

# What I've Learned: Fred Griffin

## Grand Cypress Academy of Golf, Orlando, FL

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



**Its prime location and long years of success have made the Academy of Golf at Grand Cypress a pilgrimage site for people who are passionate about golf performance. The Academy's director, Fred Griffin, is the face of the place. He has overseen the academy operation since it opened back in 1986.**

**Recognized by GOLF Magazine as one of the Top 100 Teachers in America, Fred is responsible for developing and honing all of Grand Cypress Academy's instructional programs. A first-class teacher and administrator, Fred was honored as a Lead Coach within the new Golf Channel Academy system and has been honored as Teacher of the Year for the North Florida section of the PGA.**

**When he spoke with Paul Ramee to look back at several decades of high achievement, there was plenty of insight and story-telling to share, as this transcript readily reveals.**

**Fred, please describe your background in brief and how you became a golf professional.**

I grew up in Cedartown, Ga, which also happens to be the hometown of Doug Sanders. There were a few of us who grew up in Cedartown and would go on to become PGA professionals. Besides me there was Bucky Ayers, Joe Guillebeau, Van Tanner and Bill Robinson. At Cedar Valley and later Cherokee CC where we played as juniors there was no range or pro to teach us, so we learned from the better players. When I turned professional I went to work for Mark Darnell at West Lake CC in Augusta, Ga and then for Bucky Ayers at the Hills of Lakeway in Austin, Tex., which at that time was in the process of opening a golf academy. Chuck Cook was hired as director of the academy. I volunteered my time to help Chuck get started and eventually split my work week between the golf shop and the golf academy. When the academy opened, Chuck asked me to be part of it. That was an extremely valuable experience for me. I would be able to see and work with teachers like Paul Runyan, Phil Rodgers and Davis Love, Jr.

**At that particular point in time, some new innovations were making their way into golf instruction. Tell us how the Lakeway crew took things to a new level.**

Sometime late in 1985, Chuck Cook and Phil Rodgers had the idea to franchise the academy. They created a concept and asked for involvement from Jack Nicklaus and his company, who of course had worked with Phil on his short game for some time. Jack gave them a green light and a plan was formed to set up five separate locations. Each of the owners of these five proposed franchises visited the academy for a two-day meeting with Chuck, Phil and me. Afterward, I started by visiting one of the locations in Traverse City, Michigan before returning to Austin. Soon after that time, I met with the team at Grand Cypress and was offered the job at the new facility in Orlando.

**And now 30 years have passed. How have you been able to keep your program fresh all that time?**

One factor is that Grand Cypress Resort has been very supportive when it comes to capital improvements for the academy. We have a five-year plan that is submitted to management for technology and improvements to keep us at the forefront of the industry. Our teaching staff, many whom have been with us for over twenty years, are excellent communicators and help develop creative programs for our students. We keep up with the latest trends through the Proponent Group, PGA of America and the Internet.

**Grand Cypress Academy has been associated for decades with Dr. Ralph Mann. Can you talk about his contribution?**

It's been important, and we continue to offer science-based research through the efforts of Dr. Mann, who has tirelessly researched every part of this game. We teach those fundamentals, with a long record of success. I thought it would be unique to offer a curriculum where every aspect taught in our programs was based on science and not opinion. I was introduced to Dr. Mann in Texas when Chuck hired him to do a swing analysis for a golf school. Dr. Mann started doing golf research at the request of Jim Suttie. He had been working with Olympic runners at the time, having been an Olympic hurdler himself.

**How far does the scientific approach extend, within your academy program?**

With the help of Dr. Mann we do research on all aspects of the full swing and short game. We have extended into clubs and balls. To give you an example, we test every club head on the market, every year. We know the ones that have a low or high launch, and so forth. We do the same with shafts and balls. We can then accurately match equipment to our players.

**Has technology expedited the time frame for you to complete your research?**

It is definitely easier with 3D. What used to take all day to complete research on one swing can now be completed in a much shorter time frame.

**Over this long span of time, what changes have you seen to the golf school market and golf academy market in your part of the world?**

From 1986 to 2000 it grew at an amazing rate. One of my sales managers mentioned to me that it didn't require much selling as he was simply taking orders. When we opened at Grand Cypress in 1986 there weren't but a few golf schools available so the competition was limited. But as more schools opened in Florida and around other parts of the country many more options became available.

**And nowadays?**

Recently, it has become even more competitive. Many of the private clubs around the country are making a commitment to instruction and members can stay at home and receive a very good experience.

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**What have you learned from working with Tour Players over the years? Any favorite stories about the pros who have trained at Grand Cypress?**

The ones who are good are very goal-oriented. They work hard and work smart and they are not afraid to work on their weaknesses. Greg Norman practiced at the facility from 1985-1988. He enjoyed working on his swing using the computer model system. Greg was really good to the staff and hosted a cookout for everybody one evening. I also remember one time when we had him on the system and we were doing work on long hitters. Dr. Mann asked him to hit one as far as he could. I will never forget that swing. At impact not one part of Greg's body was touching the ground. He had completely lost contact with the ground.

**Any other tour-player recollections along these lines?**

We had Bernard Langer come over during Bay Hill to get compared to the model. We put him on and saw that he was slightly over the top and his grip was a bit strong. We talked to him about that and Bernard said no, he was not changing his grip. A month later when the Masters came around I went up to Augusta and spoke to his teacher, who mentioned that Bernard was starting to make some of the changes we had recommended.

Seve Ballesteros had taken his family to Disney for some vacation time and he made a visit to our academy to check his swing. Actually he came by for three days in a row. We put him on the model and found that his upper body was tilted back one foot behind the model at impact. Just by showing him that contrast, it was as though we had given him a challenge. By day three of his visit he was almost spot-on with the model. Toward the end of his last day here he walked over to a practice bunker where one of my staff instructors was practicing sand shots. He got into the bunker and bet the young man that he could beat him with his 3-iron, which he proceeded to do.

**Your facility is one of the best anywhere to practice at. What would you say are the essentials for creating a great practice environment?**

Being creative and having very good wedge areas. You need to create an environment that motivates people to practice. We bought a Flight-



Griffin was named one of GOLF Magazine's Top 50 Teachers in America when they published their first list in 1991

Scope XI and an iPad Mini and we rent it to our members to use when they practice. We had a seminar for those interested and we set up combines for them to use when they practice. Another small tweak we made recently involves the main landing area. We had our superintendent mow a fairway into the middle of the range so people could practice their driver shots more effectively. Last and not least, we are serious about teaching people how to practice, as part of our golf schools.

**You taught with Phil Rodgers for many years, can you share some of your favorite Phil stories.**

I really do not know where to start. Obviously, Phil was known for his skills in teaching the short game. However, he was really exceptional at analyzing a full golf swing and he was very good at getting a person to do what he wanted them to do in the golf swing. He was very good at fixing the ball flight. Phil would never let someone off the

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hook until they did what he was asking, and he always did it in a very caring way. Once the change was made, he was that student's biggest cheerleader. When he showed enthusiasm to one student the other students all became more motivated. I played a late nine with him at The Hills, he missed all nine greens and shot one under. He got it up and down eight times and chipped in once. He had an engineering mind and he loved the Model Golf Swing machine. But he and Ralph wouldn't always agree and when the debate started I would be sitting there as the benefactor of these two great minds going back and forth. Phil was also a great club designer and an even better clubfitter. Almost every student bought clubs when they went through a fitting with Phil. He deeply understood the mechanics of fitting.



**Griffin has been the only Director of Instruction since Grand Cypress' academy opened nearly 30 years ago.**

### **On that same subject, what is the role of clubfitting in your teaching and how has it changed over the years?**

With the current USGA rulings on Conforming Clubs and Balls, a key is understanding how the clubhead and ball perform and how the right combination will help the student. The shaft is the outlier and with so many options it can be mind boggling. That is one of the reasons we do our research. The ball and clubhead are easy. You need to identify what the shaft does then you can optimize it. You have to know how it launches the ball and what kind of spin it imparts.

### **Any advice from Fred Griffin to young, up-and-coming instructors?**

I'll start by saying you should be very motivated and embrace technology. Do that and the older guys will come to you for advice. One great quote I always remember relates to progress: "If you can't measure what you're doing, you will lose interest in it." So, create a program to improve for your students, then be sure to measure and catalogue their improvement. Sit down with them

and show them that indeed they are making progress. Also, read everything you can, watch others teach, get better at it by doing it. Always remember, if you get your students to play better, they will keep coming back. Another great quote I always share is this: "The mediocre teacher tells, the good teacher explains, the superior teacher demonstrates, the great teacher inspires." Phil Rodgers and Butch Harmon inspired their players. To this day, Butch gets a lot of people to the top of their game.

### **Read any good books lately?**

"Every Shot Counts" is a book I continue to go back to often. Mark Sweeney and his AimPoint information is phenomenal. Mark was a member of our Academy and was taking a putting lesson before he came up with his AimPoint program. One of our instructors mentioned to him that green reading "is an art" and required experience. He didn't like that answer and went out and developed AimPoint. I also read a lot of info by Dr. Bob Rotella, Dr. Dick Coop and Dr. Ryan Caserta and his visual training. Between Ryan, Mark Sweeney, Dr. Mann and the SAM Putt Lab, my own putting has really improved, I can tell you that.

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