

What I've Learned: Eric Alpenfels

Pinehurst Resort, Pinehurst, NC

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



Making the GOLF Magazine Top 100 Teachers ranking or Golf Digest's list of America's 50 Greatest Teachers--those aren't popularity contests. But Eric Alpenfels—yes, you'll find his name on both lists—is the sort of guy who can win popularity contests, too. The longtime director of the Pinehurst Golf Academy has an ease and humility that makes it a cinch for industry folks to accord him the professional standing he's earned.

A baseball player-turned-golfer during his youth in Colorado, Alpenfels took his first golf lesson at age 15 and was soon spending all his free time on the fairways. In his sophomore year of high school, constant practice and a few lessons led to a handicap drop from 10 down to 2 which allowed Eric to compete for Stephen F. Austin State University in the East Texas town of Nacogdoches.

It so happened he had taken one lesson during his high school years with Jim Hardy, an experience that stayed with Alpenfels throughout his college days. By his own admission, he hounded Hardy with phone calls in an attempt to begin a teaching career under Jim's mentorship. The connection was eventually made, leading to a two-year gig working under Hardy in Palm Springs. Out of that came an internship offer from a former Hardy assistant, Hank Haney, who was then running the instruction program at Pinehurst. Alpenfels took the offer and went east to Southern Pines in 1985. In the 28 years since, he has grown with the resort, the golf industry and with the instruction business in particular. Proponent Group member and interview specialist Paul Ramee recently got some interview time with Eric and filed this transcript.

I'm remembering a long conversation we had back in 2008, which seems like only yesterday although five years have gone by. Can you catch me up on what you've been doing?

It's funny you should refer back to 2008, because it's really now that we've made our way back to the

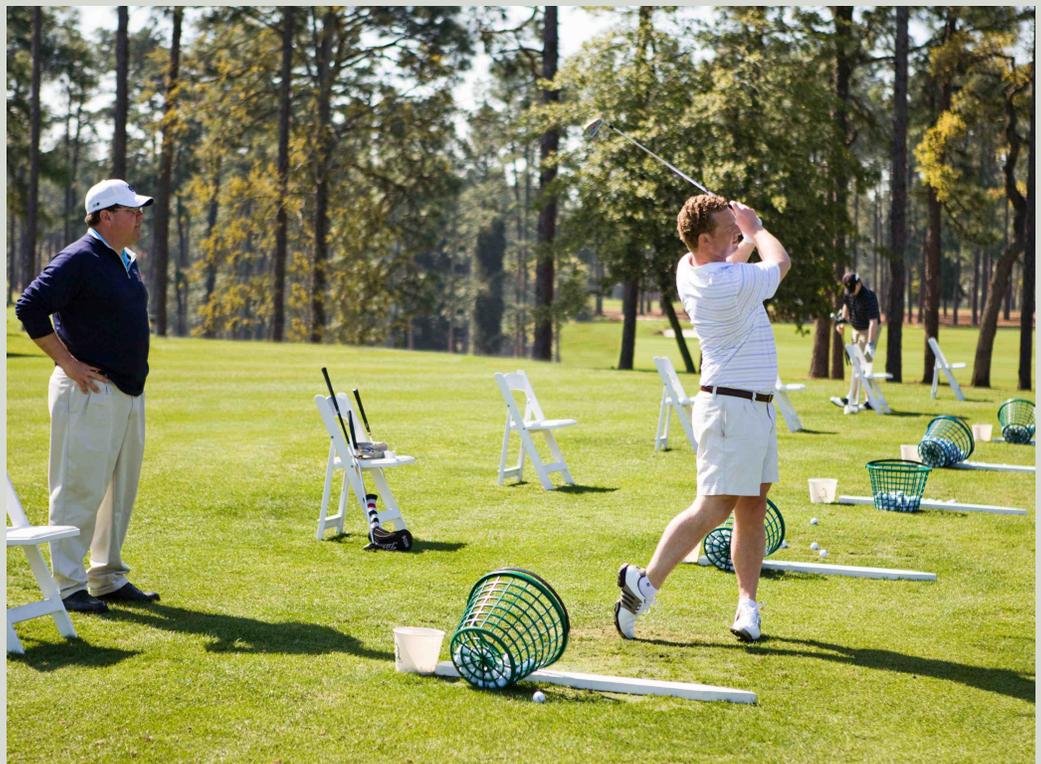
sales levels we enjoyed at that point. Through the first 10 months of this year the Pinehurst Golf Academy has surpassed its 2013 budgets and we're returning to where business was in 2008.

That's great news. No doubt it's a testament to a lot of hard work by your team.

We've been very lucky over the past five years. We've been able to retain our core teaching staff and our operations staff, whom we continually train to keep them fresh so they can provide the customer service that our Pinehurst members and guests expect. We have continued to excel when it comes to research, which is very exciting to me and to our instructors. On the business side we've managed to keep expenses down while increasing revenues.

Eric, you've been working with Dr. Bob Christina for many years now on researching the effectiveness of various drills and various training methods. Could you tell us why you started doing this?

Bob and I were both of the opinion that doing research on human performance in golf was an interesting challenge and we partnered up with that goal in mind. Since then we have concluded that the research is valuable to our students, to our



For nearly 30 years Eric Alpenfels has been a fixture at Pinehurst Resort. During that time he has become one of the game's most influential instructors through his research projects and leadership in PGA education.

staff, to Pinehurst, but also to the industry. No matter what program or approach we're looking at, we always come back to one simple question: Does it have value? If it does, we put it to use. If not, we move on.

What have been some of the biggest surprises as you've done these projects?

We did research on looking at the hole while practice putting, we did research on creating clubhead speed and do people hit it further, but most recently we did research on internal and external cues for the PGA of America which was very interesting. Internal cues include cues like turn your shoulders or shift your weight. External cues might focus on the clubhead, the club-

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-Eric Alpenfels

face or the ball. We concluded that, as in other sports, the external cues are more effective for the student.

You've been contributing to what is now a bona fide scientific study of how golf is taught and learned. Where should that effort be focused, in your view?

There are some really brilliant instructors and from a communications standpoint we as a profession are

definitely evolving. But it takes a long time for a new instructor to get to the point where they are an effective communicator. My belief is that if we had a manual that highlighted effective teaching and communication skills it could greatly reduce the 20 years of time that it seems to take for someone to become

an effective teacher and communicator. The PGA's new PGM 2.0 program is making headway in this direction and I would love to do a study on how long it took for a Top 100 Instructor to get to that point—and figure out how that time span could be shortened.

Do you believe that teaching will always be part science and part art? How do you train your instructors with this question in mind?

When developing my staff I look for someone who enjoys teaching and gets frustrated when they do not achieve results. I can teach people and they can learn about swing plane and how to use video, but the love of teaching is an innate characteristic. Not everyone possesses that. New instructors have so much more material to learn now. They need to grasp the process of motor learning, which is so complex. They need to develop that craft of communicating, as well. At our academy it's my job to expedite this learning.

Do you think golf schools are coming back, after a series of down years? If not, would you say we in a scenario where only a few schools do well while others struggle or are forced to shut down?

My observation from what we are doing at Pinehurst is that the multi-day schools are going full blast. In addition we are having success with individual lessons. With respect to golf schools it is always about “heads in beds” for us. That remains the bottom-line economics of it.

Being at Pinehurst drives a lot of traffic to your doorstep, but other schools at top resorts have not been seeing results similar to yours. What are the major contributors to your success in such a tough marketplace?

The key ingredient is our people. We have a great staff, all the way from the front desk to the golf schools. We also have the support of our bosses which is integral to what we do on a daily basis. In addition we have the advantage



At a time when many golf school operations saw significant decreases in enrollment or simply went out of business, Pinehurst's golf schools have thrived.

of our research, which supports our teaching and coaching and allows our schools to live up to the reputation of the facility. It all adds up to return bookings and the word of mouth referrals that generate 70 percent of our business.

How many instructors are there in your group?

We have three lead instructors who have been with us for 27, 18 and 20 years, respectively. Our golf operations staff is led by three head professionals who have been with us for six, seven and eight years, respectively. Supporting them are some very skilled assistant professionals. We utilize the head professionals to teach in our schools when time permits and we are training the assistant professionals to replace the head professionals if they should move on.

What is your focus in training your teaching staff?

There are three categories we focus on. First is learning how to communicate, second is determining what are the best ways to teach and thirdly we focus on how to play the game. I also identify what level of instructor a person is. In our system there are four levels—beginner, intermediate, advanced and expert. It is my responsibility to figure out what a teacher may lack and then focus on helping them develop that area.

What do you do to help instructors improve their communication skills?

We do a lot of mock scenarios and situations. The bulk of our training happens in January and February, when traffic is down. We will also do a pre- and post-lesson analysis of the teacher's technique and presentation. That's our opportunity to focus on communication skills, how they deliver the information obtained from video analysis or how they create a practice plan. We record their interaction and make an assessment. From there we put together a set of training guidelines, let them execute that, then do a follow-up assessment.

You're very active in the PGA on the education side. Where do you see the biggest opportunities to better train the next generation?

I mentioned producing an appropriate teaching manual that could reduce the time it takes for someone to go from a new recruit to an advanced teacher. I would start there. I also believe mentoring is an activity we should

pay attention to. I know how hard it is with all of our duties to take the extra time, but I was so fortunate to have great mentors like Jim Hardy, Mike Adams and Mike LaBauve. They guided me every step of the way.

What sort of patterns are you seeing in terms of group business and corporate bookings?

We don't do a lot of corporate business. In general, as people start to travel more the hotel is staying busy and those are the factors that allow our business to keep thriving. We typically see smaller groups now. Companies are more cautious with their spending and the smaller groups allow us to provide a more specialized experience.

You've accomplished so much in so many areas of the industry, what's left that you've always wanted to do, but maybe haven't gotten to?

What I keep coming back to is the continuing need for original research. I believe this is the most impactful for the teacher, for our students and for the industry. At this point I am looking ahead with the goal of identifying more critical research concepts and projects that will bring progress and make a difference for golfers.



One of the advantages of hosting major championships such as the Men's and Women's U.S. Opens is the opportunity to upgrade infrastructure such as this teaching building which is one of the largest anywhere in the world.