

What I've Learned: Dr. Jim Suttie

TwinEagles G.C., Naples, FL and Willow Hill G. Cse., Northbrook, IL

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



Dr. Jim Suttie, a fixture on the top-teacher rankings of Golf Digest and GOLF Magazine, has always been ahead of the coaching curve. Not satisfied with instruction's accepted wisdom, he has pushed to apply scientific, physiology-based approaches to the improvement of golfer performance. This mode of thinking is becoming the standard, but it was foreign to the industry when Suttie was earning his Ph.D in bio-

mechanics from Middle Tennessee University and his master's in kinesiology. "Doc" is still the only person to hold a PGA of America card and a doctorate in biomechanics.

Suttie's experience as Eastern Kentucky University's golf coach and years of studying biomechanics as it relates to the golf swing allowed him to create a teaching framework that optimizes the relationship between different body types and matches it with swing elements. He has written two books on the subject — "Your Perfect Swing" and "The LAWS of the Golf Swing," co-authored with Mike Adams and T.J. Tomasi, Ph.D.

Suttie, whose work earned him the 2000 National PGA Teacher of the Year award—teaches at TwinEagles golf community in Naples, Fla., from mid-September to mid-May and at Willow Hill Golf Course in Northbrook, from mid-May to mid-September. No stranger to the sit-down in-depth Q&A interview, he made time for a Proponent Group exclusive with Paul Ramee earlier this spring—here's what came of it.

Tell us about your early days in the game, when you were introduced to golf?

I got into the game as a caddie and was quickly addicted. I worked in golf shops and played as often as possible. My parents encouraged me to play as much golf as I could and I ended up competing in a lot of amateur events. I played in college at Northern Illinois University and after college I stuck around to get my masters, meanwhile working as an assistant coach on the men's golf team.

From there I got into teaching the game, working with younger players who were playing at a high level. I developed a passion for teaching,

mainly because of my naturally inquisitive nature. Going back to my playing days, I was always trying to "solve the puzzle."

You were ahead of your time when it came to kinesiology and video. Now everyone uses it. Do you take some pride in that?

I just think it had a lot to do with my upbringing and my quest for the perfect swing. As you say, at the time I was developing my own game there was no research devoted to kinesiology in golf. I figured there had to be a link so I learned more about it and started to utilize it with my students. With respect to video I started using it in 1968 and I remember we had a huge portable cassette player that we had to lug around. But, people really wanted to see their golf swing and they could relate to the feel of it much better after looking at the tape. I took it upon myself to pursue the best video equipment I could throughout the years. I remember in the early 80's I went back to school to get my doctorate and at that time we were able to use stick figures as an overlay on the video, which was revolutionary at that time.

Who were some of the people that were instrumental in your development as an instructor?

Every person I ever worked for always found time to work with me as a player and a teacher. The mentoring I got for instruction work focused on how I could best take care of the members. But with respect to my developing as an instructor, I did a lot of the work and research on my own. I had such a love affair with teaching that no one ever had to inspire me to work hard to learn more about teaching golf.

You wrote the book "The LAWS of the Golf Swing" with T.J. Tomasi and Mike Adams. To my view it is one of the most interesting books ever written on golf and one that I think is not talked about enough.

What's your recollection of that experience?

Writing the book for us was a lot of fun and very gratifying. It was honored as the 1996 Golf Book of the Year. We were able to share some neat information with regard to such factors as Power Sources and Dominant Dimensions. My hope is that it helps instructors in their effort to make students understand what they can actually do, as opposed to what the student thinks they can do.

Do you consider it to be particularly important for younger instructors to read? I think it can help young in-



Dr. Jim Suttie, who splits his time between Florida and Illinois, is the only PGA member with a doctorate in biomechanics and a masters in kinesiology.



The 2000 PGA of America National Teacher of the Year, Suttie has coached Tour winners including Paul Azinger, Mark Wilson and Loren Roberts.

structors understand what we refer to as “Matching Swing Elements.” Most younger coaches would not have a clear understanding of that challenge. The material in our “LAWS” book can help them build a philosophy as they learn about body types and which elements work for different body types. Plus, young instructors will learn very quickly what will not work for certain body types and it will allow them to rule out certain elements and help the student in a quicker manner.

You’ve been active teaching elite juniors—how do you approach that challenge?

I find it hard to teach more than three juniors at the same time. To properly evaluate and work with them I don’t want to take on more than three. We do a total evaluation of their game to include their equipment, ball flight, tendencies, statistical analysis and so forth. We then sit down with each player and identify the areas we have to address.

Kids sign up on a year-to-year basis and we really try to make it fun for them. When I head north the kids I work with in Florida can send me their video through V1 and I can monitor their exercise program from Illinois. To improve at golf you need to be diligent but in fact some of these kids are overly serious. I try very hard to get them to relax and just let things happen. One of the other benefits I bring is that I coached college golf for a long time, so I can explain what it takes to make a team and also describe for them the time commitment it requires.

Tell us a little about your college coaching experience.

I coached at Eastern Kentucky University for five years and won two conference championships in that time. From there I went to Brevard Community College, where I coached Paul Azinger. I always felt that I related well with younger kids and it really helped me with my recruiting, I think one of my stronger traits was that I always was concerned with the person in front of me, whether it was on the lesson tee or in life, coupled with my dedication to the sport and I think it resonated with kids and their parents.

Have you made any major changes in your teaching approach for 2015?

Not a whole lot. I continue to work out of my two studios in Illinois and Naples. I am using a 4-camera system now, as well as forces plates through the SAM Balance Lab. We also continue to use TrackMan and the SAM Putt Lab.

How are you integrating the technology into your teaching?

I really only use it if there is a need for it, but I believe it can help with the learning curve for teachers. Let’s say it used to take 3,000 to 5,000 swings to learn about ball flight and what causes the ball to curve a certain way, now with a Track Man you can learn much more quickly about ball flight. And if you can get the ball flight changed then you can make an immediate impact on their golf game.

Have we as a profession gone overboard with technology?

If we haven’t we are pretty close. People can only absorb so much, so we have to be careful not to impart too much information. I do think technology is good for the student conceptually, but I think the better teachers decide which limited info to share.

How about social media—too far with that?

Very overboard with that. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, how much do we really need?

It does have a role in marketing and branding, but, I fear that we may get into the marketing aspect more than the hardcore teaching. I think we will see a social-media turnaround in the future.

What do we need to do to get better as Instructors?

We are not on the golf course enough, although I don’t think it is entirely our fault. Our facilities are not programmed for us to get access. If we had three holes dedicated for course management, wedge play and short game, players would get better much faster.

We also need to become specialists in all areas of the game. I see from time to time that teachers only focus on one aspect of the game and are not delivering instruction on all aspects of the game. The more you coach every part of the game, the less often the student needs to go elsewhere to find help.

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