

What I've Learned: Bill Abrams

Golf Solutions Academy, Crete, Illinois

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



Having compiled a 15-year record of success with his Golf Solutions Academy at Balmoral Woods outside Chicago, Bill Abrams is busy now doing more of the same—with new twists and improvements as he goes. A Pennsylvania native, Bill aligns his basic swing concepts and style of coaching with the “Swing Connection” concepts of Jimmy Ballard, who has been a mentor to Abrams. It’s a concept and style, in Abrams’ words, that “allows the player to

make a body-friendly, athletic movement” in all their shotmaking.

The Abrams approach translated naturally to precision clubfitting as that practice was becoming developed in the 1990s. An early adaptor, Abrams found himself recommended for his fitting skills and he used the gear-performance connection to create golfer improvement and continue building his brand. He is a former PING Regional Clubfitter of the Year. Bill is also recognized as a US Kids Golf Top 50 Master Teacher and as a TPI Certified Golf Fitness Instructor.

In the fall Abrams expects to release his new eBook, “Have Fun Playing Golf,” which he touts as a “player’s guide to getting the most out of the game.”

Bill, could you talk about your early golf life and career?

Starting at age 12 I worked at a golf course in northeast Pennsylvania. It was a lot of fun for me and I stuck with it all the way through college. I took on responsibility as I went through school and got to the point where I was closing the shop. After college I sold insurance for a year and a half. I didn’t like it, so I went back to golf.

Where did you go on this second time around?

I got hired by Jay Williams at Lincolnshire Country Club and I worked there from 1991 to 1998. I was elevated to director of golf at Lincolnshire in 1995. The club was struggling and I had always enjoyed the smiles I got from people after a good lesson so I decided to move to Balmoral Woods. My intention was to be able to focus more on instruction and clubfitting.

Sounds like a move that had an element of risk to it.

It did, but starting something new is

always difficult and you have to work hard to get anything off the ground. I brought with me a strong desire to teach and fit clubs and our revenue started to increase from day one. I firmly believe clubfitting and instruction go hand in hand.

Which clubfitting systems do you use and what does your clubfitting process entail?

We use PING, Titleist and Mizuno. I also fit putters using the SeeMore putting system. Our process with a new client will begin with an interview that’s informal but gathers the relevant information. I will ask what they like about their current equipment and what they don’t like. I will check into what their goals are as they go through this fitting session. Then I check their gear one specification at a time: Lie angle, length of their clubs, shaft flex, grip size and then we fit the distance gaps between their clubs.

Explain to me some of the flaws you see in fitting and how teaching and custom fitting are linked?

The biggest flaw I see is the accuracy of the fits. If custom fits are not done by an instructor they are usually a mess. We have a motto: “No mats. No nets. No guessing.” We really rely on their divots and ball flight. We utilize a Foresight launch monitor and we use real golf balls during the fit so the data we are collecting is precise. We see plenty of clubfitting that is done with smoke and mirrors, if you will.

You recently started using Retail Tribe for business development. Without this sounding like an advertisement, can you tell us how you have benefitted?

Retail Tribe has been wonderful. We use it to keep in touch with our clients. We started last August and it has been a home run. The golfers we serve feel like we care about them and that we are not “used car salesmen.” Word-of-mouth value from our Retail Tribe work has been excellent.

We’re talking now about “outbound” digital marketing, right? In other words you send email messages rather than wait for people to find your website.

Yes, and our clients love the tips we send out. The return has been tremendous. The first week of September when people are not typically thinking about buying golf equipment we sold 6 sets of irons, 4 drivers, 2 fairway woods and 3 hybrids due to our email blasts. All at full retail. The email messages inspire people to come over and get fit. It taps into something that is in their head already in



Bill Abrams has been a pioneering leader in clubfitting and player development for many years.

most cases. They always meant to do it, but our communications inspire them to action. Their time and money are valuable to them, but the professional manner in which we now communicate with them creates a connection.

What is the outbound marketing process like? Do you utilize templates or do you create the content yourself?

We have a small staff so using Retail Tribe has allowed us to get organized. Mostly I will create our content. It's to the point where we have gone beyond most of their generic content. For example, I do not stock TaylorMade, so items that are TaylorMade items tend to get clipped out.

Do you believe there is a perception among members that the club professional is distancing himself from the club, based on not utilizing the club's email blasts and instead using the Retail Tribe platform?

I believe based on the feedback we have gotten that our emails are more professionally done than most, and that professionalism becomes the message. The people at Retail Tribe are specialists in golf retail and it has enhanced my communications.

Putters—that is kind of the final frontier in clubfitting. Talk a bit about your putter fitting.

I saw a sign recently that said the lack of proper putter fitting is the reason most people will not play golf to their potential. That's worth considering. We use the Eyeline setup, the PING Eye app and the See-More putting fitting system. We start off with the golfer talking about posture, setup and aim. Then we check what we call the gait of the stroke. We may change the shaft flex, for example, if the player has a longer, slower stroke. In that situation a tighter shaft won't feel as good. If the player has a face-balanced putter, a huge gait and long stroke and you watch him hit five putts, the first four are typically going to go left because the putter has been shutting down. He is then going to correct and will blow one right.



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There are common patterns of this type?

There are, yes. Not having the right fit will first mess with their aim and then their stroke. Putter fitting has had a big impact on our business, it creates lessons and also shows our expertise in the field of putting instruction and fitting.

Talk in general about social media and how you deploy it to strengthen your business.

We use Facebook and have 15,000 followers. On Twitter we have about 1,400 followers. Facebook has been great along with our YouTube videos in maintaining our relationships. Along with our website upgrade it has given us great visibility. For example, I am now doing video lessons and have reached people in Thailand who are sending video for me to analyze.

What are you doing to create golf opportunities?

We have always focused on juniors and families. I have been fortunate to be recognized by US Kids as a Top 50 Master Instructor and we were the first course in Illinois to use the US Kids Family Tees back in 2006. We have a Family Golf Night where

after 4:30, a family can come out and get one cart and play for \$22. We also have something we call “Good Evening Golf” where after 5:30, we charge \$2 a hole, as long as you play a minimum of three holes. This creates an opportunity for people to get on the course at a reasonable price. That said, when I think of the health of the sport I lean more toward retention of our current players. I read somewhere that it takes three times the effort and dollars to create a new player than to keep a current player engaged.

With clubfitting such a large part of your business, how do you stay current with all the trends?

I really work hard at both of the trade shows in Orlando and Vegas. In that regard, the Proponent Group has really been wonderful for me, in helping to keep me very current with trends in the marketplace. I do a lot of online reading and newsletter reading. Lastly, I test a lot of clubs. If a new shaft comes out, I order one and try it myself, that way I can share with the client that I have tried the club or shaft myself. If I recommend it, that recommendation has more weight behind it.

Is it a problem for you the way some of the companies come out with mid-season releases of new equipment?

Personally, I shy away from doing business with companies that have a history of unveiling equipment mid-season and as a fitter I do not have a lot of equipment in stock. Plus, I am very happy with the relationships I am currently using. For example, I have

had steady growth the last five years and PING was up 22 percent last year compared to the previous year.

You mentioned your staff is relatively small, how do you accomplish so much with so few people?

I have one assistant professional, one golf professional who is the Pro Emeritus at a club down the street and myself. We play 18,000 rounds, so we are fairly busy. We believe that while “we are not the biggest, we are always striving to be the best.”

What advice would you have for someone getting into the business right now?

I would encourage them to be diligent about everything they do and stay on top of things. I would recommend they focus on their strengths and work on their weaknesses. Lastly, be careful not to bite off too much, focus on what you are good at and do not try to be the best at too many things.

Have you read any good books lately?

I would recommend Simon Sinek, he is the author of “Start with Why.” To get a taste for what is in Sinek's book you could go view his Ted Talk on YouTube. He really focuses on the belief that inspires you to do what you do. I've found that very helpful.