

What I've Learned: Gary Gilchrist

Gary Gilchrist Golf Academy, Howey-in-the-Hills, FL

Interview by David Gould



In a coaching career that's now in its third decade, Gary Gilchrist has been responsible for recruiting, training and developing more top-ranked junior-level golfers than any other coach in the profession. He has run and overseen the coaching of two of the biggest golf academies in the world.

A South Africa native, Gilchrist had the bug to compete at a top tour level but also a strong motivation to understand what's required for competitive success. In his

career, he has coached more than 75 American Junior Golf Association All-Americans and six AJGA Players of the Year. He has coached three U.S. Amateur champions: David Gossett of the U.S.; Colombia's Maria Jose Uribe and Thailand's Virada Nirapathpongorn and four U.S. Junior Girls champions, Paula Creamer, Julieta Granada, Chile's Nicole Perrot and Korea's In-Kyung Kim. The NCAA women's champion Virada Nirapathpongorn of Thailand and the U.S. Public Links champion Michelle Wie also emerged from Gary's system of training.

Gilchrist also teaches many of the game's best professionals and helped Yani Tseng ascend to No. 1 in the world. He also coaches China's first fully exempt LPGA Tour player Shanshan Feng, who when combined with Tseng and Suzann Pettersen, have won a combined six majors since 2007 under Gilchrist's guidance. His PGA Tour players include Sean O' Hair, Charles Howell and D.A. Points.

"I love when my players share their goals and dreams. I get excited by the challenge to help and nurture those aspirations into reality," he explained to Proponent staff editor Dave Gould.

Like a lot of golf professionals you followed a path that began with playing competitively then took a turn toward instruction. Tell us about that. My decision to pursue teaching wasn't exactly planned out. I was in my home country of South Africa, playing professionally. I had been to America as a university student but returned home and ended up playing the South African Tour for five years into the late 1980s. It was a good experience although I struggled to try and attain my playing goals.

Explain that scenario for us. I could drive the ball well and

play long irons. That kept me going. One factor working against me was my belief that I had to become a classic pure swinger to play tournament golf successfully. That's what motivated me and I neglected other very important areas of the game. The great players balance their practice and have the ability to focus on the key areas that need improvement. If I focused my attention on my short game, my routine and my mental game, I would have seen much more improvement. Being a perfectionist without a clear plan caused me to become negative towards my game, which impacted my attitude and eroded my confidence over time.

What influences were around you at that time?

David Leadbetter had come down to play the South African Tour and his approach to coaching and teaching was influential even then. People in South Africa knew him as an outstanding instructor through work he had done with Mark McNulty, Nick Price, David Frost, players of that caliber. I studied what he was doing when I got the chance.

What brought you to the U.S.?

I had to do National Service for two years in the Air Force. During this time, my golf improved and I made the South African team. This opened the door for me to go to college in the US. As I said, I had been there in the early 1980s as a college golfer at Texas A&M, which lasted two years. That's when I turned pro and went out on the South African Tour, which lasted 5 years. Every year, I kept my tour card but was not seeing much progress in my game. That's when I returned once again to the US to seek out David Leadbetter's tutelage in 1993.

How did you proceed from that realization?

There I was, standing with my new wife in the Orlando airport with two suitcases and a bag of clubs.

I then spent the next six months practicing, taking lessons and playing the mini tours without much success. The money we brought over was running out. During this time, I was taking lessons with one of David's top coaches Rob Baker.

I ended up talking to Rob about my future plans and he asked me if I would consider teaching as a career.

How would you describe your transition?

This was a very difficult time in my life. My whole childhood was based on becoming a



Gilchrist has been the long-time coach to former world No. 1 Yani Tseng.

world famous golfer. I had put so much time and effort into the game. Now I was going in a different direction starting at the very bottom. It took two years before I finally let go and started teaching and loving every day learning from some of the greatest teachers in the world. Lake Nona was a special place with the best players in the world training there on a regular basis.

Were there other challenges besides just the tasks you had to perform?

My other big stress was due to the fact that I'd made a pretty abrupt decision to give up playing. It had been a big dream of mine and that was hard to let go of. I talk to young people about their dreams all the time. Dreams are important. They guide your life, so we as teachers need to have a lot of sensitivity around that. I make sure the teachers at the Gary Gilchrist Academy never forget that aspect of the student's experience.

When you started with the Leadbetter group, did you feel you had a lot of options and opportunities?

Overall, I would say yes. After two years, I found I was learning at a fast rate. I was the instructor who was actually there assisting David Leadbetter during his one-on-one teaching sessions. That's a rare experience. But the environment for staff instructors was competitive. To even work at the Leadbetter Academy you had to be a pretty special teacher.

What ended up setting you apart?

What happened was we got a visit at the Leadbetter Academy by people from IMG who wanted to make David the brand name for something that would be the golf equivalent of the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy. They invited a few of us to a summer camp for golf they had set up. They felt I was a good fit to get the junior academy started and offered me the Director of Golf position. This ignited a passion in me for junior golf and developing the potential in juniors.

Did it feel like a risk, to go in that direction?

I became excited about the journey because I was able to help young people learn the lessons that I had missed in my own career. The importance of mental and strategy and learning and managing yourself are the keys to achieving your potential. During those early years, I learned from the model they used in tennis and developed into all the areas of coaching: Psychology, fitness and strategy together with the technical side.

At the time a holistic approach wasn't common. For me, it was about being with the athletes on the front line. Instead of teaching a swing, in those early years, I learned how to become a coach, and how to coach the whole person. At my Academy, in Orlando, I believe we have the most integrated approach to training and development that you will find anywhere in the world.

How did you imagine you could build such a thing?

My passion for the game and love for juniors gave me the drive and ambition to create something unique. But I always knew that the secret is having a great team and learning from those

who have gone before. By using the tennis model, I created a systematic approach to training that I still use today at GCGA, and the results speak for themselves.

After you left Leadbetter/IMG you ended working in Hilton Head for the IJGA for a while. Is that when you devised the plan to own and operate your own facility?

My time in Hilton Head was a test for me. I wanted to see if I could challenge the coaches to a new level of excellence and see how far we could motivate the students into realizing their potential. The academy had never won a national title but during

my tenure, we won two USGA events and one LPGA major. When IJGA notified me that it was going in a more high-profile direction, I knew that it was time to determine our own destiny. My wife and I decided to leave Hilton Head and move closer to her family in Florida. It was our dream to start an academy that was managed or owned by the people who worked the business every day and loved the game. The plan to open our own facility was just the end result of this dream.

Your location in central Florida is fairly rural but it has some real advantages. Could you talk about the move there?

Yes, we were looking for a facility that really embraced junior golf. We needed a good location that could provide diversity of golf, condo-style housing and was close to a preparatory school. Our current location meets all the criteria. Now we have our own 11-hole training course that has just been completed; 36 holes of golf at Mission Inn and 18 holes at Bella Collina. Our new 17-acre training facility has two full par 4 holes, 4 USGA greens and numerous target greens providing an incredible training experience.

Along with golf amenities you could offer a private schooling opportunity—also an advantage?

Montverde Academy was one of the biggest reasons for locating the Gary Gilchrist Golf Academy in Howey-in-the-Hills. Education and character building are foundations of our program, and we encourage all our students to pursue collegiate careers. Montverde Academy prepares them for this experience as they learn to balance the demands of academics and sport.

And apparently they come to your academy from all over.

Golf is an international game and is growing all over the world, especially in Asia. We have built the Academy through building relationships. All the relationships I have developed in Asia and Latin America have been invaluable in building GCGA and creating an international network.

We currently have students from over 20 countries at GCGA because of this network of coaches, agents and families that have supported us over the years.

This diversity of culture is a tremendous learning experience for our athletes and provides a broader perspective of life that is invaluable as they go on to college.

What you learn about parent-child relationships must be quite an education.

This is a great question because the parents are an important part of the team and it is so essential to be on the same page and working together with the coaching staff.

Children look to their parents for approval and acceptance. When the parents and the GGG Academy team are working closely together, it can make all the difference to a child's confidence. For this reason, I believe in including them in the process and educating them on every aspect of their child's development. The more they understand, then the better the team can work.

It is hard to be a parent and a coach and I know this first hand. I encourage parents to let us coach and let them be the parent. This is a fine line and often hard for those who introduced their children to the game.

Providing a healthy balance between freedom and control is the key. By allowing your child the space to learn and grow and find autonomy and identity for themselves, it gives them the tools to be the best they can be.

Now that you have some perspective on how you built the model and calculated costs, revenue, the balance sheet, etc., how do your reflect on that?

The first goal was to have a unique culture and approach, which focuses on caring for the whole person. Once you know and understand the individual, you can more effectively train and develop the athlete.

Our investment in quality in the early years was expensive, there is no doubt about it, but the result is a high standard that we have maintained. I do not believe in cutting corners and in every aspect of our business, we bring excellence.

What is your take on the competence and mindset of young golf instructors these days?

Young instructors are way more knowledgeable today than when I started out. The advantage is they can learn and model the best in the industry and accelerate their learning process. However, there is no better teacher than experience.

Only time and experience will make you a master coach where you have the golf coaching quotient or IQ to be able to give the player exactly what they need. By finding the "IT", which many times is not technical, you will then have the leverage to make a difference.

Are you saying it's easy to say too much and overload the player?

Instruction is one of my main concerns when teaching a student. Players today absorb loads of technical, mental, physical and on course information, on all subjects related to performance. I believe that's why getting a training plan over a period of time gives the student an opportunity to learn in their own time. They can first learn how to practice with a purpose then learn how to play the game and then learn how to win.

That's interesting—the coach has a trove of wisdom but he or she can't empty it out on a player.

That's how it is with the physical technique element. But really the average golf coach or instructor isn't complete in their knowledge—that's why it's a fun job. I'm talking partly about the life-outside-golf aspect. Working with young people provides a full-on education on the pressure a youth feels outside their sport. You can be on the lesson tee with someone whose family is struggling in many ways. You'll work with other students who struggle in the academic environment or have difficulty making friends. They will have trouble preparing mentally for competition.

Any other places where the young instructor goes astray?

The big error, as I see it, is how we unconsciously set limits on the player based on our own limiting beliefs and our model of the world. By improving your emotional intelligence you will be able to create a plan to improve every area of performance.

You then need the discipline and patience to stick with the plan. The two main areas to improve are the player's self-image and confidence. What the player needs is an open mind and a great attitude towards the challenge in front of them.

You can't put all of your own standards and judgments on the player until you know what's on the inside. To win, you have to find a way to simplify what's going on. Henrik Stenson did that and it changed everything for him. Seve Ballesteros, in his prime, was childlike in the way he played—and I say that with utmost admiration. Tiger Woods, to me, was childlike in his approach to winning golf tournaments. His love for winning and performing made him look like fear had no place in his life only pure belief in his ability. It's creativity, and there's a flow to it. Phil Mickelson is that way—it's all about discovery. It beats being analytical out there—that's one lesson you learn working with young players.



The Gary Gilchrist Golf Academy employs 17 golf and fitness coaches and is based minutes from Orlando, FL. The academy recently purchased its own golf course and refurbished it into a large training center.