

JOHN PERNA

THE PLAYERS SERVICE, OAK BROOK, IL

INTERVIEW BY PAUL RAMEE, JR.

Any junior golfer or parent of a junior golfer who lives anywhere near Chicago and entertains high ambitions regarding NCAA competition knows—or certainly should know—John Perna. The various ways in which this Proponent Group member has taught, trained, educated and mentored young people with college-golf talent is almost beyond understanding. The Players Service is the unique and fast-growing organization Perna founded seven years ago, with the intention of reinventing player development in the junior ranks. TPS has been the breeding ground for juniors with golf talent that in some cases is obvious and in other cases has turned out to be visible to John alone.

One notable characteristic of the juniors who've come through Perna's system is their camaraderie with each other and their reliance on the group for mutual support—even as they pursue the normal rivalries and competitive jockeying one would expect. That capacity for friendships to form among the players flows from the top and is owing to Perna's own insistence on bringing humanity and warmth to the training of elite junior athletes, as a means of helping them attain maturity as people, not just as golfers. John spoke recently with Paul Ramee about his training concepts and how they were developed.

Here's our standard leadoff question, John—how did you get into the golf instruction business?

I played college golf at Florida Gulf Coast University for Doc Suttie. After I graduated I tried to play professionally for five years and it didn't work out, so I went to work for Doc for a year and got to watch him interact with PGA Tour players. As a result I had the opportunity to observe and coach on the PGA tour. It was great, because I got a front row seat watching all these instructors working with the top players. I went back to Chicago in 2010 and started The Players Service. Currently, I train our elite players, which is made up of 24 juniors: 12 boys and 12 girls. I have been fortunate to have 58 juniors come through TPS and go on to play Division I college golf since 2010. I also teach a handful of professionals, and Dan Kochevar and Kyle Slectha train our pre-elite players.

How early are you getting juniors into your program?

No younger than sixth or seventh grade. Our program is based on group training and it's very competitive. With this type of approach you cannot include the very young kids. We group our players by skill level and unless a junior is very special, if they are in fifth or fourth grade they won't be able to keep up with an older kid.

We have partners who work with juniors who are younger than sixth grade. If those juniors attain a certain skill level, they will be handed over to us. Admittance into our Elite program is currently by invitation only.

How big are the groups you train in?

We are training in groups of three, six or 12, inside in the winters in Chicago and outside in the summers. During the winter we will work on biomechanics and on adding clubhead speed. All mechanical work is done in the winter. We work according to "periodization," focusing on certain aspects from November to March and other aspects of performance from April to October.

Does that get you get any pushback from parents?

We had some "healthy debates" early on about how we set up the program, but those debates have quieted down.

So a student comes to you, presumably in sixth grade, and you have to decide if they are right for TPS. What does your initial assessment look like?

We run them through a battery of tests which includes short game, a TrackMan combine and a physical assessment. There are three pathways that a student can then be placed into. The first would be our "Player Service" group which is entry-level. The next would be our "Pre-Elite" group. The top tier is our "Elite" group. I built the curriculum for all three programs, but only the Elite players have personal access to me.

We have probably turned away more juniors than we have accepted. The track record is that 100 percent of our Elite juniors go on to play college golf and 90 percent will play Division I.





The Players Service provides year-round training in Chicagoland with its new state-of-the-art indoor facility.

Sounds like your students are in a pretty selective environment.

We have been fortunate to have some amazing kids walk in our door, and as a result we have probably turned away more juniors than we have accepted in our Elite program. So far, 100 percent of our Elite players have had the opportunity to play college golf and about 90 percent have gone on to play Division I.

What is a typical week like with your students?

It varies from winter to summer. During the winter we get a lot of Division I coaches stopping by. I estimate that we will get 10 to 15 D-1 coaches to visit this winter. The Elite program is constantly changing, as we are always looking at analytics and trends in the game to try and give our players a competitive edge. But currently our elite players will train two times a week. In Addition, the students have a “self-discovery,” session where they practice on their own.

In the summer, because of their tournament schedules, I tend not to see them as much as in the winter, but the work we do in the summer tends to be more on the golf course, along with some summer maintenance.

How many tournaments do you attend each season?

Early on I went to a lot of AJGA events, but now I am attending just a few tournaments, including the U.S. Amateur, the U.S. Junior and the NCAA Championships. I also visit some web.com and PGA Tour events.

Would you say that you have created a niche business?

Yes. I guess it stems from my failed playing career, and all the one-hour lessons I took that didn't help. At one point during my career at FGCU I was ranked in the top 30 collegiately. Five years later, after turning professional and seeking out many different instructors, I couldn't break 80. So I took \$30,000 and went out to travel on tour and learn from the best players in the world and it was obvious to me that they were training differently. My observations from those experiences are what The Player Service is built on.

Why would most other coaches fail if they tried to build what you have built?

I am unsure why others have failed, but I can tell you I sought out many instructors and people in the golf business while I was putting together my plan and my model, and the vast majority, told me I would fail. Three people disagreed—Rick Jensen, Lorin Anderson, and Dan Kochevar. They told me I had a business. So I think its important to surround yourself with a quality support system that can look outside the box.



Perna's coaching program is a powerhouse on National Signing Day each year.

Is Rick Jensen a mentor?

Very much so. Rick took me into his class when I didn't meet the criteria to gain entrance to it. He gave me some of the best advice I ever received, which was, "Don't take the quick money. Only train the type of students you want to train in the future."

Do many of your students come from out of state?

Some do. I have an out-of-state version of the program. I have had students from Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin and Indiana. It takes a special type of parent and junior to drive in weekly.

Obviously, your program has evolved to a place where you can charge what you need to make it work, but I would imagine it wasn't always that way. Can you comment on the rates that TPS charges?

During my first year I generated less than \$30,000 of total revenue, and I bought a TrackMan, so I broke even in year one. That's how it started. In order to pay the bills I also had to sell insurance on the side. By my second year I was spending less time selling insurance. My first six juniors all went on to play at major BCS Division I Schools, with two of them becoming AJGA All-Americans. So the program took off and I went to the parents and met with them. My message was: "Your kids are not getting everything they need to reach their full potential." I told them I needed to set my fees at a certain level to address that. By my third year I wasn't selling Insurance and I had to turn away business.

What percent of your students play other sports?

About five percent play other sports. I can tell you, its very difficult to develop enough skill to play Division I golf playing the game part-time. In my opinion, once junior golfers reach sophomore year in high school, they should begin to specialize in one sport.

If a young player is working with you, that means they've got the highest competitive ambitions, right?

What is great about The Players Service, in my view, is that we are not just building golfers. Chip Brewer, CEO of Callaway, is a friend and he's someone who understands TPS and what we do. Chip said to me: "You are helping build the future leaders of this country." These kids are high achievers in golf and life and while most of them will never play the PGA Tour or the LPGA Tour, they all have the discipline and focus to go on to great things.

I see that you have many certifications, when will you create your own?

I really don't know. My first book is set to come out in 2017, "Developing Golfers Into Players" and I believe it will shed more insight into what we do. But your question makes think back to when I was still coaching tour players and trying to play professionally. My mother and father, who have been valuable advisers to me all along, sat me down and said, "find something that both helps others and that makes you happy." I can honestly tell you one of the greatest joys I have experienced was when my first student signed his letter of intent to play college golf. It makes me feel like I've made a difference in somebody's life. When moments like that come along, that is the real joy for me. **PG**