

RON PHILO, JR

STOWE MOUNTAIN RESORT, STOWE, VERMONT

INTERVIEW BY PAUL RAMEE, JR

Right off the bat let's point out that Ron Philo, Jr. has legions of devoted students, he's earned a Golf Digest ranking of Best Teacher in State, he is the 2010 New England PGA Teacher of the Year and he's long served as trusted coach to his sister, LPGA Tour standout Laura Diaz.

It's important to get those teaching chops on the record right away, or we could easily get lost in the details of Philo's stellar playing career—which is a testament to his mix of golf talent and passion to compete. Ron has appeared in a dozen-plus PGA Tour events, seven PGA Championships and a U.S. Open. At the club-pro level he has one national title and numerous section or regional wins. He captured the 2006 PGA Professional National Championship and is a five-time PGA Section Player of the Year and four-time PGA Section champion.

Philo currently serves as director of golf and club operations for the highly successful Stowe Mountain Resort in northern Vermont, overseeing all facets of two separate golf clubs there. He arrived at Stowe in 2010 and was asked to take the top job in their golf division three years later.

Philo won the 2006 PGA Club Professional Championship.



In the Philo family tree, there is golf everywhere you look. Ron Philo, Sr. has been a PGA member for more than 40 years and continues to teach at Stowe Mountain Resort seasonally.

Ron's uncle and grandfather were also PGA professionals—his late uncle Dave competed in two PGA Championships. That made it all the more memorable when Ron, Jr., made the cut at the 2005 PGA at Baltusrol, with sister Laura caddying.

Some PGA members focus on playing because they don't have a head for the business—that's hardly the case with this month's featured Proponent member, who could step into any operation and make it hum. Of course, club boards don't exactly mind when the guy running the golf program also brings home shiny trophies. In 2006, the year Ron took the head-pro position at Metropolis Country Club in suburban New York, he stepped out of the shop briefly to go win the PGA Professional National Championship. A few weeks afterward he captured the Westchester Open, then, later that summer, the Rhode Island Open (for the second time), and oh by the way, the '06 Met PGA Championship as well.

Within the Proponent membership you'll find a wide array of career paths, but there's one type that has caught the eye of Lorin Anderson ever since he founded the organization—and Ron Philo, Jr., represents that. "You can't help noticing the professional who has been an excellent player as well as a real leader on the business side, yet somehow they find the time and they find their way to Proponent Group—that's a case of genuine passion for teaching, showing through," he comments.

We get a look at all of the above, in these highlights of a conversation between Ron and Paul Ramee that took place recently.





Philo thought about a career outside of golf while studying for his MBA, but ultimately returned to the game and profession in which he has always been immersed.

Ron, you come from a very storied golf family, with a grandfather and father in the business, how much pressure was there for you to become a golf professional?

No pressure at all, actually the opposite. I had it presented to me that the golf business was a known territory, and it's possible there would be opportunities beyond golf that would be my best choice.

So how did it turn out that you followed in their footsteps?

I had some success as a junior and I went on to play at Florida State. I was doing well academically and thinking that an MBA would open up opportunities for me in business. I was playing well, but it was clear that I couldn't do golf and also do graduate school. So I chose school.

That was it—no involvement in golf?

Well, I did have a part-time job, at a municipal golf facility that had other amenities, too. Along with providing spending money it was also a way to get started toward PGA membership, if that became a choice for me. This place had squash and racquetball courts that stayed open late and required a staff member at the desk until people were done using the courts. So I put in for that duty. Seven nights a week, after finishing my shift in the golf department, I would head over there there. That was my study time, and I was able to get my PGA course work done and study for my MBA as well. Once I became a PGA member, I started playing in pro-ams and had some success.

Your family and Bob Duval were pretty friendly, isn't that correct?

Yes, my father and my uncle grew up with Bob, in upstate New York. That led to me going to work for Bob in Jacksonville. It so happens I met my wife there. She was teaching tennis at Sawgrass and I was working for Bob nearby.

How about the corporate world? Were you still seriously considering it?

The thought I had was to leverage my MBA into a job with the PGA Tour. I pursued that for a while but nothing came of it. It was around that time that I started playing a lot of golf with Bob, and with his son David, who of course would go on to tour stardom. That helped me develop as a player and got me more keen to compete at a high level.

What directions did that lead you in?

I started playing the Canadian Tour and also some events on the Australasian Tour. In 1991 I left for Asia and came home at Christmas, during which time we got the news that my wife was expecting. That shifted my perspective. I didn't want to go back to Asia and leave my pregnant wife on the other side of the world, by herself.

So you stayed in Jacksonville.

Right. I went to work at Amelia Island Plantation. At that time, the Golf Digest Schools had just left, which meant

Philo has appeared in a dozen-plus PGA Tour events, seven PGA Championships and a U.S. Open



we had an empty teaching building we could put to use. My father and I discussed it and he was intrigued, so he came down and we did a bunch of golf schools together.

Sounds like there was also time to work on your own game. Were you doing that?

I was. I found I was able to compete well within the North Florida PGA, and in fact I won the Section Championship in 1993, which gave me an exemption to the second stage of PGA Tour qualifying. I made it to third stage and out of that I earned a Nike Tour card for 1994-95. So I played Nike Tour the with some reasonable success, but I was losing money and digging a hole, you might say.

From there it seems you took the club-pro path, with plenty of tournament competition along the way.

Pretty much, yes. I worked at the Kittansett Club in southeastern Massachusetts, at County Club of Vermont and at Metropolis Country Club, before landing the job in 2010 at the Stowe Mountain Club, which I now manage and which, believe it or not, is really a four-season club.

Interesting. What do you do in the Vermont winters?

We have indoor facilities and we do a lot of trips with our members, which I really recommend. Playing with your members and students really gives you a better understanding of what they are experiencing on the golf course.

Family dinners must have involved a lot of golf talk with you, your father and sister, LPGA Tour player Laura Diaz.

My sister came along nine years after me, so she grew up in a little different environment. By the time she was in kindergarten I was busy helping my father at his driving range, which he referred to affectionately as a “golf ball farm.” This was in Scotia, N.Y., outside of Schenectady.

What did that involve?

Well, he used to get me out of bed at 5 a.m. to go over there with him to pick up golf balls. My father had taken over this range from his father and he made sure I was engaged with him. It wasn't that way so much with my sister. She was the cute little girl hitting balls.

With that nine-year age difference, what were you able to share with her, as one golfer to another?

I have three particularly strong memories of times with Laura, involving golf. The first is from when she was headed off to play college golf at Wake Forest. A program at that level is not going to be easy for the incoming freshman, no matter how good you might be. During that first year when she would call home and talk about the challenges, she wasn't getting any sympathy from our father. So I would take the phone and talk to her. She was worried about not making the team. I told her to stop worrying about making the team and start trying to beat the number one girl on the team, who was winning everything she played in. It was an idea I took from work



Philo still enjoys the fact that the game is not supposed to be easy and that there is tremendous satisfaction in working to improve your golf skills and your scores.

I'd been doing with Bob Rotella, and it changed her perspective. She went on to become All-ACC, an All-American and Co-Athlete of the Year at Wake, along with Tim Duncan. My father continued to work on her swing and I was the one who worked with her on the mental game.

And the second memory?

The second was late in her college career. Laura was playing in the North-South Ladies at Pinehurst and I was finishing up an event in Richmond. I drove down and caddied for her. In the finals she was playing great and was really getting the best of her opponent. We were at lunch and the other girl was a mess, in tears, really upset. I could see that Laura was starting to feel sorry for her—which was not good. I told her, “Lunch is over, let’s get going.” As we walked back to the tee I said, “You need to kick her while she’s down—no mercy allowed.” We went out and won.

And the last one?

That would be the 2005 PGA Championship, at Baltusrol. I had qualified and Laura caddied for me. Every tee and green we came to she was getting large applause. The attention was all on her, which was great for me. It took a lot of the pressure off of me and we just both enjoyed the moment.

As you grew up watching Laura play and then became being part of her professional career, did you develop a lot of respect for the women’s game?

Absolutely. It is amazing how good they are and how much they struggle for recognition both on and off the course. They achieve so much, and they do it with a lot less in the way of resources, compared to the men. They don’t have the full-time managers, the entourages, the private jets and so forth. To add to their responsibilities, many of them are also mothers.

Your swing philosophy of “keep your arms and the club in front of you and swing left.” Where did that come from?

It was developed during that period when my father and I were first teaching together at Amelia Island. Believe it or not I had never taken a formal lesson from him. We sat down and talked about the concept for six weeks before we actually went out on the range to work with it. The genesis of it was our plan that we would start to share students, so to

do that we’d need to be on the same page. This led to an initial outline, which was influenced by coaches like Mike Hebron, whom we had both seen independently. We simplified it as much as possible—the body turns and the arms swing—the body supports what the arms do with the club. “The club is the only communicator to the ball” was a phrase we often used.

“Technology definitely makes us better teachers and better learners, but it doesn’t replace attention, experimentation and effort.”

How did you make the leap from a great player to an instructor, because it is not always guaranteed?

When I started to teach, I decided to develop a *golf philosophy* for my students, rather than a *swing philosophy*. My father's generation, they needed to dig things out of the dirt, but this generation is different. Things need to be fun for them. Growing up, I saw how my sister's way of practicing was to be more of an entertainer, the cute girl showing off a bit as she was hitting balls. Laura's way was more about having fun, compared to me, who hit balls until my hands bled. I was always the figure-it-out type of practicer. So, when it comes to practice we apply the appropriate games, drills and physical exercises for our students. I know I always did better when I had my teammates around me pushing me and inspiring me, so we use that approach. We create practice situations so people are entertained, working together in groups to have the social and motivational aspect.

On the issue of technology in teaching, where do you stand?

Technology definitely makes us better teachers and better learners, but it doesn't replace attention, experimentation and effort.

What is the state of the game and the industry these days, in your eyes?

I would say I am disappointed that society wants golf to be easier. I love the game because it is hard. At the end of a well-played round the satisfaction comes from playing well at something that is difficult. I would also say that the loss of starter courses challenges the industry. More people should start on par-3 courses and graduate to bigger courses. That eliminates a lot of the intimidation. The decline of caddie programs has also hurt the game.

“My father's generation, they needed to dig things out of the dirt, but this generation is different. Things need to be fun for them.”



Philo runs the golf operation at Stowe Mountain Resort in Northern Vermont.

Caddie programs introduce young people to the game, so without that where are we going to introduce golf to kids? Career days? At the same time I'm excited about businesses like Topgolf. I also feel that Erik Anderson has done a wonderful job introducing millennials to the game.

You talked about how you worked on the mental side of the game with Laura. Has anything from that helped your students over the years?

I like to tell people, keep playing until you are out of holes. There's no score to put in that little box on your card until you've holed out—you're actually “nothing” score-wise until you are done. So keep playing hard. **PG**

Proponent Group Summit 2017

Heathrow Country Country Club, Orlando, FL

November 5-7, 2017



The Most Valuable Event of The Year for Your Teaching Business