

KEVIN SMELTZ

BISHOPS GATE G.A., HOWEY-IN-THE-HILLS, FL

INTERVIEW BY PAUL RAMEE, JR.

Kids who grow up to become electrical engineers are the ones you see taking old radios and lawnmowers apart to figure out how they work. In the world of tournament golf there's a similar type—the junior or collegiate player who likes to compete but is pulled toward a continual study of the technical elements of the golf swing.

This month's featured professional, Kevin Smeltz, displayed that questioning, tinkering nature as a junior player and especially during his NCAA career at the University of North Florida, where he received All-American honors. He's had that trait confirmed for him years later, by teammates who insist they knew all along Kevin would become a golf instructor.

They surely suspected he would excel in the profession, which Smeltz indeed has. Under his guidance, Kevin's players have won 19 tournaments on the PGA Tour, Champions Tour and LPGA Tour. He has coached two U.S. Walker Cup team members, two No. 1-ranked NCAA player, a No. 2-ranked college player and many top-ranked juniors.

You'll find him listed by GOLF Magazine as one of America's Top 100 Teachers and on the Golf Digest list of Best Teachers in Florida. This month marks the end of his first year at Bishops Gate Golf Academy in central Florida, where he is director of golf, so it seemed a good time to engage in some Q-and-A

with Smeltz for the benefit of his fellow Proponent members.

Kevin, could you give us a little background on how you got to where you are in the golf business?

I took some lessons from David Leadbetter and some of his coaches growing up and had the good fortune to become David's assistant on the tee, which meant I was with him for every lesson he gave. That was a phenomenal learning experience. I got to watch and listen as David worked with players like Nick Faldo, Nick Price, Ernie Els, David Frost—it was a rare opportunity.

What was your role, in that process?

I was responsible for taking all the video. And keep in mind, this was in the days before V1 or other video technology for teaching. So, we were drawing lines on the monitor screen. We didn't have computer files to log the lessons and store all that information, so I was there with my pen writing down all the faults, fixes and drills by hand. Today you hit 'save' on your computer



Smeltz with Yani Tseng (left) and Na Yeon Choi. He has taught multiple LPGA Tour winners.



Smeltz has spent significant time in Asia, where he studied the intense work ethic of Asian cultures.

but back then I stored it all in a manila file folder. But we didn't know any different—we were paving the way.

So, you earned your stripes, doing all this support work?

Apparently, because one day I found myself on a flight to Japan, with the assignment to run one of David's academies over there.

After your time in Japan, did you stay with the Leadbetter organization?

I did. I came back to the U.S. and went to ChampionsGate, where I ran the company's World Wide Training and Certification. Then, in 2013, I moved to Hilton Head to run the International Junior Golf Academy there. I stayed in that position for two years and now I am running the Bishops Gate Golf Academy.

How are you liking it?

For my family and me it's been great, Before this I was traveling back and forth between Hilton Head and Orlando. On the work side, we are building a coaching model, and moving away from the teaching model, so that is exciting. We are really focusing on developing

players with a more holistic view, teaching them how to practice, how to prepare to play.

How much of a challenge is that—to move a player from the teaching model to the coaching model? Do you encounter resistance?

None at all. Hey, we've all known the mini-tour player who never misses a shot but somehow shoots 75 every time. That is the classic case of someone who needs to practice and prepare better. What the profession has believed about learning is backwards. In other words, the idea of hitting 400 7-irons on the range is very limiting. There's a place for repetition if you are learning a new skill, but, if you put someone in a random practice environment it will benefit them on the golf course.

You've worked extensively with male as well as female tour professionals. How does that coaching experience differ?

For the LPGA Player it is more about the relationship. Women are better listeners and are more interested in going over their round with you. I find that the young Asian women really want direction, and they'll follow it to the letter. I find with the men on tour it's not a relationship thing. A guy will ask, "Why is the ball going left?" You'll tell him the answer and he'll say, "Thanks, see you next time."

Smeltz is now in charge of all instruction at Bishops Gate Golf Academy outside Orlando.



How about with respect to training?

One new development we've seen is the LPGA player catching up to her PGA Tour counterpart with respect to the importance of distance. The women now emphasize fitness and strength conditioning. You see the results with players like Michelle Wie and Lexi Thompson. And that trend has worked its way down to the elite junior ranks, as we see at Bishops Gate.

You mention Asian players, who seem to develop their golf games at such an impressive rate. What is the cause of that?

Work ethic, basically. They have a stronger sense of duty when it comes to training. If they are sick, they will still practice. If it is cold out, they will still practice. When they feel like they want to quit, they will hit another bucket of balls. Our society here in the U.S. is soft, by comparison.

Describe what a typical day is like for the students at your academy.

It starts with 6 a.m. wakeup and by 7 a.m. they're on their bus headed to Montverde Academy, where classes start at 8:00 a.m. They finish at 12:30 p.m. then head back here to Bishop's Gate. They eat lunch,

change, and take part in either the early workout or a later workout. They practice for three hours, eat dinner then do their academic homework. That's the Monday-Friday schedule, and there is optional practice on Saturday and Sunday.

How many take advantage of the optional practice?

In the beginning of the semester about 90 percent of them do. By the end of the semester it's down to 30 percent.

For the Bishops Gate program in general, what is your dropout rate?

Zero percent.

What are the pros and cons of a kid going this route for golf training?

For the kid who is driven it is ideal. It puts him or her on a path to play college golf and it helps accelerate that process for them. But it's also great for the kid who is a late bloomer, because it gives that player all the tools they'll need to get good quick. The cons are that it is not a great path for an individual who does not have the passion.



Smeltz is often found at LPGA Tour events with his stable of talented players including Na Yeon Choi.

facility. For example, we have trees in the range to represent fairways. We've got a great uneven lie area and a nine-hole course for the kids to play. Charles Howell III said the greens on that course are the best greens in Orlando.

How many kids can you handle at one time?

The maximum is 70 with our current school schedule. We've discussed a split schedule with the school to see if we could accommodate more, but right now our priority is quality over quantity.

As a young pro you were drawing lines on a video monitor. What is your current array of teaching technology?

We have 3D Golf BioDynamics, Trackman, SAM PuttLab and we've also got force plates.

What is a typical tournament schedule like for your students?

There are obviously national tournaments on the AJGA and IJGT level, but some of our developmental kids don't play as many tournaments as you might imagine.

Interesting. How do their parents feel about that?

They're okay with it. We communicate extensively with the parents. They deserve to be kept in the loop and know what is going on. We give them monthly reports so everyone is on the same page. This makes it easier for all concerned, with respect to expectations and progress.

What makes Bishops Gate unique?

First, we created an Advisory Board to help us keep our product moving forward. Second, we have an amazing

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How quickly do you introduce all this technology to the students?

Right away. We do testing as soon as they get here. That principally involves 3D work and Trackman Combine. We also take them on the course and evaluate their ability from different lies and so forth. We also assess their mental skills and fitness. At that point the student, the coach who is assigned to them and I will sit down and create a development plan for them. It will be precise without being overly complicated.

Do they ever deviate from these plans?

Sure, they get on the range with their buddies or they see something on YouTube and it can get them off the rails, but if we do our job educating them about the value of the plan then we should be fine.