

MIKE PERPICH

RIVERPINES GOLF, JONES CREEK, GA

INTERVIEW BY DAVID GOULD

At 7 a.m. on the third Monday of every month you can speed-dial the River Pines main number and quick press extension 4, the lesson-booking line. But don't call at 7:30, and even 7:15 might be too late. Fortunately there is a policy followed by director of instruction Mike Perpich that favors reservation requests from golfers who weren't lucky enough to get a spot in his book the previous month.

So yeah, Perpich has a following in the Atlanta market. A longtime Proponent Group member, he is old-school in the way he runs his business but unstintingly open-minded when it comes to new concepts for improving golf performance. Famed for his sharp eye and calming manner, Mike counts an early and unusual involvement with Homer Kelley's "The Golfing Machine" among his important learning experiences.

As a high-schooler in the 1970s, Perpich played golf and other sports, including some football for his dad, who was head coach of the Butler High School team in Louisville, Ky. Motivated even then to learn about cause-and-effect in golf mechanics, Mike persuaded his father to film a few of his swings with

the football team's movie camera.

"I took the film my dad shot and drove around Kentucky asking club pros who were considered good teachers to look at it," Perpich recalls. "I

already knew what didn't look right to me about my swing, and I was wondering if they would see the same problems. The guys were generous with their time, but basically all they said was, 'Swing looks good, kid.'"

Returning home, this teenager who would grow up to teach clients such as the rejuvenated PGA Tour pro Jason Bohn realized he had studied golf swings on film—at least one, anyway—before any of the big-name teachers in his region had. Mike would build on that early curiosity by continuing the quest for effective ways to help golfers of all types and talent levels through the decades.

Of late, Perpich has been modernizing his marketing tools a bit—a new website with professionally written text and first-rate photography was launched a couple of years ago. Though he doesn't stray far from the teaching area where he labors some 300 days a year, if you catch him in a free moment you can learn quite a bit from how Mike goes about his business. In the process you are certain to hear some colorful and memorable golf stories. as well.

Mike, would you say that your beliefs and your career were strongly influenced by "The Golfing Machine" and its legendary author, Homer Kelley?

It was a turning point for me, to get my hands on that book. It gave me a basis of understanding that I had been looking for—something researched instead of just theoretical.

Did you ever get to meet Homer Kelley in person?

Well just one time, for about 10 minutes. It was a very strange experience. I was present for the last 10 minutes of his life.



Mike Perpich has been a Golf Magazine Top 100 Teacher in America since 2001.



Perpich has been one of the most sought-after teachers in Georgia for decades.

Could you explain that?

Homer was giving a talk in 1983 at the spring meeting of the Georgia PGA. When I found out about it I was very excited. It's the most anticipation I've ever had for a section meeting, definitely. I got there right as the presentations were starting and sat way up front, just about on the edge of the stage. Homer Kelley was first to speak, and he didn't look good. His voice was weak. If I wasn't five feet away from him I wouldn't have been able to hear him. In the middle of a sentence he stopped and his body stiffened. His eyes went back in his head and he fell over backwards. I took a few steps toward him but there was nothing to be done. Homer was dead before he hit the floor.

It's well known that Mac O'Grady, as his PGA Tour career was winding down, got very deep into swing analysis and teaching. Also, that he was close to Kelley and had become the ultimate expert on "The Golfing Machine." You and Mac spent time together studying what's in it, correct?

Yes, it is. I've got a great admiration for Mac. I sought him out for information and advice about teaching golf. His response was amazingly generous. I couldn't repay Mac for all the things he's taught me. I had read "The Golfing Machine" many times but to have Mac share his understanding of it, and share his swing knowledge in general, was a great gift.

How did you and Mac meet?

It was through Jodie Mudd, whom I knew very well, all the way back to childhood. My father and Mr. Mudd

worked together and our families were very close. I've been friends even longer with Eddie Mudd, Jodie's brother, because Eddie and I were the same age. The three of us were like brothers, really. For me to sit down to dinner at Eddie and Jodie's house was no different than having dinner at home, and it was likewise for them. The Mudds are the only brother combo ever to win the USGA National Public Links Championship. Jodie of course had a strong PGA Tour career, with four wins including the Players Championship in 1990.

Was it at a tour event that you met Mac?

Yes, it was the Anheuser Busch, over in Williamsburg at Kingsmill Resort. I was there caddying for Jodie. I had just gotten a video camera and was thinking it would be great if I could capture some tour swings on it. Jodie said to Mac, "Hey, my caddie Mike here is a PGA pro, he's a teacher, can he take some video of you hitting?" Mac basically said nothing, so I figured it was no dice. Later that evening the three of us went to dinner. When we were finished, Mac said to me: "When the sun comes up in the morning, be on the range with your new camera."

Did you think he actually meant sunrise?

All I can say is that when I got to the range it was pitch black. I think I arrived at about 4:30 a.m. Just at dawn, Mac showed up. He was ready to go and he got right to it, directing how we should do the filming. He would say, "A couple face-on, hitting righty." I'd shoot those swings and he would say, "Go in back of me and take a few



Perpich was an early student of The Golfing Machine and was with Homer Kelley on the day Kelley passed away.

looking down the line.” And so I filmed those. He sent me 20 feet out onto the range and told me he would hit shots over my head, so we did that. Then we did it all again with Mac hitting lefty. [Editor’s note: O’Grady was famously ambidextrous, with a lefty swing that was the mirror-image of his swing right-handed.] I took the tape back to Statesboro, Ga., where I was working at the time. I bought some black Sharpies and studied that tape over and over, marking the screen of the TV with the Sharpies until I couldn’t get the screen clean anymore, and had to junk the TV. I ruined three TVs in a year.

In the process did you come up with new questions to ask?

Quite a few, yes. So it was fortunate for me to be able to visit Mac in Palm Springs. He invited Jodie and me out there to spend some time. Between what I had studied and what he shared during that visit, I figured out what he was doing mechanically and in just about all aspects of his golf swing. I matched his components to other great ball strikers. I had it all in my head. After that visit, I asked him if could call him sometime and ask follow-up questions.

What was his answer?

He said “OK, call me at 9 p.m. my time on such-and-such date.” Mind you, his 9 p.m. was midnight Statesboro time. But I was happy to have the chance, and I called him at 9 p.m. Pacific time, and we talked, and kept at it until back East the sun was coming up. I apologized and told him, “Mac, I’ve got to go open the golf shop.” He told me to call him again that night at 9 p.m. Pacific, which I did. I

worked a full day, ate dinner, set my alarm for midnight, went to sleep about 8 p.m. and we did it all over again. I would ask a question and Mac would respond, in some cases, with a three-hour answer, with me writing notes the whole way. After seven or eight days of this, Mac’s wife said stop, so we stopped.

Coaching and teaching a serious golfer involves two journeys—one is about technique or swing mechanics and the other is about championship competition. How do you balance those two?

I would answer by saying there is major difference between success striking a golf ball and success posting a score. I learned that very early, from the people I got to know at Shawnee Golf Course, in Louisville. That was probably the peak of the hustling era. We had bookies and gamblers and all types of guys, competing with each other and competing against naive golfers who could be plucked. So, I saw 68 get shot a whole lot of different ways. People don’t realize that it’s possible to go from being a scratch golfer with a textbook swing to a scratch golfer whose swing looks bad and his ball flight doesn’t look so great either—because the guy taught himself how to swing bad on purpose. I know because I played against guys who did just that. The golf swing is just a vehicle. It’s a piece of the puzzle, it’s not the whole puzzle.

Some people must come to you and say my swing is pretty, let’s make it prettier. So, instead of being an A-minus tee-to-green player they want to be an A-plus.

There is every type of golfer and every type of good



Perpich began studying his own swing on film and videotape back in the 1970s after borrowing the football team's camera at the high school where his father was the head coach.

golfer. And if you just want the aesthetics of the full swing, that's fine, I won't talk to you very much about your scorecard.

That being said, on pure golf swing and ball-strike, you can't play well enough to shoot any particular score— that's my view of it. There's just too much else going on. The ball bounces and rolls and you have to go find it. You have to scramble. You need to be able to putt. There's absolutely nobody who can play at the higher levels on just their swing and their ball-hitting.

Who was the first accomplished golf instructor you got to know?

That would be Moe Demling, who was the pro at Shawnee Golf Course, in my hometown of Louisville. That's where I had my first assistant-pro job—Eddie Mudd and I worked together there, under Moe. He was a good player, grew up in Louisville, got married young or I think he could have played the tour.

What was his operation like?

The atmosphere of the place, with Moe directing things, was just wonderful. Shawnee back then was like the Wild West. You had every kind of character come through. There's flood plain all through that area. Eddie and I were playing golf there one day and the river was settling down from having been above flood stage. Walking off No. 8 green toward the ninth tee we looked over and saw a dead body, washed up out of the Ohio River. We reported it to the guys in the shop and went on with our round.

Sounds like you two had your priorities straight.

Eddie and I played a lot of money matches at Shawnee. Some of the matches would be arranged and we wouldn't even know what the stakes were, only what we were in line for if we won.

Did you get some help with your own game at Shawnee?

I learned plenty, the old-fashioned way I suppose. Shawnee was a great place to hit balls. People would come from miles around to use the practice range. Frank Beard, who played the PGA Tour with a lot of success, would practice at Shawnee. Fuzzy Zoeller would be there—Moe worked with him. Jim Farrell practiced at Shawnee, too—he was tour pro who went on to be the head golf professional at Crooked Stick in Indiana.

Describe it for us, physically.

The range was 500 yards long and 300 yards wide—it was a flood wall, designed to handle a repeat of the flood of 1937, which was the one people talked about. All they did was mow it. You brought your own balls and picked them yourself. I owned six of those red zipper shag bags, and every one of them was jammed full of golf balls. You needed to have a big supply so you could hit and hit and only have to shag at the end.

And how did you first come to know about Homer's book?

Mrs. Mudd knew that the two of us were fascinated by "The Golfing Machine," after Jodie first heard about it

from Bobby Clampett. She somehow figured out how to get copies and ordered us some. When that box arrived at their house we tore it open. We sat in one room and started reading and you couldn't hear a peep. But eventually we looked up at each other with confused looks on our face. It was just so difficult. We tried to read it like you read a normal book—it doesn't work that way.

It's interesting that you became such a swing freak, and yet you don't give ball-striking all that much credit for success in high levels of tournament golf.

The golf swing is a great mystery. It's worth studying for a lot of reasons. I pursue it because I'm really called to do that. If I want to help someone become a very good tournament player, I'll use as much of my understanding of swing technique as the situation calls for. But I've studied the rest of the game just as intently. I felt responsible to do that. I consider myself to be as good at teaching putting, the short game, even the mental side, as I am at teaching the golf swing. If a player hires me to be his coach or her coach, they don't have to have another putting instructor. Same with the short game and with the psychological part, as well. It's up to me to have expertise on all of it.

Tell us about your work with Jason Bohn.

Well, in early March of 2012 there was a message in the golf shop, from Jason, saying he would like to come over to River Pines and take a lesson with me. He was pretty frank about his situation. He said, "I'm struggling. I don't have any answers right now, and I need to find some answers. Two days later he came over. We got to know one another and I felt like we connected.

What was the state of his game?

I felt that he needed some help in all categories, especially the short game. My assessment was that he was not a good bunker player at all. In the time we've worked together he has really made improvements from the bunker. What I think he's been able to do is really learn how to use his body better than he did. He understands how the body rotates in the golf swing—the trunk, the spine. This is a guy who has been on tour for 15 years and he wants to get better. He could win and it wouldn't surprise me. He finished 21st at the Byron Nelson, then 18th at the FedEx St. Jude a week later, then he was ninth at the Sanderson Farms in Mississippi, then he tied for second place at the RBC Canadian Open. So right from the start he made great strides.

You must have been stunned to hear about his heart attack, at the 2016 Honda Classic.

Without a doubt. It's a heck of a story, how he ended up getting such immediate care and from such a top hospital for cardiac emergencies, Palm Beach Gardens Medical Center. He wasn't really feeling all that bad, but the medics on duty at the course told him he had to go to the hospital. Jason told them he had just finished his round and he would take a quick shower and they could go. They shook their heads and told him a shower was out of the question. They said, "You're not even taking your shoes off, buddy. We're strapping you to a stretcher this second."

Apparently his blockage was in that artery they call the "widow maker," and it was 90-plus percent.

Oh yeah. It could have turned out for the absolute worst, so Jason was extremely fortunate, that goes without saying. At the same time, if you look at the trajectory he was on with his play, it was frustrating for both of us, because he had really brought his game up significantly. He was coming off his best year ever, and he was also off to his best start ever, when it happened.

Is he most of the way back?

Yes he is. Which is great to see. I'd say at this point all that's left is for him to gain back that last degree of strength and that last edge to his confidence. His attitude has been excellent, throughout the medical rehab and throughout our work together once he got back on his feet. From Jason you wouldn't expect anything less, given the kind of guy he is. I look for him to have a good season out there.

Before we finish, tell us about some other student of yours—a regular person, not a tour player.

Hearing that question makes me think of a doctor I've been working. This is a guy who loves golf. Like a lot of people, he doesn't have much time to spend on it. He hadn't played at all when we first got together, so we started from scratch. But get this, my teaching area is right next to the beginning of our par-3 course, so one winter day when nobody was around I suggested we take his very rudimentary game out to the little course. He teed his ball on the first hole, swung his 9-iron, hit a solid shot and the ball went in. Jumped right in the cup. At the time he had only been on a regulation course once, for nine holes. But you can tell even with beginners when they have a chance to be pretty good. I took it as my responsibility to find him an activity that gets him outdoors and gets him away from the stress of what he does—golf has been the answer. And that's important. **PG**