

# ALISON CURDT

**WOOD RANCH GOLF CLUB, SIMI VALLEY, CA**

**INTERVIEW BY PAUL RAMEE, JR**

Several decades ago, professionals seeking new ways to improve golf performance started to look beyond physical movement alone. Their term for this new direction in training became, unfortunately, “the mental game.” In some ways this was progress, but it represented a false completion of the scope of study.

Think about it: When a person’s condition or behavior is examined in ways that transcend the body, the “mind” as we tend to define it is only part of what’s left to look at—the human psyche in all its complexities must also be accounted for.

Every childhood exposes an individual to experiences, negative and positive, that get recorded and stored. Their imprint remains and is carried forward into adulthood, with the result that past experiences—and the feelings that go with them—can become triggered by present-day situations.

Proponent Group member Alison Curdt, a Class A LPGA member and a PGA Master Professional in Instruction—also a doctoral candidate in psychology at California Southern University, with an emphasis in sports psychology—has designed a golf coaching practice that examines and works with the whole human being in ways nobody else seems to do.

A practicing psychotherapist in the state of California, she see clients in her office at Curdt Performance Therapy and she sees them on the

lesson tee at Wood Ranch Golf Club in Simi Valley. If you’re one of Curdt’s students, you can avail yourself of “Off-Site Mental Sessions” at her therapy studio in Woodland Hills one week and the next week meet her at the Wood Ranch practice range—with clubs and balls and launch monitors and all that good stuff.

“Issues such as depression, performance anxiety, ‘choking’ during a performance, and mindfulness focus are just a few of the aspects Alison has helped her athlete-clients with,” explains the Curdt Performance Therapy website.

When the LPGA bestowed on Curdt its 2015 National Teacher of the Year award, it may have had some inkling of her breakthrough work in the inner psychic life, or indeed the award may have been based strictly on the excellent results she achieves.

Either way, the frontier this Missouri-bred professional has crossed raises the stakes on beyond-the-mechanics coaching. For nearly a century, it’s been understood that all experience of self-scolding, shame and self-chastisement—ultra-



**Curdt appeared with Michael Breed on Golf Channel during the 2015 KPMG Womens PGA Championship, which she qualified to compete in.**





**Curdt's training as a licensed Clinical Psychotherapist provides her with an array of tools to assist students with emotional issues that may interfere with their best golf.**

-common among golfers—flows directly from the Freudian super-ego, one of three centers (with the ego and the id) of all human psychological experience. Calling this “bad self-talk” and offering quick tips on how to counter it, without even glancing at its psychic origins based on early experience, is incomplete science to put it mildly.

Working in a sport that attracts affluent participants, instructors like Alison end up encountering that rare and seemingly inscrutable breed—people who have everything that money can buy yet are unhappy, often deeply so. Her university training in psychology, her intuitive nature and her unusual form of curiosity regarding cause-effect make her just the right teacher for that environment. Curdt has given many a golf lesson in which the student would confide and confess uncloaked truths of their inner emotional lives—panic, seething anger, numbness, phobias and the like. These are stimuli that obviously would hobble anyone's attempt to focus on swing mechanics or their ability to accept less-than-desirable results on the course.

As we find in this dialogue between Alison and Paul Ramee, Curdt's own personal experience has been marked by some minor and not-so-minor personal trauma since she left Florida State University, where she was a mainstay of the woman's golf team for four years. Or you could put it this way: Stuff happened to her that, through her training and sheer openness to the reality of emotional experience, she recognized as true psychic ordeal—that alone indicates a rare capacity for understanding the human journey.

### **Take us back to the beginning, and your early involvement in golf.**

I grew up in St. Louis in the 1980s, with a brother who was two years older. When he was nine and I was seven, my brother was able to start participating in organized sports, which made me jealous. He got to play on all these teams and have all this fun and I couldn't. My father made it up to me by sneaking me out to play golf (you were supposed to be at least eight to go on the course). He got me a couple of clubs and I absolutely loved it.

### **With golf, there's nothing like getting an early start.**

It does help, and as I got older I got more and more involved in playing and competing. I was able to play in some city tournaments and junior events. Eventually I made it to the NCAA Division 1 level, at Florida State University. My ultimate goal was to play professionally but I was also very serious about my academics and my PGM training. I completed a double major in Psychology and the Professional Golf Management program.

### **What came next, after graduation?**

I went to work in California, at Westin Mission Hills Resort and Spa in the desert, where I had previously interned. Then in 2006, a couple years out of school, I had a life-changing experience. The house I was living in burned down and I lost everything. I literally had no possessions. That's a traumatic thing to undergo and it left me with no idea what to do. I decided to give up golf and move back to St. Louis.



**Curdt knew quickly that playing and teaching were her passion and that she would focus on building her own unique instruction brand.**

**We know now that your decision wasn't permanent.**

Well, right. It wasn't. After a couple of months in St. Louis, I wanted to get back involved, so I secured a teaching position at a GolfTEC in El Segundo, Calif. and moved back to the West Coast. Then I was recruited by Sherwood Country Club, in Thousand Oaks. My title was Head Teaching Professional and First Assistant.

**So, a mix of teaching plus regular golf operations?**

Right, and that works for a lot of people, but it just isn't right for me. It became very clear that I was happiest when I was helping people directly with their golf games. Meanwhile, when I was working on the day-to-day golf operation I was unhappy. It affected my mental well-being and even my physical health.

**Interesting. What advice would you have to people who are doing something that truly does not make them happy?**

First, I think it requires a high level of self-awareness in a person and I understand that not everyone is in a position in their life to make a big change in their career. Some have the obligations of supporting a family or need the assurances associated with being an employee. But I could see, in myself, that unhappiness and frustration was affecting my body language, my communications with people and my performance.

**Was there a tipping-point event—something that pushed you over the edge?**

I came to the end of the 2013 season and took stock of things. I was to the point where I was unhappy with the day-to-day operations and responsibilities and knew that I had no upward mobility at the club due to being a female. With being stagnant in my position and feeling antsy to move forward in my career I decided to make some changes. So in 2014 I left the traditional life of a golf professional and started Alison Curdt Golf, and since then I've been out on my own.

**How did you come upon the clinical-psychology segment of what you do?**

I am a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in California with over 3,000 hours of training and client contact. I created Curdt Performance Therapy and obviously my ideal demographic is athletes, but anyone who performs can be helped by my programs and I have the chance to work with some musicians and actors. I typically teach golf during the day and then have office hours in the late afternoon or evenings. It should come as no surprise that many athletes have anxiety/depression conditions that greatly affect their performance. My background helps me work with these athletes on a much deeper level.

**Do you leave the golf fundamentals on the range and the clinical approach to the office? Or do the two ever overlap?**



**Curdt was named the LPGA T&CP National Teacher of the Year in 2015. She has also made the Golf Digest list Best Young Instructors in America, and was recognized in 2016 as the Northern California PGA's Clubfitter of the Year.**

I use the clinical approach every day in my teaching and with 100 percent of my students. A big part of it is listening to who they are as a person and interpreting what they are saying. At any point in the process if I don't understand what's being shared, it's up to me to seek clarification. I use emotional techniques as well as basic therapeutic dialogue, and also breathing. One tool I use is EMDR, or Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing. This is a tool that is now commonly used to treat PTSD—people who have endured trauma and the resulting depression and anxiety.

#### **Does your particular clinical approach have a basic theoretical root, within psychology?**

For the most part my technique is based on a client-centered approach. It's a way of interpreting the whole spectrum of heightened feelings or energy, with an eye to how it gets triggered—what factors underlie the stimulus. We work through the issues and create ways to not trigger these arousals in the present-day forms that they take. For example, if a player had a coach in another sport growing up yell at him or her and tell them they were not good enough, they could have confidence issues and it could affect how they deal with pressure.

#### **What is next for you with respect to your future?**

I am playing in the KPMG Women's PGA Championship at the end of June, which I'm looking forward to. I've

done some public speaking and and I would love to do more. I'm scheduled to speak at the PGA Fashion and Demo Experience in Las Vegas later this year.

#### **Any thoughts of "franchising" what you do?**

There may be some logic to that—for example, right now I am the only PGA professional out there who is trained in EMDR—however, being in two places at once is difficult and right now the idea of training others seems like too big a distraction. It would take away from the time that I dedicate to practicing and playing. I value that very highly and I'm not ready to give that up.

#### **Anything fellow Proponent members could learn from how you have gone about branding yourself?**

I developed a logo and a website, basically. It was all new to me. The biggest ROI was based on word-of-mouth. In other words, giving good lessons and being patient. The first few months were slow. But I guess I developed some of those so-called "raving fans." A student would tell their friend about me and, sure enough, each month I gave a few more lessons, and it grew from there. I also went to a local newspaper and wrote some articles, and I gave some free clinics to a few women's associations, that sort of thing. I really believe you have to plant seeds in all areas of your life, water them and let them flourish. But then you can't rush the results, you have to be patient. **PG**