

# What I've Learned: Bill Davis

## Jupiter Hills Club, Tequesta, FL

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



**They say a teacher is somebody who can't stand to learn something new and fascinating unless you allow them share to it with someone else. Bill Davis, a 35-year PGA golf professional and an instructor/coach of great renown, fits that description. In a recent profile of the Florida-based Master Professional by veteran golf writer Larry Bush you'll find the Davis comment: "My whole career, I've been**

**blessed to be around knowledgeable professionals. Not to pass along the knowledge they shared would be sinful."**

**Over his long and admirable career Davis has received five Teacher of the Year awards and written articles for Golf Digest, GOLF Magazine and PGA Magazine. He has coached several dozen PGA Tour, LPGA Tour, and Nationwide Tour players, along with 50-plus club professionals. We had been asking him to set aside time for a Paul Ramee interview, and that chance to get Bill and Paul together recently arrived. Here's the edited transcript of their discussion:**

**Every accomplished instructor seems to take a unique path to reach their chosen spot. Could you tell us about your path?**

I suppose you would say I came from the playing side of things. I was a fairly good player with an above-average short game.

**What were the early signs or displays of your interest in teaching and coaching?**

I had a habit when I was out playing with members of asking them why they would pick certain clubs for certain shots. As my teaching continued I really felt like I could help develop members' games and help them lower their scores. If someone went from an 80 shooter to a 75 shooter, I would know that I really had an impact. No doubt, teaching the golf swing is a part of them getting better, but it is only one part.

**Were there any particular turning points in your career?**

While I was the head professional at Shaker Heights in Ohio, we hosted the Ladies World Series of Golf. One year during tournament week I

worked with Joanne Carner as she was preparing to compete. She happened to win and it happened to be the win that got her into the Hall of Fame, so lucky for me, Joanne mentioned my name on national television.

**What was that like?**

It opened opportunities with good players. I was fortunate to move along to Jupiter Hills and been able to stay for 25 years.

**It's well known that you hold a strong preference for teaching out on the golf course. Tell us how that came about.**

Bob Rotella and I were talking a long time ago about the basic responsibility of a golf instructor. We agreed it was to lower people's scores. I came away from that discussion wanting to move off the range and onto the course. It had dawned on me that if we spend more time with golfers on the fairways and greens and less time drawing circles and lines on our computers, then people have a better chance of improving.

**Bill, you are known as someone that creates a Long Term Development plan for your students, can you tell me a little about this method?**

In the "microwave age" we live in people want success in two minutes. But, is it realistic to believe that a 40-year-old married man, with two kids, who is trying to grow his business, is going to have the time to commit to a rigorous practice schedule?

If he is currently a 20-handicap and he wants to become a 15-handicap, you have to discuss with him that it is more than likely a three-year project. You can then devise a program with 10 lessons, 30 hours of practice and he can play rounds of golf, as well. But, you have to tell him how his time is best spent so he can get better.

Also, you have to listen to them in the interview. If they tell you they three-putt seven times a round, then you obviously work on their putting. Right there you have a huge space for improvement. Sometimes it is not as simple and there is not one glaring weakness and you have to work on various areas.

**Do you ever get any pushback on this long-term approach?**

If a you went to a doctor and wanted to lose 100 pounds, he would do the



**Davis is known for creating detailed practice plans and practice stations like the short game training session shown here.**

math and tell you about how many calories you can consume and how many you need to burn and that it will take you one year to burn enough calories to lose 50 pounds and then another year to lose the additional 50 pounds.

#### **How do you balance their expectations?**

I find that financial investing comparisons help. I will ask a student to think about putting \$2 million to work in the financial markets. Would they expect to get their desired return on that investment in 90 days? Well, absolutely not. Significant changes take time. They do seem to understand this analogy. I also like to point out that if they start as a 20 handicap and improve 10 percent a year for three years, that will take them down to a 14-handicap.

#### **People in golf academies talk about the coaching model as a new concept. You were years ahead of the field in pursuing that approach. How did that happen?**

I'll go back to my 20-handicapper. You speak frankly with this golfer about a game plan that will work. It's something the two of you arrive at together, and it's viable—it can be carried out. Then you work on a lesson plan, but you add in some supervised practice. That's how you get on the right path. To go further down the path, you need to develop a practice plan that he can execute when you are not supervising him. It's going to look like what a veteran coach of a team sport has on his or her clipboard. It may be 11 minutes of putting, 17 minutes of full swing and then additional time spent on chipping, pitching and bunkers. If we had 10 sessions throughout the year, I would take sessions 1 and 2 for instruction and then integrate supervised practice throughout the remaining 8 sessions.

#### **When you are on the course do you make it like a typical round of golf? If not, what are some of the playing situations you may take them through?**

I may take them directly to a certain situation that occurs often in a round, to see what their reaction is to a given lie and see what club they select. I'll put them in two inches of rough and have them proceed as they normally would. Then I'll know if they routinely pull a 3-wood versus a 7-iron when they're in that type of lie. From there we may go to a clean fairway lie, except the ball is above or below their feet. We'll hit balls from there and talk about what happens. I'll be trying to get them to realize how much they pull or push the ball, so when they are on their own they can then allow for that and hit a successful shot.

#### **Switching to the next generation of players, what do you feel are the best opportunities for bringing young people into the game?**

Junior development seems to be a full-time job in itself, but for the longest time we went without a little league in golf, now finally the PGA has developed a team concept in junior golf and it is a great concept.

#### **What advice would you offer to the young, eager, dedicated golf instructor?**

I would encourage them to read a minimum of 15 really good instruction books. Start with Henry Cotton or Seymour Dunn

and read right up to modern times. Then shadow as many instructors as possible and it does not need to be everyone in the Top 100, there may be a guy down the road who is known for developing juniors or teaching bunker shots. Shadowing other teachers is the best way for young instructors to learn.

#### **How has the golf industry changed in the last 10 years?**

The teaching industry has gotten much more technical—with so much in the way of video, computer apps, TrackMan, things like that. I still believe teaching is an art form, but in today's society you have to know how to go the technical route.

#### **Do you like or dislike that trend?**

I think we are relying too much on the technical side, I mean information is great, but how important is changing an angle one degree? I believe this time could be better spent on something else. Technology is a good tool for the instructor to use with a student who wishes to challenge your analysis.

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#### **Where are our teaching opportunities?**

Let's get more people coaching the game and less people drawing lines and circles. I think teachers have an opportunity to improve their knowledge of teaching the short game, but before they can really teach the short game, they must learn how to hit the shots themselves.

#### **You are known as someone who sets up formal practice stations for students. Can you elaborate on that?**

The stations I set up are to encourage motor-skill learning. I believe that no true learning can occur in a motor-skill setting without feedback. So during a lesson I teach students to set up the station so it will provide valuable feedback, then ask them to practice using the station. Typically I will have them make two swings in the station without the ball. The reason being, in a motor-skill approach to learning the ball actually will act as an inhibitor. Then I ask them to make a swing with the ball.

#### **You have become an old hand at seminar and workshop presentations, before small audiences, large audiences, in a lot of places. Do you remember your first seminar?**

I actually do. It was a talk in front of about 50 assistant pros. I remember that I practiced my public speaking to get prepared. I also organized my thoughts by reflecting back on what I had learned from my mentors. I do remember one seminar where a student stood up and said to me “You have a great short game, how do you like being labeled as a short-game coach?” I responded by telling him that 65 percent of the shots in golf are played inside of 100 yards, so if I'm guilty of concentrating on what is 65 percent of the game, then so be it.

#### **If you did it all over would you teach at a private club again?**

Yes, absolutely I would. The private clubs I have worked at have all given me the ability to get on the golf course and develop my students on the course. Now if I was at a 54-hole private club with 2,500 members that would be a different story. The opportunity to get on the course with students may not be there. Different instructors have to run different programs based on the club or facility they are at.