

# WHAT I'VE LEARNED: KANDI COMER

KANDI COMER GOLF, CROZET, VA

INTERVIEW BY PAUL RAMEE, JR



**A** Proponent Group member for nearly all 11 of our years in business and a Golf Channel Academy coach since 2015, Kandi Comer is ranked as one of the top teachers in Virginia by Golf Digest and recognized as a US Kids Top 50 Junior Instructor. Comer served as trusted coach to LPGA Tour star Dottie Pepper—who won 17 tour events including two majors—and coached several other pro golfers as they successfully earned tour credentials.

She is a four-time winner of the National Top 50 Teaching Professionals honor bestowed by Golf For Women and has been nominated several times for GOLF Magazine's Top 100 Teachers award. She is also ranked on Golf Digest's national list of Top 100 Clubfitters. More than 60 young players have moved on from her lesson tee to play NCAA golf. Her students have competed in the U.S. Boys and Girls Juniors, U.S. Amateur, U.S. Mid-Amateur and the U.S. Open.

Comer was selected as the 2005 PGA Junior Golf Leader of the Year and named the 2014 Public Golf Leader by the National Golf Course Owners Association. In 2005, she was tapped to serve as a member of the PGA President's Council on Growing the Game. A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Comer was a first-class

player who competed in the 1986 Curtis Cup Matches, capping an amateur career that saw her win five Virginia State junior and amateur championships.

She made it to the quarterfinals of the 1985 U.S. Women's Amateur Championship, claimed several collegiate trophies, and competed in five U.S. Women's Open Championships as a professional golfer, finishing 14th in 1987. In 1985, Kandi was recognized as one of the top 10 U.S. women amateurs by Golf Digest. Paul Ramee persuaded her to recount the highlights of her career to date, as well as offer views on an array of topics about coaching. That interview transcript is excerpted here.

**There's an old cliché in golf about "horses for courses." We're told you actually gave up one for the other. Could you explain?**

My first love and my main interest as a young girl was equestrian. Then at about age 11, I began to have allergy problems when I rode horseback. So I turned to golf. My dad was the one who got me into the game and I was hooked right away.

**PGA Junior Golf League has become a passion for Comer. Her junior programming is designed for all levels of skill and interest from 3 years and up.**





Comer spent time at the top of the amateur game playing in the Curtis Cup and went deep into match play at the 1985 U.S. Women's Amateur before playing professionally.

#### **Apparently you were a natural at it.**

I was able to play well as a junior, and I enjoyed the competition. I kept improving and eventually won five state junior and amateur titles, including the Junior Girls Championship at age 14. The peak of my amateur career was probably 1985, when I made it to the quarter-finals of the U.S. Women's Amateur. The next year I made the Curtis Cup team. In my NCAA career I won some individual titles. It was enough to convince me to turn pro.

#### **What's the short version of your story as a professional golfer?**

In 1987 I finished 14th at the U.S. Women's Open. I ended up competing in five Women's Opens, as a professional. I didn't enjoy the life of a touring pro, is one way you could sum things up.

#### **You quit after a short stint—what did you do?**

For a year I managed a swim and tennis club. The head pro back home in Charlottesville encouraged me to give the golf industry a try and see where it goes.

#### **What were your early experiences of working with golf professionals like?**

At my local club in Charlottesville there was an assistant professional, Phil Owenby, who kind of took me under his wing. He spent a lot of time helping me, and in fact he still does. As I progressed in junior golf Phil could see that my short game was a little shaky. He and Bob Rotella, who is also from Charlottesville, suggested I get help around the greens from Davis Love, Jr. That sounded good to me, so I went to Sea Island, Ga., and started working with Davis. I always brought Phil along—that way I had an extra pair of eyes for when we were back home. Davis became a

great mentor for me, and the guidance I received from Bob Rotella was just as valuable. Counting Phil Owenby, those were my "big three" mentors. And I was always impressed by the way Phil encouraged me to get another opinion.

#### **Looking back on your playing career, is there anything you wish you had done differently?**

Even though I had success as a professional, it wasn't fun the way amateur golf had been. It was cutthroat, actually. And there was so much travel. On the tour now, players seem to bond a little better and they do more things together, so it's changed over the years. Once I got married and had kids, I wanted to be home more.

#### **Do any Futures Tour moments stand out for you?**

I remember going for my first professional tournament win, and Dottie Pepper, whom I was paired with, was a good friend. On the 18th green I was so shaky over an eight-foot putt that I rolled it halfway to the hole. I made the next one to beat her but I was thinking, this is not fun. And the money wasn't great back then, either.

#### **So, you don't have regrets about your career path?**

I really don't. I'm having fun now, I've had success teaching and I love the feeling of helping others improve. And I so value the education I got at UNC, which came about through golf. We all want to give back, and I get that feeling so often as I see these kids of mine getting scholarships and loving the sport.

#### **You also do career-development with women at the graduate level, right?**

That's correct. I do a program for the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia with the women



Comer's keen ability to coach youngsters has landed her on the U.S. Kids' Golf Top 50 Teachers list.

there. It's all about how you can use golf in the business world. That kind of teaching and mentoring is just as rewarding as anything for me. Seeing these women not get left in the office while everyone is out playing golf is great. They just need some instruction and encouragement—then they can use the sport for networking and deal-making, like the guys do.

**Your reputation as a player gave you credibility when you first went looking for students, but you didn't have a teaching philosophy.**

That's right, but all along I had been a big student of the game and I was someone who wanted to know how the golf swing worked. I had a great rapport with Phil and with Davis, so I would go back and talk to them. The other person who was really good to me at that time was Bill Strausbaugh. He was so great at keeping it simple and he was very influential. To this day I still reach out to Phil. I also try to keep up on my reading about what everyone's teaching, but at the same time I like to stick to my style—based on the belief that no one method works for everyone.

**You've gone all-in with juniors and youth at your facility, Old Trail Golf Club. How does that work?**

We start them at age 3 with a program that is all about playing games and just having fun. We have a Sunday afternoon program for some of the newer golfers. Then we have a performance program for players who are committed and want to see how good they can get—there are three different levels of that. My goal is to get every level involved. We have junior leagues, which they love, and this year we're doing inter-club matches with kids who graduated from the league last year.

**Any instructors you're following, or that you're particularly interested in?**

I'm a believer that there's no magic formula out there, so you kind of have to think about the basics; grip, posture, and the setup. I'm a huge fan of Butch Harmon, the way he keeps it really simple, but he gets results obviously. I try to incorporate anything I can from the newer pros coming up. I use a lot of technology to make learning easier.

**What are you excited about at the moment?**

I'm trying to figure out better ways to focus on putting. I like the Blast Motion putting product, for focusing on tempo. I tried it on myself first and the results were pretty amazing, so that was kind of the highlight of the PGA Show for me. I also like the K-Vest, because I think it will really help the wrist position at the top and at impact, which is one of the things my students struggle with sometimes.

**What do you do with your more elite players during the offseason?**

I have an indoor facility but it really isn't for group instruction at this time, so we focus on mostly individual practice there for now. We usually regroup in January and I'll find out which kids are genuinely interested and we offer them winter instruction. For the fitness aspect, we use TPI and yoga and I've found this helps a lot. Again, at this time most of this is individual, focusing on who really wants to get better and making the commitment. The other thing that I do for all of my players, is I try to go to all the games they play in their team sports, to build better relationships. **PG**