

WHAT I'VE LEARNED: JOHN WEBSTER

JOHN WEBSTER GOLF ACADEMY AT THE BREAKERS — PALM BEACH, FLORIDA



Hearing the various turning points in John Webster's career and not having met him, you'd be excused for wondering how people like Dennis Satyshur, Jim McLean and the top brass at The Breakers decided with such little hesitation to hand him important duties. But if you've spent time around Webster, experiencing his rare mix of confidence and humility, his blend of knowingness and curiosity, you would expect nothing less.

Raised in one of America's great short-season golf markets, the Buffalo, N.Y., native has been a PGA member since 1996 and director of instruction at the John Webster Golf Academy at The Breakers for the past decade. He helped design and develop a two-bay learning center at The Breakers' Rees Jones location, in addition to the center already established at The Breakers Ocean Course. Extensive experience in academy startup work for the McLean organization were brought to bear in both those efforts.

The branding umbrella he stands beneath is "Total Package Golf," a multi-faceted system that includes world-class instruction, clubfitting, golf fitness, course management and the mental approach.

John has earned multiple TPI accreditations, including Certified Fitness Professional, Professional Club Fitter and Leadership Advisor. He has coached players of all skill levels from beginners to PGA Tour winners. Among his

noteworthy students are a U.S. Open champion, U.S. Amateur winner and an NCAA individual champion. In 2011 he earned South Florida PGA Teacher of the Year honors.

Prior to joining The Breakers, Webster had extensive tenures with Caves Valley Golf Club in Maryland—where he spent six years as director of instruction—and the Jim McLean Golf Schools. During his eight years with the McLean group he designed and oversaw construction of the company's center in Grand Traverse, Mich., then served as its director for two years, en route to his role as vice president of operations for McLean Enterprises.

An accomplished player, John had a fine collegiate career at Loyola University and also competed on the Australian/Asian Tour and a number of Florida mini-tours. Paul Ramee recently interviewed John about his life and work. Here are highlights of their conversation.

You're from a part of the world that's snowy and cold but also a hotbed of golf. Talk a little bit about that.

My father loved to play and he got me into the game at a really early age. Growing up in Buffalo, it was hockey in the winter and golf in the summer. We started at a little par-3 called Audubon and eventually joined The Park Club. I was about 10 years old at the time we joined and I remember

Webster has put a lot of effort into building an accessible junior program for kids in the Palm Beach area.





Clubfitting is one of Webster's favorite parts of being a teacher.

feeling very lucky to be at a place with such history and sense of tradition. The club had a reciprocal agreement with Oak Hill, which allowed me to see a major championship venue. When the PGA Championship came in 1980 I got the chance to sit behind Jack Nicklaus on the range. This ignited my love for the game and I started playing more competitive junior golf, high school golf and then went on to Loyola University of Baltimore.

What were your thoughts as you were finishing college?

I wanted to give it a try as a player, so I went to Australia and entered a lot of qualifiers for different events. It was really competitive and also expensive, so after a while I packed up and moved back to the States. I got a place in Orlando and tried playing mini-tours for a while. After a year and a half, I saw that I was spending more money than I was making and it just wasn't working. Buddy Antonopolous, who had previously been head professional at Park Club had just helped Greg Norman open The Medalist and was kind enough to put in a call to Rick Whitfield at Loblolly Pines. Rick had an entry-level spot open. I took the job and worked outside operations—the range and the carts and whatever else. Things went well there and I made some good connections.

Any in particular?

Most notably Henry LeBrun, who belonged to Green Spring Valley back in Baltimore. His daughter had been a very good amateur player back in the day. Henry told me about a club that had just opened up in Maryland, called Caves Valley, and advised me to make contact with Dennis Satyshur there. So I ended up meeting with Dennis that winter and did two years back and forth between Loblolly and Caves Valley. Charlie Briggs was teaching at

Caves Valley at the time and he brought the Jim McLean connection, from his time as one of Jim's lead instructors.

That started a new chapter for you.

It definitely did. I remember I picked Jim up at the airport one day for a three-day school at Caves and he told me if I was interested, I could go South and help him in the winter. So I went down to Doral to learn more about the teaching side of the business. So, very early on I was in with two of the best guys in the business—Jim and Dennis—quite a bit of good luck.

It was also a very active era, the mid-1990s—opportunities were plentiful.

There was a lot going on, for sure. In 1998 Jim asked me to go up to Michigan and design and build a golf academy for him at Grand Traverse Resort. I went there and did everything from the ground up, over a two-year period. We opened in 2000 and I stayed on full-time for Jim. I became his lead instructor as well as VP of McLean Operations, helping him run everything in his business. After those two summers I got back into playing summer mini-tour golf. One day I got a call from Dennis concerning a new opportunity back at Caves Valley. With the help of Dave Phillips, the club had built a learning center but Dave was in the midst of starting TPI and was moving on. I returned to Caves as Director of Instruction from 2002 to 2008. This still allowed me to work seasonally at Doral as well.

What was your overall experience, working within the McLean system. Pretty rewarding?

It was awesome. Jim is one of the most passionate and enthusiastic guys in the business. From a business standpoint he goes after everything as hard as he can. Jim always kept trying to grow, and I loved that challenge. He didn't really have a northern facility, so Grand Traverse was

Webster's teaching brand is "Total Package Golf," a multi-faceted system that includes instruction, clubfitting, golf fitness, course management and the mental approach.



a way to build an audience in the Upper Midwest that would translate into winter business at the Sunbelt facilities. I was doing everything from top to bottom and working every hour of every day. Those few years were the hardest I've ever worked, but it turned out beautifully. We were motivated by all the other instructors there because they were great to be around and everyone was trying to be a better teacher than the next guy. It was really a lot of fun.

Seems like your foundation in running an instruction operation was pretty complete by that point.

I felt it was, and I knew I wanted to expand my career and possibly start my own business. An opportunity came up at The Breakers, in Palm Beach where my parents were living. I ended up going there and really wanted to settle in, and The Breakers agreed to let me put my name on the school. So, that became my own academy, and I stayed year-round. Now 11 years have gone by, and we're settled in. Everyone is here—my parents, my wife and our four-year-old boy. So, this is home for us.

The Breakers is such a major brand. What convinced them to let you put your name on the academy?

Part of it was the longevity I had with some of the better-known people in the business like Dennis and Jim. From their standpoint, seeing that history, plus my high-end resort teaching experience, they felt confident that it could be a long-term relationship. It was a very thorough interview process and I made sure they knew I was committed.

You developed the "Total Package Golf" coaching system. Can you explain what that is?

The concept is a six-part learning module. Long game, short game, clubfitting, the physical side, the mental side,

and on-course management are the six. You can use these with any caliber golfer to keep them as a student for life, because there's always something to improve on. We're working to make each golfer better and get them enjoying the game as much as possible while learning how to apply these components properly.

What is the marketing and promotion process like?

We are very fortunate to be associated with The Breakers. That, in itself, adds great exposure and credibility to our programs. We have members, resort guests, juniors and then local clientele, which all require slightly different approaches to marketing. One challenge, albeit a good one, is the expense of coming to such a luxurious location. This does narrow our target market. We stress the relationships our instructors create and try to build on those.

Your infrastructure will be expanding soon, right?

We've already started. Fortunately, we have our Breakers West location and Learning Center during this time that The Ocean Course is being completely renovated. The new facility at the Ocean will be much bigger, to include more bays and a putting studio. We currently run V1, Trackman, Foresight, SAM Lab, Blast, K-Motion and are really looking to advance our social platform in association with Golf Channel. We truly are lucky to have all these tools at our disposal, but it is an important art and skill to know how and when to use them with guests and clients.

Many coaches who haven't been connected with Jim McLean do know his books. Which is your favorite?

"The 8-Step Swing" to me is a real classic. A lot of it came from research that he had his guys conduct for him. It wasn't theory, it was literally guys sitting in front of a



Webster is heading into his second decade operating out of The Breakers in Palm Beach, FL

computer doing research and questioning everything and seeing what worked and what didn't.

As a devoted clubfitter, whose gear do you work with?

I love seeing new gear and we fit a variety of brands, but I've been a Titleist partner and fitter for 15 years now. I like their philosophy of not having to pump new product out too fast, just to jump on a trend. It's great to be first in certain arenas, but it's more important to get it right, in my view.

Your clientele includes elite players, high school players, plus resort guests and members. How do you cater to the different groups?

With golf academies it is now necessary to have everything, if you expect to grow your business. We have staffed our academy to include fitness professionals, clubfitters, trick-shot performers and junior specialists. Your staff must have the knowledge, playing ability and personality to fit these different groups. We've built a lot of our recent success with juniors and made a point of targeting local schools. We currently work with three local schools on after-school programs and have gone so far as to provide transportation from school to our course.

How did you get the junior piece ramped up?

In 2008 our corporate business dipped with the economy. We turned our focus to growing our junior programs and business. Over the last 10 years that's grown by more than 400 percent, to where it's now nearly 40 percent of our business. From after-school programs to holiday camps, we try to keep these juniors with us. As a result, we've seen juniors from age 5 all the way into college programs.

You have a reputation for something uncommon these days—promoting in the corporate category.

That's right—we're working on our corporate groups pretty strenuously. It's interesting because we are helping corporate people literally re-learn how to entertain. We have simulators that we bring into the hotel so we can do in-house entertaining for groups or outings. Growing that side of the business is our newest objective. We'll evaluate our progress and see what kind of return we're getting.

What are you reading right now?

Thomas Friedman, the author and *New York Times* columnist, is a friend, so I always keep up with Tom's books. I really like psychology and have been into that most recently. Having a young son has inspired me there. Just dealing with different types of people and trying to figure out the best way to pass along information is so important. I just read and enjoyed Angela Duckworth's "Grit." I was a philosophy major in college, with a business minor, so I still have a curiosity for psychology and development studies.

When you step back and look at the path you've been on, what comes to mind?

I'm getting older, but I've learned that surrounding myself with juniors and youthful colleagues is really good for me. It is important to stay current with everything, in and out of our business. It also keeps me motivated personally, physically and mentally. All industries are challenging to keep up with as times change, but if you're motivated and passionate you can work through any challenge to be successful.