

What I've Learned: Dom DiJulia

Dom DiJulia School of Golf, New Hope, PA

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



This month the Proponent member whose life and career comes up for in-depth review is Dom DiJulia, who operates the Dom DiJulia School of Golf in the aptly named town of New Hope, Pa. A PGA Master Professional who bases all serious work with students on his proprietary concept of the Golf Matrix, DiJulia has risen in stature to become a GOLF Magazine Top 100 Teacher. In 2008, he earned early recognition as one of Golf Digest's Top 20 In-

structors under 40.

The Golf Matrix, a “performance-based, comprehensive and highly customized approach to the game that fosters continuous improvement,” takes certain cues from the Human Potential Movement of the 1970s—still one of the most logical and inspirational philosophies any coach or athlete could absorb. The conceptual underpinnings of the DiJulia School of Golf are explored in Paul Ramee's interview below, along with the nuts-and-bolts challenges of running a profitable instruction business.

Dom, tell us a little about your background and how you got into the game.

As a kid I caddied at Aronimink Golf Club, west of Philadelphia, and did not really play much golf. I was busy playing basketball and soccer. We moved to Connecticut and I started caddying at Brooklawn Country Club and worked in the bag room. Brooklawn is where I got my real start playing golf. I attended St. John's University in Queens, N.Y. and was a walk-on, which is typical of my story. In general I would describe myself as the “chaser” type. I continued to work on my game through college and after school I became an assistant pro at Wheatley Hills and Cherry Valley, two clubs on Long Island. My game had progressed to a point where I was the points leader on the assistants association standings. I raised enough money to play for four years and see if I had what it took to play full-time. Unfortunately, I did not reach my goals, but more importantly, I did learn what it took to improve as a golfer and my passion took hold. I had learned that there was a bigger picture than the swing.

What are the elements of this bigger picture you talk about?

Motor learning, ball flight laws and biomechanics—those three aspects.

As you know, motor learning is how individuals learn to practice and perform a skill. It is how the brain works, in terms of physical motion. In building my understanding of it, I have been fortunate to work with Dr. Rick Jensen and sit on his advisory board. Ball flight laws and club delivery apply to every shot struck in golf and are very important. You have to have an understanding of club movement, face orientation and speed, which affects distance, direction, launch and spin. Biomechanics would be the third element. We as humans are not all built the same way. Our swing needs to match the body type.

For far too long, teachers have taught a model as compared to a system. A model would be all about enforcing a specific, precise set of movements. By definition, it would be unachievable by all body types. A system uses matching elements to benefit the golfer. In that effort we use 3-D to measure what's happening. I recommend instructors get certified to understand and recognize golfers' diverse capabilities.

These are pretty advanced concepts. Tell us how you came to adopt them.

My first five years teaching golf I was a teacher of the golf swing. Then I decided that I needed to increase my offerings and become an actual coach. This transition really meant: *I am now taking full responsibility for all facets that affect the player's performance.*

This is when I developed my Golf Matrix. I felt I could identify and focus on four versions or expressions of *golf technique*, which are full swing, wedge play, short game and putting. From that starting point we focus on *your game*, which includes practice, habits, goals, fitness, clubfitting and tendencies. By tendencies we mean which way does a player tend to miss a shot. Thirdly and lastly is *the game*. This term relates to the specifics of the challenge in front of any golfer on any day—variables like slopes, strategy, grasses, wind and different lies.

We talk to students about their performance “versus investment.” So, we are exploring the effort it would take to develop skills and elevate performance by a certain degree. It's the what, the when and the how of doing what it takes to reach the next level. We also discuss performance in a right-now context—that's about getting the most out of your game at that moment.

As these ideas and practices are coming together, where are you in your actual career path?

By this time, I would call it 1999, I



Dom DiJulia was a late bloomer as a golfer, but has been ahead of most of his peers as one of the game's top coaches.

was in New Hope, Pa., working as Director of Instruction at Jericho National Golf Club. It was the customary situation—of back then—of being a full-time employee and working for a salary. That went on for two years. Then the owner and I decided it was best to switch me from employee to tenant.

What were the benefits of this decision for your business?

One immediate benefit was autonomy. I could make my own decisions about education, technology and spending. I found I was very focused and precise when it came to both education and technology. I was determined to become an expert in both of these areas. Once I became free to do my own decision-making, I would need just two things to reach the desired level of expertise—the tools and the training. I put money into that. An accountant might say that my expenses went up, but they weren't expenses. This was an investment. As my investment went up, so did my income. I learned a business lesson early from a client. He told me: "Don't work for money. Make your money work for you."

What was the downside of your new business model?

It was the scariest thing I have ever done. I went from an employee with a good salary and benefits to having none of the above. Instead I now had to go into my pocket to pay rent on my space. It was a challenging transition for a year.

You were doing your coaching and teaching—and meanwhile you had to set aside time to make these long-range decisions. Sounds pretty formidable.

It does, but I did a valuable thing. I took the pressure off myself in terms of business decision-making by setting up an Advisory Board. These were trusted individuals who knew my core business. They are there to help me review all my decisions. The board encouraged me to charge the proper rate. One member of the advisory board has now started to serve as a pseudo business manager. She has jumped in and runs my day-to-day operation, helping with strategic planning and marketing.

What is a typical day like for you?

I am an active teacher, along with running the business. I am on the tee in the morning, then I'll try and hold any meetings I need to have in the midday. Then it's back out to the tee for the afternoon and evening. I try and work five days a week and always keep Sunday off to spend with my kids.

Can you talk to me about the business side of what you do?

I am continually assessing the value of education and technology and how much more effective they make me. I continually try and learn from the best.



As with many top teachers and coaches, DiJulia works with a large number of competitive juniors.

What are your thoughts on growing the game?

I start with the idea that instructors are improving, therefore students are improving. Next I would stress the idea that we need to make golf courses more playable. Obviously the length of the course is important but not just tee-to-green yardage. I'm also talking about the length of the rough, the length of the fairway cut, and so on. Very tight fairways are tough to play from—we sometimes forget that. The height of the rough around the green and the speed and texture of the greens—these are important factors. If you think of it, who really wants the course faster? Maybe 10 members?

What are the challenges?

Time and family. Young people have so many other things in their life these days. The traditional or classic club member as we know it has vanished.

What do you do with your students in the off-season?

We work on periodization and seasonality, periodization is working in any given interval with the goal to perform at peak or full potential in the future, this is learning

new skills that would be hard to learn. Seasonality has a clear distinct off season, a focused time to take mechanics and fundamentals to a new level.

Do you teach many juniors?

I teach about 70 percent junior players and the school in total is over 50 percent juniors.

Do you mandate that players sign on to a long-term program with you?

I think it is self-evident, more than a mandate. The players that are coming to us are looking for structure. We don't take very many one-off lessons. That said, we do encourage people to come in, take a lesson and kick the tires. Then we design instruction, tournament and practice programs.

Do you add other elements?

Absolutely. Stat tracking, fitness and clubfitting will all be added.

At this point, do you feel you know precisely what works for you and for your academy operation?

I know this: The success I have enjoyed all traces back to my desire to become an expert—to invest in my own education and in the technology I use. I am not a slave to technology, instead technology has made me smarter and a better teacher. When we first started using video, it took 500 videos and then you would be able to know what you were going to see. It's the same with our current technology. After seeing enough swings using Trackman, I have gotten to a point where I know what I am going to see.

“I switched from club employee to contractor in 2001, which gave me autonomy to decide how I would invest in my education and in technology.”

-Dom DiJulia
