the sponsors dictate who they wanted my students on the show to be. That was a great benefit to them, because they could use the TV appearance and the lessons as a reward or inducement for one of their own clients.

What was your schedule for production and broadcasting?

The show aired Monday, Thursday and Saturday for 13 weeks and then they would repeat it for another 13. We would shoot our episodes in the summer and they would air it over the winter months. Eventually, I took the content from the shows and compiled a VHS tape and also created a pamphlet which turned out to be a Lesson Plan for High School Golf Coaches. We sold it to about 2,000 colleges, high schools and libraries.

Why do you think you are well known as a smart businessman, especially in comparison to golf instructors generally?

The short answer is that I was doing it. I had the interest. Along with wanting to be an effective teacher I also wanted to run a successful business. Maybe somewhere in me there's a gene for creative ideas. Seriously, though, I was never afraid to try something different. To me that made the work more fun.

For example?

Take group instruction. I remember going to the doctor's office and finally after multiple people—the receptionist, one nurse, another nurse—the doctor would come in. He was managing his time to have maximum exposure to patients. I thought about trying to do something similar. If the doctor could have multiple patients at the same time, why couldn't I?

Why do you think most golfers are not lesson takers? Is it the golf pro's fault?

It's not necessarily the pro's fault. I believe you have two things going on here. The first, is that the golfers don't trust the source and the second is that they are afraid to take the risk to change to improve for the long haul. They only come for a lesson when they're desperate and that's when they are looking for a 30-minute miracle rather than a program to develop their skills.

How do we do a better job of marketing and selling golf instruction as an industry?

Well, I suspect you need to convince golfers that it's worth the time, the effort and the cash. I think we also need to realize that not everyone wants to be the club champ, but they just don't want to play poorly. I think we need to get better at telling stories of improvement and it has to be fun, we are too serious with our approach and too technical. I ask myself: Have players gotten better now than they were 50

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years ago? My answer is: I don't think so. We are over-teaching. We need to coach more.

Did you train the teachers that worked with you in the art of selling and marketing? If so, what help did you give them?

Basically, I promoted the hell out of them. If they played well in a tournament, I put that news in the club bulletin. If a member

gave me some positive feedback about a swing thought of theirs, I put it in the club bulletin. I typically hired only good players and teachers so it was easy to promote them. Their lessons books were always full.

Where do you think the biggest upside is for the next generation of teachers? Is it fitness, using technology, long-term coaching programs, or something else?

They need to figure out what makes golfers better, because people are not getting better and then they stop taking lessons. If people don't get better in one or two lessons, they are gone. These young teachers need to get better at follow-up and offer real coaching. As a basic format, I would offer programs that have five sessions of teaching and five sessions of coaching.

What would be the first thing you'd tell a new teacher just getting in the business about building their business?

They should figure out some good ideas to market themselves. This was the focus of my Master Professional Thesis simply titled: “Increasing Teaching Revenue.” I spent a lot of time researching ideas and trying different methods of promotion and over time I came up with a lot of ideas that worked well for me. Teachers are welcome to take as many ideas from my thesis as they would like to grow their businesses, market themselves and get skilled at implementing promotional strategies.

Is being a successful golf instructor still a relationship business even given the digital world we now live it?

We're moving away from the relationship business, I am a 30-handicapper when it comes to the internet, but I can tell you that people can get golf instruction on the Internet and the quality of the instructor-student relationships are diminishing and I doubt that will be good for our industry.

What conclusion do you draw, from looking at that trend?

We need to focus on simplifying our approach. We're too complex with our presentation. I always felt that we are casual about the setup and very concerned about the specifics of the swing. We should worry about the specifics of setup and swing the club casually. People will get better automatically if we get them to set up better. I realize it isn't fun teaching setup. It can be boring. From the golfer's viewpoint it's got value. With a reasonable starting point our players will have a chance.

I believe it was Jack Nicklaus talking about a comment his teacher, Jack Grout, had made that “80 percent of golfing success could be attributed to a sound set-up position.” I tend to agree with that assessment.

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