

# What I've Learned: Don Hurter

## Castle Pines Golf Club, Castle Rock, Colorado

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



**Golf operations and club management were all computerized about a generation ago, with unintended consequences. Indeed, there was organizational magic in those golf shop point-of-sale systems, plus digital tee sheets, all your tournament data on-screen—along with financials, F&B, timesheets, payroll and all the rest. The unpleasant result is that golf professionals began spending a big percentage of their time at the computer, or in**

**meetings discussing club data that was never available before computerization.**

**The result? We heard it in a common lament from PGA professionals—they were being pulled away from the natural pattern of a club job—in which you teach, play golf with the members, help your players improve and generally boost golfer enjoyment.**

**Huddling at the screen was a trap that Proponent Group member Don Hurter didn't fall into. His skills as head professional are well-developed and admirable, but Hurter is able to make his job description work while devoting large blocks of time to one-on-one coaching with Castle Pines members. In a recent conversation with member/interviewer Paul Ramee, the longtime Proponent member talked about that career choice and commented widely on issues every member faces.**

**Don, I was thinking it was just recently we had one of these long conversations, but then I checked and it's been seven or eight years. Has your situation at Castle Pines changed a lot in that time period?**

Not since we last talked. I've been at Castle Pines for the last 17 years, the last 11 of those as head golf professional. Prior to that I did six years as teaching professional. My opportunity to become the head pro came along when Keith Schneider made the transition from the club's head professional up to general manager.

**Remind us briefly about your career path prior to Castle Pines.**

I had worked at Desert Highlands in Scottsdale, Ariz. and at the same time I taught at the Golf Digest Schools. I've also served as an assistant at Spanish Bay, out on the Monterey Peninsula.

**You're a head golf professional in the bottom-line era. How do you continue to assure the club that working on the lesson tee four-plus hours a day is a valuable use of your skills?**

I am very cognizant of my role at the club and our GM, Keith Schneider is very aware and supportive of how important our instructional programs are to the member experience. He and I both believe that the head professional should teach the game and be out on the course, playing golf with the members.

**Player Development is a hot topic now. Has it ever been an issue at Castle Pines?**

It really has never come up that we need more player development. Our play is typically male-dominated, though we have women members, and everyone is welcome. There are no restrictions on when women and kids can play. It's a club where everyone is always welcome on the course or the lesson tee.

**Talk about how you structure your staff, so that you don't need to spend large amounts of time in the golf shop.**

I try to hire people that want to be golf professionals and have the right personality. Recently I've been hiring people who can specialize in certain aspects of the operation like merchandising and tournament operations. So, my approach is that I bring in people to do the things that need to be done that I don't have the time to do. I've been fortunate to have great staffs that work extremely hard.

**Do you feel like you are able to do all the parts of your job equally well in an age of specialization? How is it that you personally stay sharp in all areas of the job?**

My aim—and I feel that I achieve it—is to manage all parts of the job equally well. Castle Pines is a busy facility. We play 14,000 rounds in a short season and provide a very high level of service in all aspects, whether it is teaching, golf course monitoring, merchandising, what have you. As I mentioned, hiring the right people helps immensely.

**How does that play out, day to day?**

At times, we are similar to a high-end resort. We will have members come in for several days, and they may bring three guests and stay "on campus" for the entire time. In those circumstances, each day is like the Super Bowl for us. Service standards are what they require and more. We know each member's traits, the wine they like, the drinks they are going to order, when they wish to play, and so forth. We try to anticipate all their needs.

**Do you sometimes feel that your staff does not anticipate member needs quite as quickly as you do?**

That does happen, at times. It can be a difficult thing. Their intentions are good and they are learning as they go, so you keep that in mind. Again, if you hire good people they will get the picture. My approach is to lead by example and continually talk about being proactive, not reactive.

**Obvious question: Why is it you didn't become a full-time coach and run your own academy?**

I used to split time between Castle Pines and Desert Highlands in Scottsdale and the back and forth would take a toll. At one point the club moved Keith Schneider up to general manager, which created a natural segue for me to become the head golf professional. The idea was that I would be able to do all my teaching and at that same time run the operation as it needs to be run.

**One of those happy circumstances where two professionals find themselves in agreement, apparently.**

It really is. Keith respects our golf instruction programs. He and I are both old-school golf pros who feel that teaching and coaching are important functions at a good club, followed by playing with the members. It's what creates the relationships that make us invaluable to the members at Castle Pines.

**Your instruction activity obviously requires investment of budget, along with the investment of your personal time. The club is all right with that?**

They are. Castle Pines has a national membership, which helps. Our golfers come from a lot of different places, which is good for us. For example, a member based at Kansas City Country Club will come in and he'll talk about the teaching facility they just built. A member who also belongs to The Bears Club down in Florida will describe a new workout facility they have there. Hearing about these amenities will inspire us to invest so that we keep up with best practices. Our goal is to be the leader and when we see others improving their facilities it helps us out.

**When did you decide not to continue playing? When did you start to think about teaching the game as a possible career?**

As a junior golfer I was pretty much self-taught. I did not take a lot of lessons. I remember playing nine holes with Dwaine Knight when he was head coach at the University of New Mexico. He suggested that I make a grip adjustment, which led to some good results. I was fortunate to play college golf on a scholarship and started taking lessons and I would take them from whomever I could. I really enjoyed the learning aspect.

**After graduation, you stayed on that track, of trying to learn about the swing and skill development?**

Pretty much. My next move was working as an assistant at Spanish Bay. While I was there I formed friendships with some quality teachers. Good people like Sandy and Mike LaBauve influenced my thinking. I worked with Mike and he had such a great way of explaining things, it really made sense. I was fortunate to do an apprenticeship of two-plus years with the LaBauves. From there I went to work for David Leadbetter and Mike McGetrick. The next stop was working for the Golf Digest Schools.

**What did you learn by being around PGA Tour pros every year during The International when it was played at Castle Pines? Any memories from that period?**

Mostly the guys were very giving of their time. We had a junior golf event associated with The International on Monday and Olin Browne was always terrific, he was always such a giver and not a



Don's teaching ability have been showcased in Golf Digest articles like this for decades.

taker. I will always remember Tiger being on the practice range and not really going all out with his driver and then he gets up on the first tee and he is playing with Mark Wiebe, who was a local guy. Well, Tiger goes from not hitting it very well to flushing one out there 100 yards past Wiebe. Those are moments that stay with me.

**What about their approach on the range, preparing to play?**

I always enjoyed watching the players work on their games. Certain ones stick out. For ex-

ample, Tom Pernice always seemed to be one of the hardest working guys. I remember one year watching Tommy Armour III hitting balls and working with Mac O'Grady on the range. It was early in the week and Mac, who of course competed on tour playing right-handed, happened to get his hands on a left-handed persimmon driver. He took the spot next to Tommy Armour and proceeded to pound tee shots that were even with what Tommy was hitting, with a metal driver. I remember Bob Rotella working with Tom Kite on bunker shots. Rotella stood on the green and let the bunker shots land in his hand. That took a lot of trust in Kite's ability to hit one high, soft bunker shot after another. There were also great moments like Dean Wilson winning his first tournament and Jason Day playing in his first PGA Tour event at the age of 17. It was a great experience overall.

**What are you excited about going into 2015?**

I am excited for our students who have access to a multitude of different types of instruction via social media. They can view an instructor's YouTube channel or Twitter page before going to schedule a lesson with them to see if their personality or style is something they would think works. Looking at that from the instructor's side, it's pretty clear that if you do social media the right way, you can promote yourself very effectively.

**How would you describe the current state of golf?**

I think we are going to be OK. Our equipment sales were slightly down 2014, but we are expecting this season to be great. Tiger is coming back, the women's tour is thriving with players like Michelle Wie and Lydia Ko, and it certainly helps that the economy seems to be getting stronger.

**Any there any instructors whose work you take a particular interest in?**

Well, there are so many different personalities that are fun to watch. In the past we have had Bill and Craig Harmon in for a club school and we got to hear the stories about their father, the great Claude Harmon, and how he mentored his staff and his children. That was a different era of course. Billy did not see it as mentoring as a youngster, but now he sees the wisdom of Claude's pearls.