

ANDY HILTS STEPS IN

CONVERSATION WITH A LONGTIME MEMBER AS HE TAKES ON THE POSITION OF DIRECTOR AT PROPONENT GROUP

INTERVIEW BY DAVID GOULD

He's a familiar face in a new role, and yes, he's the first golf instructor ever to serve in a staff position for Proponent Group.

As the calendar turns to 2018, Andy Hilts arrives bringing a tailor-made skill set and a true dedication to helping his fellow coaches get more from their careers and their businesses.

It's a move indirectly prompted by the changing and expanding landscape of golf instruction, and more directly by the Golf Channel acquisition of Proponent Group and Golf Channel Academy. That deal was finalized earlier this Fall after a lengthy joint-venture partnership, and it led to the appointment of Lorin Anderson as a Golf Channel vice-president overseeing instruction-related businesses under the Golf Channel umbrella.

With the dust settled on those transactions, the time was right to put Hilts in the new position of Director, covering day-to-day operations and reporting to Anderson, who continues to oversee the company's strategic direction. Details of Andy's background and credentials are provided in the

news story you'll find on the front page of this newsletter. What follows is the transcript of a question-and-answer session intended to look back over Andy's golf career and look ahead to how Proponent Group will leverage his skills and background to better serve the membership.



Describe your early discussions about taking a leadership role at Proponent.

About three years ago I approached Lorin and asked him for some advice about long-range career planning. I was looking to the future and beginning to think about what might be next. We

Upon graduation from the PGM program at Mississippi State, Hilts had offers from Whistling Straits, Butler National and GolfTEC. He chose the latter and played a key role in building the largest instruction operation ever.





The Hilts family took a summer camping trip throughout the western U.S. that covered 10,000 miles, amassing a large collection of slides that Andy took from room to room of his grade school, narrating the trip. The experience helped spark his lifelong zeal for giving educational presentations.

had a good conversation that helped me get clear on what mattered most to me in my professional life. Then, last December, Lorin called me to say certain things were taking place that might eventually open up an opportunity for me. Over time he was able to provide additional information. I was excited by the prospect. I could see that my experience at GOLFTEC would equip me well to do the support work for Proponent coaches that Lorin is charging me to take on.

Among all your qualifications for the job, being a 10-year member—and a highly active one at that—would seem extremely relevant.

Without a doubt. I'm a member of Proponent Group because of Lorin. I joined because of him and over these many years I've stayed a member because of him. I'm certainly not Lorin, but I feel I can make an important contribution. Part of my job is to make sure the new distribution of responsibilities works well enough that Lorin can continue doing the things that he does best on behalf of Proponent members.

What specialized skills and knowledge do you feel that you bring to this job?

If you go with the basic idea that Proponent Group is a tool for taking a craft—teaching and coaching—and getting it to operate like a business, I've got a lot of expertise in that. As others have said in the past, a teacher is wired to

teach. It's the reason instructors get up in the morning. The organizational activities that go along with being a golf instructor aren't particularly enjoyable to most, but even if they were enjoyable it can be difficult to know what to do, and when. Some activities that seem appropriate are actually not a good use of your time and energy. Other activities that don't seem like they would do much to enhance your operation are in fact vital. So, members can look for help from me in these areas. I'll also be part of the education effort Proponent has always put forth, to help members keep up with the latest trends and approaches for game-improvement.

What was family life like for you, growing up?

I was born and raised in a small town in Wisconsin, just west of Milwaukee. My parents were schoolteachers—my mother taught third grade and my father taught industrial arts, including graphics and printing. He was very interested in photography and knew a lot about it. I had an older brother, Troy, who was a major influence on me. We were best friends as well as brothers, and played every sport you could name together. Troy was a soccer star, and in general he was better than me at everything, until finally when I was in 8th grade I was able to beat him at golf. My brother died very tragically a few years ago, which was a huge loss for me at the time, and still is.



The first golf instructor ever to hold a Proponent Group staff position, Hilts has trained and mentored hundreds of young teachers over the years and given more than 10,000 lessons himself.

How and when did you realize that golf was a game you would play your whole life?

By the time I got to high school golf was starting to become more important. I played just about every sport and was pretty good at most of them, but then I started to really develop as a golfer. I played on our high school team as a freshman and loved it. Our coach was a great person and great to play for. I learned a lot from him about how to interact with people you were trying to train for success in a sport.

What stands out as you think back to those years playing high-school golf?

One amazing thing for me was to get to play so many excellent courses, generally at private clubs. Our family lived pretty modestly—the golf I played with my dad was on public courses, and we usually played early-bird or twilight to get a break on the green fee. I had a lot of pinch-me moments that first year of high school playing country clubs I never thought I would have access to.

Tell us about your entree into the golf industry. How did that happen?

I had a summer job all through high school, working for a carpet installation company. It was pretty brutal work but it paid \$10 an hour, which was a lot more than most jobs I could get. My father disapproved of me doing that, because the

older guys on the crew were rough around the edges and a lot of our jobs were in downtown Milwaukee—not the best neighborhoods, either. He wanted me to do something else, but I wanted that \$10 an hour. One day we were working a job and I banged up my knee really bad. It swelled up and I had to quit for the day. I didn't want to go home until the swelling went down and I could walk without limping, because I didn't want my dad to go off on me. So I went to the golf course and hung around, hitting putts on the practice green and the pro happened to walk by. He recognized me and struck up a conversation. Right then and there he offered me a job at the course, for \$9 an hour. Even better was the deal he offered me to run junior camps—\$100 for a four-hour session. I told him I didn't know anything about running junior camps, but he told me I'd pick it up no problem.

More fun than installing carpeting?

Well, anything would be, but I loved working at the course, and working with the kids. I did that my last summer before going off to college.

Where did you go to college?

I started off at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. My first choice would have been University of Wisconsin at Madison, but I wasn't good enough to make that golf team. So I played

Though his college playing career was cut short when the program was discontinued, Hilts has remained an avid golfer. He's played 43 of the top 100 courses in the U.S.



at Stevens Point for two years—the last two years of the program, which got cut because of Title IX. That was it for me, as an NCAA golfer. Then someone told me about PGM programs. I looked into a couple of them and chose Mississippi State University, which had year-round golf weather.

A good experience for you?

It was, and what really made it special were the internships. One in particular, up in Detroit, probably changed my life. I interned at a couple of muni courses under a professional named Terry Ryan, who was a Teacher of the Year in the section. Terry was booked out months in advance and her students loved her. I watched how she worked and saw golf swings get significantly better. She sold lessons in packages and she scheduled the lessons right then and there—I had never seen that. I got all her overflow business, and arrived back on campus with \$10,000 in the bank, from one summer's work. I was on a loan program, but that year I paid my tuition in cash.

You went the instruction route and became an award-winning teacher. What part of teaching and coaching did you feel you had room to improve in?

One area where I wish I had developed sooner

was in motivating students to practice. Until I got exposed to Dr. Rick Jensen, I wasn't able to set the practice expectation from the outset. I also didn't know about supervised practice when I started, or the comprehensive, detailed plan or assignment used by Bill Davis. These ideas and techniques are fairly new on the scene. In Colorado, most serious teachers know Trent Wearer and we use his Golf Scrimmages concept, which is as good a way as you'll find to get people practicing effectively.

Golf is a game for a lifetime and teaching seems to be a skill for a lifetime—you never quit trying to perfect it, right?

In a sense, yes, but I look at it this way: Golf is a difficult game and that's why we've got millions of golfers struggling to figure things out. If one of those golfers has a coach who is trying to figure things out at the same time as they are, the golfer isn't well-served. You pay for experience.

The top coaches may have 20 ways to solve a problem—golfers paying for instruction need somebody who has at least five or 10 ways. So, the dedicated coach who keeps on learning—the Proponent member, in other words—is a resource that people can and should turn to. Invest in that relationship and your money is well spent. **PG**