

What I've Learned: Andy Hilts

National Director of Instruction & Education at GolfTEC

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



Proponent member Andy Hilts oversees the training of more than 500 golf instructors in his role as head of instruction and education for GolfTEC. Based at the company's Centennial, Colorado headquarters, Hilts was recently named one of Golf Digest's Top 40 Teachers Under 40. This article continues our one-on-one interview series featuring a diversity of insights from Proponent Group members.

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A mainstay of the Collaborate newsletter is the question-and-answer interview conducted by member Paul Ramee of Bull's Bridge Golf Club in western Connecticut. This month's interview subject is Andy Hilts, who chose the teaching path early in his career as a golf professional. He became a leader in the GolfTEC organization through his skills and energy for improving golf skills using the proven and respected concepts his company has developed. Hilts recently spent time engaging in a dialogue that explores these experiences in detail.

Andy, you've found your way to a unique and specialized role within our profession. Tell us about your early experiences and how they may have led you to your GolfTEC position.

My high school golf coach, Mike Duchin, had a devotion to the game and he instilled that same passion in me. I went to Mississippi State as a Professional Golf Management student with intent to pursue a career in the golf business. During college I did internships at West Lake in Augusta, Georgia and at the Country Club of Colorado, which is a resort. I got exposed to the major-championship atmosphere by working for the USGA at the 1998 US Open at the Olympic Club. That was very memorable but the internship that made the biggest difference for me was at a municipal golf course, working with Terri Ryan. This is where the light bulb turned on for me, so to speak, and I fell in love with teaching. Terri's style was minimal in the use of technology, but very effective. She inspired me to want to achieve my potential.

Can you name some people who have influenced you in the industry and helped to shape your career path?

While Mike Duchin solidified my passion for golf during my high school years, my parents, who were both teachers, instilled the need and joy for education. Dr. Roland Jones and all the friends I

made at Mississippi State also helped guide me along the way. At GolfTEC, I've been strongly influenced by Mike Clinton and Joe Assell, the two golf professionals who founded the company. They taught me about the business of golf and have provided me the opportunity to help build our business. Other great people I've learned from at GolfTEC include Ty Walker, our Colorado Regional Manager, also Jeremy Beck and Ian Hughes, two coaches I began my GolfTEC career with. Really it's been all my fellow coaches at the company. It seems there has always been someone around helping me strive to become better.

Here's a simple question we often ask: Why is it you love being a golf instructor?

Three reasons, really. One, if I am successful I get a chance to make a person's day by giving them more enjoyment in a game they love. Two – and this is selfish – my obsession is my profession. Not many people can honestly say they love their work. Lastly, I love how playing and teaching the game are a wonderful blend of art and science.

GolfTEC is a phenomenon in golf instruction. Its success is well-known but we'd like to have you describe the model and the company mission from an insider's perspective.

This is an approach based on technology and science, not opinion. I stumbled onto GolfTEC when I attended a presentation Mike and Joe made at MSU. The fact-based approach appealed to me right away. What I heard and saw that day

changed my perception of the golf instructor's way of gaining insight into what's happening. I was given what I needed to become a coach that could develop a game plan that would guide players through a structured process that would revolutionize their game.

What would be the appropriate mindset for a GolfTEC instructor?

First and foremost our coaches are passionate about helping people. It also is vital for our coaches to be open to new ideas and concepts. After that we focus our efforts on helping them understand the cause and effect relationships throughout the swing.

In the marketplace, how does the company operate?

First, I would say quite successfully. We have given more than 3.5 million golf lessons with a 95% success rate. We employ 500 Certified Coaches in 165 Improvement Centers across the US, Canada, Mexico, Japan and soon to be Korea. Most of our growth has come while rounds played and golf has generally been on the decline. There are many reasons for our success

but one that stands out to me as a coach was how GolfTEC taught me how to see the swing and sell.

Where do you fit into that, in your current capacity?

My position with the company is VP of Instruction and Education. Basically I am teaching the teachers who come to our academy about our system. It was not a tough decision to move from teaching 1,800 lessons annually to this role in an organization with the scale of GolfTEC. I was at a place in my teaching where I was burned out and ready for something different. I wanted to contribute to the company's growth, which has been significant.

Even under difficult economic conditions we are going to open 30 new locations this year and we are opening locations in Tokyo. It certainly has been quite an experience training coaches when they don't speak the same language. In my current role I hope that I can continue to shorten our coaches learning curve and make sure they are giving the best golf lessons possible.

As you went up the learning curve at GolfTEC, what was most important to your progress?

When I began to teach teachers I realized the nuances of getting points across effectively. That was when I really learned to communicate. I understood that I could have 10 people in the room with me and they would hear 10 different things—just a matter of learning styles and the way our minds work. The challenge was to get my message across to them in a consistent voice, but in a way that each of them could understand.

To train the instructors you recruit, the company has established GolfTEC University. Give us some insight into that.

It's basically a 10-day seminar series that covers motion analysis, the art of selling, custom clubfitting and the golf sequence. It is not open to the public, only GolfTEC guys. We continue to monitor our relationships after the franchisee graduates and have only had five stores close due to poor performance. Before closing a store, we work with the individual and monitor the quality of their lessons over the web. We can see how many lessons they have on the books and track those trends.

We try and explain to our attendees that your Doctor tells you to come back to see him, most golf professionals are of the soft sell nature, while we push to book out the year well in advance.

How, in your opinion, is GolfTEC changing the teaching landscape?

I think we have begun to change the mentality of giving one off lessons to really taking ownership of a player's improvement. One off lessons typically don't change a player's movement pattern or improve their game significantly for the long term. I think we have also helped make the use of technology in lessons more common place. Seventeen years ago when we first started teaching no one really used motion analysis, now it is quite common. I think we have also changed the opinion about teaching indoors.

How would you assess the pros and cons to moving instruction away from the golf course?

The biggest positive is that students have easier access. They can leave their office and enjoy a golf experience and then head back to the office. I can't

really think of a negative. Getting people to do anything golf related is a plus to help grow the game.

Within the Proponent Group membership there are quite a few GolfTEC staff instructors—also at least a handful of Proponent Members who are also GolfTEC franchisees. Could you tell us what the process is like if someone wants to consider taking on a franchise?

We have quite a few coaches who are very successful franchise owners and Proponent Group members. The initial investment required to open an Improvement Center depends on the location and build out costs, but is approximately \$200,000. With that initial investment GolfTEC helps with site selection, design and build out, training the coaches, marketing and everything in between. Most of our successful Centers will do between \$500,000 and \$1M in annual sales. Many of the major markets have already been built out but there are still many small markets that are open for development. One of the things most of our franchise owners and coaches like is the 45-50 hour work week as well as time off on a weekend day and holidays off.

You are exposed on a daily basis to young people intent on learning the ropes of golf instruction. What do you notice about their approach and the ideas they bring to it?

A few traits are fairly common. Obviously they have great computer skills but often lack the ability to interpret launch-monitor data or understand motion analysis. They also have difficulty diagnosing the swing flaws and fixing the flaws—especially as regards sequence. They don't know how to fix swing flaws in the proper order. Wrapped into that is understanding the equipment piece and the athletic or physical aspect.

We have to educate them in the role that equipment plays in a client's swing and their long-term improvement. That's true also for their ability to assess the physical abilities and limitations of a student and building a swing around what each student can do. In the area of growing their instruction business, it's pretty much a deficit of things across the board. There are very few golf professionals who have been taught to sell, which is a huge factor in any attempt to be successful.



GolfTEC's Andy Hilts training an instructor in the company's philosophy.