

WHAT I'VE LEARNED: CHERYL ANDERSON

**DIRECTOR OF INSTRUCTION, MIKE BENDER
GOLF ACADEMY — LAKE MARY, FLORIDA**

INTERVIEW BY PAUL RAMEE, JR



The field of golf instruction has developed to the point where it calls for expertise in a wide array of disciplines—from anatomy to psychology to kinesiology to child development, to the physics of how a shaft loads and unloads, and much more. That's made it an ideal career choice for Cheryl Anderson, whose ever-curious mind moves fluidly from one intriguing question to the next.

One of the most accomplished golf coaches of her generation, Cheryl is a big part of what makes the Mike Bender Golf Academy a destination training center for U.S. and foreign players alike. The wall in her office there is crowded with coveted industry citations—a Golf Digest America's Top 50 Teachers award, multiple GOLF Magazine Top 100 Teachers plaques, a Metropolitan PGA Section Teacher of the Year award and her 2006 LPGA National Teacher of the Year honor, for good measure. She is also a guiding light for Proponent Group, through her long marriage to its founder, Lorin Anderson, and the constant flow of front-lines knowledge and experience she is able to provide Proponent's entire staff.

Cheryl has taught several top 100 juniors in the country including a No. 1-ranked junior girl whom she taught for nearly a decade. She also coached the Lake Mary Prep Girls Golf team to two state championship victories in Florida, including a national-record 14-under-par performance in an 18-hole event. Cheryl has been with the Mike Bender Golf Academy for more than 10 years.

Anderson also is one of the best woman club pro players ever. In 2004, she earned the Met PGA Section Women's Player of the Year award for a record fifth consecutive season. Her play in 2002 was historic as she became the first woman to win all three of the Metropolitan PGA women's events in one season: The Metropolitan Women's Open, the Met Women's Stroke Play Championship and the Met Women's Match Play Championship.

A graduate of Rutgers, Anderson competed on the golf team for four years, including two as team captain. She has authored instruction articles in Golf for Women Magazine, Met Golfer Magazine and Golf Digest Woman Magazine. Her book Teach Yourself Visually Golf was published in 2007.

The following thoughts are from her recent conversation with Proponent Group member Paul Ramee, Jr.

Anderson works with all levels of players nearly every day, but she has built a reputation for developing junior girls at the highest level.





Anderson notes that her success has been built on the shared knowledge of many industry leaders including her personal coach of more than 20 years, Mike Bender (right), whom she has taught alongside for the past decade.

Talk about your childhood and your early interest in golf.

As a kid growing up in Connecticut I played all sports. Then in the summer our family would go up to Lake Placid, New York. We had a field next to our cabin there and some old hickory golf clubs. Every summer, I was intrigued by the challenge of hitting a golf ball past this one apple tree in the field. And, simple as it sounds, that's how I got into the game. One year I actually succeeded in hitting past the tree. I remember thinking how good a golfer I must be, to have hit that shot.

Obviously so—given the player you turned out to be, you had to have been a natural.

Actually, I had a very long, very slow swing. And really I didn't play much. I didn't go out for the high school team until I was a senior. At that point I was getting very serious but in tryouts I missed making it by one stroke. Still, the very next day the coach reached out to me and said I should enter the girls high school state tournament. It was so nice of the coach to do this, and I played and actually finished second.

You came out of nowhere, as they say.

I guess I did. It was a real breakthrough and unexpected. My parents and I knew nothing about competition in golf, but right away my dad said, "Gee, you're pretty good. Let me call around to see if there's a chance for you to get on a college team." That's not how things happen nowadays but it worked out because I ended up going to Rutgers and playing on the team there.

Even when you got there, you had to be pretty green.

Oh definitely. I didn't come from a normal junior golf background with lots of instruction and training. When I got to school I was a sponge for the coaching there, and was able to really develop. I mean, my score for my first college tournament round was a 103, and my last year I was

averaging 76. So those four years were a very focused time for me.

Did you have your life after graduation all planned out?

My thought had been to pursue a teaching career—that's what I went to college for. But along the way I would be sitting in class and looking out the window, realizing that a life inside classrooms wasn't appealing. I wanted to be outside. And I had been introduced one summer by Heather Daly-Donofrio to Brendan Walsh, who's been head professional at The Country Club in Brookline, MA for a long time now, but back then was at The Patterson Club in Fairfield, CT near where I grew up. The world of golf professionals and what they did was pretty unknown to me, but I got the opportunity to work for Brendan the summer before my senior year and I went for it.

I loved that job. It was the first time that I was in a real golf environment and I was blown away. I admired Brendan's passion for the game and for doing so much to help others and make everybody happy. After college, Brendan helped me secure a job at Rolling Hills Country Club in Wilton, CT, where I worked for three years

How was that experience?

It wasn't so great, basically due to my own shortcomings. I was not a good player. To be a golf professional and not play well wasn't something I was okay with. I was at a level where I played in the U.S. Amateur and the USGA Public Links but I was down at the bottom of every field, and it bothered me. Lorin and I talked it over and I decided I was going to go down to Florida in the winters and really work on my game.

That's important in our business—to get to a certain level as a player where you feel comfortable and credible. That gets us to another problem—along with not being a good player, I had no idea how to teach.

More than a decade of winters competing on the Florida mini-tours exposed Anderson to playing with the best competitors and learning from the best teachers in the game. She dispenses that knowledge every day to her current students.



I'm trying to picture Cheryl Anderson as a lousy golf instructor.

Well, take my word for it. I remember one day at Rolling Hills I gave a lesson to a man and when it was over he went into the golf shop and asked if there was another pro he could take lessons from. I felt terrible and I vowed to do whatever was necessary not to have that feeling again. So that's when I really went on this quest to become a good enough player that people would respect me, and a good enough teacher that I'd be able to help people improve and earn their trust as a coach.

So, off you went to Florida to learn your trade?

Off I went. Lorin, through his contacts, was able to open up a lot of opportunities for me. All I had to do was feel deserving and embrace the challenge. At first I was very timid, which he helped me get over. I ended up in Orlando at Grand Cypress, practicing hard and spending time around a lot of great players. That gave me a chance to see up close how someone could go from being good to being great. I was inspired and I worked really hard for the next 15 years.

Those years when you spent the winter in Orlando must have been when you met Mike Bender, right?

Yes, I first met Mike in 1996. That was when the lightbulbs came on. This was a teacher who could paint a picture for people—lay out his vision for their golf swing and what they could accomplish. It was very inspiring for me. I didn't really understand a lot of things about this work until I met him. I started taking lessons from him in '96 and we went to work. It took me two or three years to develop under Mike, but things came together. From 2000 to 2005 I played a very high level of golf for a club professional.

Mike is obviously a phenomenal teacher, but it sounds like he had a very good student.

Well, it's interesting how I went through the process with him. Being such a late bloomer, I had the same experience a lot of our students have. Along that journey from 1997 to 2000 I was working hard and not really seeing results yet, so I was in need of whatever support I could find to not lose patience. It was during that period that I met Dr. Rick Jensen and Pia Nilsson. Those two really helped me get through the hurdles of making swing changes and competing at high levels while holding down a full-time job.

"Journey" is really the only word that describes it.

No doubt about that. I look back now and realize how all of these interesting people were coming into my life because of the commitment I had made, and stuck to, of wanting to become a good player. But I wanted to become a good player, truthfully, because I wanted to be a good teacher. It was never about making the pro tour. I just wanted respect from my students so they would want to take lessons from me.

During that period, what was going on for you during the summertime?

Actually I had another breakthrough, up North, in going to work for Gene Borek at Metropolis Country Club in 1995. For eight years I got to hang around a great human being, a great player, and for me an ideal mentor. He really helped me play the game while I worked with Mike on my swing. Again, at the time I started with Gene I just wasn't confident in what I was doing. I would go out with people to play and they would beat me. So I was thinking, why would they want a lesson from me if I couldn't even beat them? When I worked for Gene, I saw how he got so much respect and I wanted to be like that. So that's why I



Over the years, Anderson has written and filmed dozens of articles for golf magazines and co-authored *Teach Yourself Visually Golf*.

went on this quest, and I always remember PGA Tour player Jay Williamson telling me, "if you can't play, then teach," and that pissed me off. That kind of drove me, and that's why I really wanted to play on the LPGA Tour as a club pro, and how I ended up qualifying for six Tour events. I needed that feeling that you get from competition; that I could do it under pressure and face the situations that these players are going to go through. This helped me develop confidence, you know, actually doing the thing I'm teaching people to do.

Talk about playing tournament golf up there in the highly competitive Metropolitan section.

It was a great run for me. I won two Met Opens in a row. I ended up Player of the Year in the Metropolitan PGA five times. I played in a bunch of LPGA Tour events in the Northeast including the Betsy King Classic where I made the cut. That was the highlight of my competitive career, taking time off from my club job and shooting three rounds under par on the LPGA Tour that week.

Then I suffered a wrist injury and it was pretty severe, so I was out of competition, starting in 2005.

Apparently that took a long time to heal.

It did, but then also I had a baby, our daughter Callie, who is now 12 years old. I had gotten some good advice from Sandy LaBauve about being a mom and a golf instructor — Sandy told me that it's better to move south when you have a family because that way you'll have the summers off. With Callie having Down Syndrome, she became my priority and I wanted to make sure I had the time to help her, so I called Mike Bender to see if it would be possible to teach at his academy.

Did Mike have a spot for you?

He asked me if I could pack up that night and be in Florida the next day. He was just so welcoming and I can't thank him enough for all he's done for me. Lorin and Callie and I left the Northeast and we've been here 10 years and I just teach golf five days a week during the school year and take a couple months off in the summers.

Throughout this entire process, what are some things that you've learned and picked up that you wish you had known earlier in your collegiate career?

The number one thing is understanding people's brains and how they are wired. I am a dominant trait personality and I like competition, but I am also introverted in a way, and on the golf course I tried to please people by engaging in a lot of conversation, and it was draining for me. Once I understood I needed to conserve my energy on the course, that's when I really started playing well. Being a golf professional, you're always working on other people's games and you're trying to make other people feel good, right? I had to get away from the members when I practiced or I found myself always answering questions and chatting.

So, does that understanding carry over to your everyday approach to teaching?

The first thing I do with a new student is determine their personality type. Whether it be through a DISC assessment or the Myers-Briggs profile, I want to understand what makes them tick. If I have an extroverted person, I'm going to turn on my energy and give them what they need. If I have an introverted person, I'm going to be a little quieter. In this way I try and cater to the student based on their personal style. The second thing involves understanding the body. A lot of people can't make certain moves and early in my career I didn't factor

that in. It helped that I got injured a few times, and it wasn't until I did proper stretching and strengthening and learned about my body that I felt good. Luckily we have an expert here, but if we didn't I would certainly need to get better at that, as any teacher should. I also wish that back then we had the technology that we do now because it would have taken a lot of guesswork out of my playing and teaching. I feel more confident as a teacher now too, having the TrackMan tell me whatever it is that I need to know.

You've also been an early adherent to the value of analytics, correct?

I did learn a lot about stats as a player, and working with Peter Sanders of Shot by Shot early in my career helped me prioritize where I need to focus my attention during practice. So, I feel I'm very good at doing that with my students. That's something I would encourage any teacher to have a grasp on, because you want to hear a player's point of view but you also want to see what they're doing on the golf course by looking at their stats, since we can't go watch them play all the time.

What stood out for you about transitioning from up in the Met section to down in Orlando with to Mike?

I feel so lucky to work here and from the start the obvious difference was resources and tools. I remember up North trying to get a mirror on the range and it was impossible. But if you come to our academy, there are mirrors everywhere. If you teach at the Mike Bender Academy you have every piece of teaching gear you would ever need. The tools allow the student to come and train properly, which even at a lot of fine private clubs they don't have a chance to do. Mike would always say, "Would you bring your car to a mechanic who didn't have tools?" So that's the environment I'm in now, and I see how important it is for people to have feedback.

What aspect of teaching are you working on now?

What I'm really into now is what Bill Davis always says, about turning good players into great players. It's finding the right challenge point for each student. When a student says a drill is too hard or they're bored because it's too easy, you have to adjust. If I have one challenge for a student, I'll have 10 levels to that challenge and I will encourage them to move through the levels. It's not about beating other people, it's about beating your personal best. So that's what I'm working on now.

And you've developed this on your own?

Yes and I developed it because of my daughter, Callie. Going through all of these educational searches and finding the right fit for her, I landed on something called Equipping Minds and that's how I'm sort of approaching all of my drills now. She has to get through different levels and certain challenges and it teaches grit and perseverance, because you have to do it again and again until you get there.

You deal with a wide range of skills in your teaching. How do you handle those differences?

I enjoy teaching all levels and always have. So I'm out there teaching the LPGA 101 class on Saturday mornings, usually followed by a couple mini-tour players, several juniors and a retiree or two. I love the variety.

I want to know what the student really wants from golf. I remember Chuck Cook saying at a seminar that if a person is happy going down the bunny hill, that's fine. Don't try to make them greater. Until I understood that, I would get busy trying to build a great golf swing for someone who just wants to go down the bunny hill. It's important to really listen to what the student wants and not to input things that you want.

There are some basic concerns in my head during every lesson that dictate how I'm going to approach that individual. They are: "Some people look but they don't see," "some people hear but they don't listen," and "some people touch but they don't feel." So I'm really in tune with those things with each of my students, no matter what their skill level. I find that most people look, but they don't see. A lot of people will be looking at a short game shot, and they know they want to hit it low, but they don't have any clue how far they want to land it. So, for example, I'll pull them aside and I will train them to recognize their distances, you know, here's 5 feet, here's 10 feet, here's 15 feet. I get them to see it better and then I will take the student back to the original shot.

Can you share some things that you've learned from the people who have helped you along the way?

Gene Borek always told me, "RMA", or Relaxed Mental Attitude. He would tell me that all the time because early on I was stressed about my game, and stressed about doing a good job. That was just something he preached to me throughout my time with him. Brendan Walsh would say, "just do a little better every day." The quote that I love when I went to Dr. Rick Jenson and he assessed my playing skills was "Cheryl, you're not a head case, you just suck." That was huge because so many people think they are head cases when they really just don't have the skills. So that was eye-opening. I almost got out of golf because it was just so hard when I was rebuilding my swing, and there were so many down moments where I was asking if it was worth all the effort.

At that time, I reached out to Pia Nilsson through Lorin and she gave me a list of like 50 questions, and I sat down for three hours going through them all. It really helped me organize my thoughts and that's really important for students, especially for serious players. I was in need of some serious soul-searching and she really helped me with that. Mike Bender has so much passion, just watching him teach from sunup to sundown every day made me want to do better and I love the environment he has created. As you can see, I've been blessed to work with, and learn from, so many of the game's sharpest minds. **PG**