

What I've Learned: Mike McGetrick

Mike McGetrick Golf Academy, Golf Club of Houston, Houston, TX

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



As golf instruction becomes more analytical and technology-based, it's possible to lose sight of the fact that heart and inspiration have been most responsible for swing-sharpening over the years. The brainpower to understand cause-effect does matter greatly, but so do motivational skills—always a strong suit of this month's interviewee, Mike McGetrick.

In a recent ESPN interview, Meg Mallon recalled her early interactions with the man who would be her most important coach. "When Mike McGetrick started coaching me, that's when I really fell in love with the game," the LPGA Top 50 All-Time player recalls, "because it was the first time I had purpose and saw marked improvements."

These days the Mike McGetrick Golf Academy is headquartered at Golf Club of Houston, working with tour-caliber athletes but wide open to golfers of all ages and skill levels who want to experience, in Mallon's words, marked improvements. A PGA Master Professional in Teaching, McGetrick has earned a long list of industry accolades, including the 1999 National PGA Teacher of the Year award. Mike has been a repeat selection on GOLF Magazine's Top 100 Teachers in America roster, as well as Golf Digest's list of America's 50 Greatest Teachers.

Appearing regularly on Golf Channel, he has also authored an inspiring book of instruction, titled "The Scrambler's Dozen—12 Shots Every Golfer Needs To Score Like The Pros." Over a quarter-century of experience, he has been Colorado PGA Teacher of the Year five times and has worked with PGA and LPGA Tour players who have a combined total of 56 worldwide wins, including 10 major championships. Along with Mallon, that cluster of pros includes Juli Inkster, Beth Daniel, Wendy Ward, Tom Purtzer, Scott McCarron and Brandt Jobe. Here are highlights from Mike's recent Q&A session with Paul Ramee.

Mike, how did you get into golf?

My father was an avid golfer—the kind of guy who buys a house across the street from a country club. And that was literally the case with our family—we lived in Kennewick, Wash., directly across from the Tri-City Country Club. My dad teed it up at his club every weekend. He started me playing at an early age, but unfortunately, Tri-City did not have a practice facility, nor did it have a junior program at the time. Like most kids who liked athletics, I gravitated to the big team sports such as baseball and football.

At what point did golf take on more importance?

I was about 15 when that happened. Either I developed a passion for the game or my father's passion for it was transferred to me—that's how it often felt. At that point I started taking lessons and playing in tournaments. After I finished high school I went on to a vocational institute, Perry Technical, and while I was there I got offered an opportunity with Bechtel Engineering. That's how I got started in the nuclear industry, working on construction of power plants. I was full-time and balancing that as well as I could with my strong desire to continue competing as an amateur player.

So, really, you were a working guy who played golf as hobby.

Pretty much. In 1983, I moved to Bloomington, Ill. and took a job at Clinton Nuclear Power Plant. After work some of us would rent time at the local YMCA and play pickup basketball. I remember we rented the 7 o'clock hour, and in the 8 p.m. slot that particular Y had a golf program. It was called Maximum Golf and it was run by a teaching pro named Mike Adams.

The same Mike Adams who...

Yes, that same Mike Adams. He and I got to know each other



Two of Mike's long-time students: Major winners Meg Mallon and Juli Inkster.

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and we would talk golf together. Eventually I started taking lessons from him, at his club on Saturdays, Bloomington Country Club. When the lesson was over he would let me hang around and practice. I enjoyed the atmosphere of the club and became increasingly more enthusiastic about golf. One day about six months along Mike sat me down and told me he was looking to fill a position—his third-assistant job. He told me my passion for golf was obvious and he wanted to offer me the position. He suggested I think about it for a couple of weeks and get back to him.

So, you said yes... and that's how you got started in the business?

Actually, I said no. I thought it over and told him I couldn't do it. I was planning to move at the end of that year to Georgia, where I had a job offer. The project I was on had a few more months to go, so I made Mike a counter-offer. I suggested that I would work for him for free in exchange for no-charge lessons, practice and playing opportunities at his club. He agreed to that and I gave my two week's notice at the plant. I went to work for Mike and a month or two later, even though he had already hired that third assistant, he took me on as a fourth assistant. What happened was, I had realized how much I loved the environment and loved the idea of working in this business.

Apparently he saw something in you.

I'd say so. Something I certainly could not have seen at the time.

You had yourself a first-class mentor, right out of the gates.

Mike was one of the top teachers in Illinois and he was getting known for his Swing Dynamic Golf Schools. He would have some of the top teachers in the country come in as a guest instructors for those schools. I was making \$7 an hour, but the real compensation was the chance to be around so many great educators. Mike would teach about 40 hours a week at the club, even though he was head professional, and he would spend a lot of time on the PGA and LPGA Tours, working with his professional players. I immediately knew I wanted to follow in his footsteps.

How did you go about developing your career?

I moved around a lot. In 1987, I went with Mike to the Hills of Lakeway in Austin, Tex. after he was appointed director of instruction there. I was there for several years then moved on to Cherry Hills Country Club, in Denver. I stayed there from 1991 to '93, then went to Meridian Golf Club from 1994 to 2003, where I first established the Mike McGetrick Golf Academy. In 2004, I moved the Academy to Green Valley Ranch Golf Club. After that I became part of Colorado Golf Club, in 2005, which we sold to the members in 2011. At that point I headed to Florida, with plans to create an Olympic-style golf practice and training facility. That plan didn't come to fruition, so earlier this year I relocated to the Golf Club of Houston.

Are you still thinking about your model for a practice/learning facility?

Yes, definitely. I recently partnered with Escalante Golf, a company that owns and manages 17 golf facilities throughout the U.S. Escalante has taken Mike McGetrick Golf Academy under its umbrella and is going to rebrand it at most of their facilities. The base of operations for the Mike McGetrick Golf Academy is at the Golf Club of Houston, which is why I'm there. The goal is to operate a portfolio of premier golf practice and training facilities within the Escalante organization.

Let's talk about successes along the way, as you honed your skills.

Well, I had the good fortune to coach some extremely talented players—Beth Daniel, Meg Mallon, Juli Inkster, Karrie Webb and Pat Hurst, just to name a few. It started with Meg Mallon, back in 1989, when she was struggling on the LPGA Tour. We clicked right off the bat and she won the U.S. Women's Open two years later, in 1991.

In 1991, you had not been teaching very many years. But there you are teaching a pro who is about to become U.S. Women's Open champ. Did you have any anxiety about being in over your head?

I was pretty confident, even from a young age. And at the time I was still working for Mike Adams, so I had the ability to bounce ideas off him. Also, he had exposed me to so many tour players, PGA and LPGA, that I was completely comfortable around them.



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Now it's all these years later and there are 56 wins on the PGA Tour and LPGA Tour by players I've coached.

What has changed the most in your 25 years of working with tour pros?

When I started out, the swing coach did it all. We were responsible for the player's complete game. Now there is a lot of specialization. A player may have a full-swing coach, a short-game coach, mental-game coach, and so forth. So when I look back I can take some pride in being able to say I was that “complete game coach” and had the long-term success I had.

Sounds like a lot of early morning and late nights.

It was a tough commitment and very demanding. I would work with 7 to 12 players at a time. Now it's hard to work with just four.

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One year I was coaching five of the 12 players on the Solheim Cup team. But today's players are more demanding. On the plus side, technical advancements have made it much easier and more convenient for players and coaches to work together.

What has been your highest high and lowest low of teaching tour players, so far?

The high points were the relationships I formed and the chance to help highly committed elite athletes perform at their best. Take a player like Juli Inkster, I want to believe I helped revive her career and during the time we worked together she won 18 tour events and four major championships. So, that is extremely gratifying. As for the low points, that's when a player is struggling, and I've done everything I can think to do but it just doesn't work out.

What happens then?

At that point you do an analysis, looking for causes. I feel that as coaches we should do those reviews—certainly whenever a relationship ends, but really on an ongoing basis. We need to understand if the performance issues are caused by what we are teaching. I've always been open to asking other teachers about my players if they were struggling. That could lead to the player making a switch to another coach. You have to ask if the player-coach collaboration is simply running its course. That's part of the process, oftentimes.

Among the established golf instructors, who stands out in your mind?

Well, Mike Adams for sure. Also the Harmons, along with Jim McLean—all those people had a big influence on my career. I am



McGetrick working with PGA Tour winner Brad Faxon.

still continuing to learn and sharing my passion for teaching. When you start out as a young instructor you're learning about the swing and how it works technically. Later in your career you work more on communication technique. Lately I've been doing a lot research into that.

What are your thoughts on the health of the game in 2015?

The industry is continuing to change. Obviously, golf was overbuilt. You don't see many new golf facilities opening now. Public courses need to create programs to grow the game. At a private club, you are working to grow the game within that membership base. People are busy and I think you need to know your core user and then create the programs that fit his or her time constraints.

Looking at the young crop of teachers coming through the ranks these days, what are their key strengths and weaknesses?

Young teachers can excel faster due to the Internet, social media, technology and other educational opportunities. There is an emphasis, understandably, on learning opportunities that include certifications. But there's a limit to how quickly you can learn this craft. You have to put your time in to become a truly effective golf instructor. You can be certified in six different specialties, be it AimPoint, TPI, Vision 54, or what have you, but you still need to put in the hours. You can't buy experience.

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