

ROB NOEL

ROB NOEL GOLF ACADEMY, COVINGTON, LA

INTERVIEW BY DAVID GOULD

Rob Noel's story is one of small-town roots and a big-time interest in how the golf swing works. Full of curiosity from a young age, Noel pursued playing and then teaching with the type of hard work that creates good luck. Along his path of professional development, the Proponent Group member crossed paths with a succession of valuable mentors and peers who inspired him toward coaching excellence. It was all this Louisiana Cajun lad would need to build his technical knowledge and communication skills to a lofty level.

The footprint of the Rob Noel Golf Academy in his region is significant. It's part of the Golf Channel Academy network and by acclamation it's the leading golf instruction brand on the Gulf Coast. About a year ago, Noel's group added a third location, this time within the Carter Plantation golf community in Springfield, La., between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

A GOLF Magazine Top 100 Teacher, Noel does most of his one-on-one work at his original namesake academy. For 16 years it's been located at Money Hill Golf and Country Club, which is north of Lake Pontchartrain outside Covington, La. The company's other venue for teaching is the Big Easy Sportsplex, just west of New Orleans proper.

A husband and father of three, Rob does his best to balance work and personal life, breaking from the routine for family beach vacations on the Gulf and

hunting excursions with his son, Chase. One recent Sunday he spent part of his day off on the front porch, answering questions about what's he learned and how he's learned it, over a long and distinguished career that has plenty more to come.



Rob, you're from a fairly rural part of the Mississippi Delta. What was your childhood like?

I was born in Abbeville, Louisiana, a small Cajun town that's about 90 minutes from Baton Rouge and not far from Lafayette. My ancestors came here from the Canadian maritimes. You get the word "Cajun" from "Acadian," which was the early name for a person from Nova Scotia. They migrated this way in the 1700s and became rice farmers and fishermen. Some of them raised cattle, too. My dad and my uncles were Cajun speakers—they also spoke English—and I saw from an early age how much appreciation they had for hunting, fishing, being outdoors and eating raw crawfish, things like that. They told their raunchy jokes in English but the punchlines were always in French, so we kids could never get the meaning.



Rob Noel has built an award-winning reputation on the Gulf Coast with multiple academy locations around New Orleans.



Noel and his father took up the game together when Rob was nine years old.

What I remember is one day back when I was nine years old, at a point when my parents were talking about giving up their membership. I was friends with a kid named Lance Broussard and out of the blue he suggested we not go to the pool that day and try golf instead. If I remember right he had a junior-size bag with a half-dozen clubs in it, which we shared. I don't recall many details of that day, except that it gave me the bug to play more golf. I went home and told my father. The next day he went out and bought two sets of golf clubs, one for him and one for me, and just like that we were a pair of beginning golfers.

As far as we know there weren't any Get Golf Ready programs at that time.

No, but of all things my dad had two employees flying his charter planes who were scratch golfers, the Sonnier brothers, Randy and Doug. Doug had played for LSU and Randy was a super-talented player who would end up losing to Scott Verplank in the semi-finals of the 1984 U.S. Amateur, having lost 1-down to Jay Sigel in the finals of the USGA Mid-Amateur a year earlier. So, the Sonniers taught my father and me how to swing the club and get ourselves around the golf course. That was a great experience for me.

Were they able to mold you into champions?

Well, my dad became a competent player who could shoot in the mid-80s. I became a low-handicap golfer but not a big-time tournament player, despite my best efforts. I played basketball and golf at our little private Catholic high school, which had a graduating class of 69 the year I got out. I was my full height of 6-foot-3 by the ninth grade, so they needed me to play center on the hoops team.

What was your experience like as a junior golfer and a high school player?

I was fortunate to be from a family that could afford to have me playing in a lot of junior tournaments, so I became very experienced at that level. Again, I didn't win a lot of trophies, but I had a one-track mind when it came to improving as a golfer, and I guess the process and the journey kept me fully engaged.

That was your father's occupation—farming?

Actually, my dad made his living with small aircraft. He started off as a crop duster pilot. When we were young kids he would be flying Piper Cubs all over the farmland regions of southern Louisiana. He had a good head for business and was a person people naturally respected. Eventually he owned a couple of small aviation companies, flying charters out of a various locations. At one point he even owned an airfield, including the service hangars and fuel depot. He was successful at that business for a long time, until the oil-sector crash of the 1980s. At that point he started a residential real estate company, and he's done very well with that, too.

Was your dad a golfer?

He had a membership at Abbeville Golf Club, our local private club with a nine-hole course, but he didn't play golf. My parents joined there so we kids could swim in the pool. I grew up the oldest of five, four boys and a girl, with a pretty large gap between our ages. I was born in 1963 and the youngest, my brother Marc, was born in '83.

Do you have memories of being at the club and looking out on the fairways, wanting to play golf?

Noel got his start in teaching in Southern California before returning home to Louisiana where he has taught for the past 27 years.



How do you mean that?

I had a true hunger to learn about it. I was a teenage kid whose big thing was taking golf lessons, from all different teachers. Back then in Louisiana you could get a drivers license at age 15, which I did, and my folks would let me drive down to Baton Rouge to take lessons from the various PGA pros who were teaching there. Now, my friends on the high school team took zero lessons. So, when I would get home from taking lessons with Tommy Carter or Lionel Hebert—a well-known tour player of his era—my teammates and I would go out to No. 8 fairway at Abbeville with a couple of shag bags and I'd show them what the pros had shown me. That's where my passion for teaching got started.

What did you do after high school?

I went off to Louisiana State, mainly with the idea that I was good enough to walk on the golf team. I stayed there for two years trying to get a spot on the team but it didn't happen.

So you left college?

I did. School didn't hold any interest for me at that point. I had a friend from high school golf in the same situation, David Gary. David had gone to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, again trying to make the golf team as a walk-in and coming up short.

He ended up being a PGA club professional, but at the time he was on the loose and so was I, so we decided to get restaurant jobs and work nights so we could play golf in the day. We were waiters at Stroud's Steakhouse in Lafayette, and we played a ton of golf—I found my game coming back to me and I was still hell-bent on becoming an expert on how the swing worked.

You might have stayed in the restaurant business and become a great Cajun chef.

Not me. I had to find my way into golf. I went to Tommy Carter, who was well respected in the golf profession, and asked him how I could get into the business. He suggested I take a look at the San Diego Golf Academy, which I did. It seemed like a good place for me, so I enrolled there. I arrived out in California a while before classes were going to start. I spent a lot of time at a driving range called the Surf & Turf in Del Mar, next to the racetrack. One day a guy hitting balls a few stations away introduced himself. I told him my name and said I had come out there to be a student at San Diego Golf Academy. He said that was funny, because he had just arrived in town and was about to start work there as a teacher.

Let me guess. A.J. Bonar?

The one and only A.J. He and I became good friends and A.J. was a big influence on me in those early years.



I also spent time with Tag Merritt, and Tag taught me quite a lot. I ended up getting my certificate from the SDGA and then going to work at Rancho Bernardo Inn, a resort complex out there, starting out in the bag room. Eventually I got to do my first teaching as a professional at the Oaks North course at Rancho Bernardo. It was a good experience but I was very interested in moving back to Louisiana, so when I heard about an opening at Lakewood Country Club in New Orleans I put my name in for it. I got interviewed over the phone and I basically got the offer and said yes, all in that one phone call. That was in 1988, so I was 25 at the time.

All good, but now you've got to eat what you kill. Which means you'll have to build a reputation, build your book, attract a following—all of that.

No doubt, but there's where my timing was excellent and I had good fortune, as well. Two very talented young golfers were right there at Lakewood, playing and practicing. One was Tommy Moore, who was the golf icon in our region, the other was Kelly Gibson, a guy who would go on to have a fairly long PGA Tour career. Tommy had played for Oklahoma State and before that he was a national junior champion.

GOLF Magazine recently added Noel to its prestigious Top 100 Teachers list.

Fate kind of threw you together with them.

That's exactly it. We would practice all the time and play together. In that environment I was very loose and my ball-striking was maybe the best it's ever been. With regard to Tommy Moore, I was also a lot bigger than him, so my drives would be pretty far out there and he'd be hitting these 230-yard neck cuts. One day we came around nine and I checked our scores. He had a 34 and I had 38—it was insane how good this guy was at getting the ball in the hole off his tee-to-green game. As we played off No. 10 he hit another weak drive and I said, "Tommy, you swing at the ball like you're hanging off a meat hook." What I meant was that he seemed to have zero connection with the ground. He looked at me and said, "Meet me at the driving range tomorrow morning at 7:30." I started working with him the next day—I ended up coaching him and I ended up coaching Kelly Gibson, as well.

How did that work out?

About as well as you could have hoped. Tommy got his PGA Tour card in 1990 and Kelly got his card in 1991. My first two big students, and now everybody wanted to find out about this new young golf instructor. It boosted my career in a big way.

What else was going on for you in that period?

Seven months after I arrived at Lakewood, the PGA of America held its first Teaching and Coaching Summit, in Dallas. I signed up to attend and when I got there I met up with A.J. Bonar and Tag Merritt and the three of us hung out together. It was announced at the beginning that all professionals in attendance were invited to either of two post-Summit events, one of which was a tour of the Ben Hogan Company factory in Ft. Worth. I had been a Hogan fan and I'd played the clubs so I was keen for that. But A.J. grabbed me and said, "You're coming with me to the clubfitting demo."

If memory serves, that was a Henry-Griffitts event, with Randy Henry demonstrating the system and the lie board and so forth?

Yes, and it was a big eye-opener for me. I personally

went through a fit with Randy and after four swings I was bombing 5-iron shots 200 yards to the target flag, one after another. My own irons were set at about two degrees upright and the club Randy gave me was effectively seven degrees upright. I signed up to become an H-G fitter and that helped my teaching and my business pretty dramatically. Randy became a mentor of mine, both in teaching and in fitting. The more time I spent around him, the less and less I talked to my students during lessons. The idea was to let the ball flight and the feel at impact do the talking.

How long did you stay at Lakewood?

I left there in 1992 and moved to a big municipal complex called City Park, which would later get renamed as Bayou Oaks, and I taught there for seven years. It was a good place to be doing the Tiger Woods golf-boom era. It exposed me to a lot of people, which every young golf instructor needs to do—be in circulation. There was a lot of demand. I was giving 10 lessons a day, six days a week.

Those were big years for the golf-school approach. Did you do a lot with group teaching programs?

Personally I never believed in the golf school concept. I never saw it as a way to help people become better golfers. Certain things you can do well in that context—Aimpoint, for instance, is great in groups. But to me people are unique and the problem-solving needs to be individualized. It can and will take time, but that should be enjoyable for people—the teacher as well as the student.

OK, give us an example.

I would point to a student of mine, Joe, who also happens to be my dentist. He is a great friend who has a great time playing golf with a whole crew of guys. Joe is a stocky, short guy who has short arms and not much flexibility, but hey, he had fun playing golf when he was a 30-handicapper. That's what he was in 1990, when I met him. He called me a one day in 2005 and said he had played that day and shot a 74. I was very happy for him, but I said, "Now Joe, if I told you when we started working together you would shoot a 74 one day, but it would take 15 years, would you have been okay with that, and he laughed and said, "Hell no!" But he progressed the whole time,

and he enjoyed the process. That's how long-term coaching works sometimes.

There aren't too many businesses or professions that target affluent American people with patience.

Teaching anything is going to call for patience, but running a business there is always the reality of *right now*. I was able to become successful without ever really thinking about the money. Now, if we hit a crunch period where there's a lot of cash going out and not a big amount coming in, of course you're going to think about it. That's one of the reasons golf academy owners get creative. This year, for the first time, I offered an

Unlimited Lessons program through the winter, at \$599 for two months, and right away I had 25 golfers sign up. So, that's an influx of cash no business would mind.

What do you think of the Elite Junior market?

We were early with that, and it's a very big revenue area for us. Golf instruction for adults hit a wall back in 2008, so, again we got creative in response to a need. People didn't have money to take golf lessons themselves, but they had money to invest in their kids and their kids' futures. It's a different part of the family budget. I have a guy with four children

who I see drive up in car that isn't fancy at all, and he writes me a check for \$8,000. Of course, his kids are home-schooled, which makes a difference. Golf academies should pay attention to all the home-schooling that goes on in their area. The kids need activities, and they aren't paying a school sports fee—they're a good target market.

There's always a new trend around the corner—is that how it seems to you?

One idea leads to the next, I suppose. You're problem-solving when you're fixing someone's golf swing and you're problem-solving when it comes to the business, itself. On my day off I like to go deer hunting with my son—that's our time together and it's my quiet time away from work. I'll be up there alone, in a deer stand, in the early morning, with nature all around. But then after a few minutes I'll start thinking about my business. **PG**

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