

# RUDY DURAN

**RUDY DURAN GOLF, MORRO BAY, CA**

INTERVIEW BY PAUL RAMEE, JR

If you're playing word-association with golf insiders in Central California, when you say "Rudy Duran" most of them will respond: "Tiger Woods." Or they might say, "Tiger's teacher," Duran being the first person to hold that distinction.

Exposed in his early days to many old-school golf professionals whose wisdom still holds up, Rudy had natural talent not just for teaching but for golf operations, as well. He has been in the business for some 45 years, including a three-year period early on when he played first the Canadian Tour and then the PGA Tour.

Rudy turned his teaching experiences into the well-received book "In Every Kid There Lurks A Tiger," written to help parents introduce their children to golf and support their development as juniors. He currently is the Director of Instruction at Chalk Mountain Golf Course and Morro Bay Golf Course in San Luis Obispo, California and coaches part time with the Vision54 Golf School in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Among the hats he's worn are those of course owner, head of operations and even golf course designer. Paul Ramee took some time to discuss all that with Rudy, in a conversation that produced our Proponent Group interview for September.

**Rudy, I'm curious about your entry into the golf business and what your early experiences were**

**Rudy Duran has always been a coach of the people, working with all comers even though he was a top-tier competitor and coached Tiger Woods.**



**like. Could you brief us on that?**

I served in the Air Force prior to becoming a golf professional. Returning to civilian life in 1971 I didn't have any career direction to speak of.

During high school I had worked at a driving range and enjoyed the work. I played golf recreationally. My high school didn't have a golf team, so I was playing only now and then, usually with my dad. In the Air Force our base in Germany had a team that I played on, competing against other bases.

**So, coming out of the service, were you thinking about the golf industry?**

What happened was, the owner of the range I'd worked at when I was in high school had purchased a golf course just north of Los Angeles. I looked into the employment possibilities there and ended up working on the grounds, in the shop and even did my first coaching with Saturday junior lessons.

**What was your next move?**

I heard about a job at Heartwell Golf Park in Long Beach, where I could get into the PGA program. I got the job—it was an 18-hole night-lighted par-3 course.





**Duran taught Tiger Woods from ages 4 to 10 in Southern California. He knew Tiger was someone special the first day he met him.**

When I started it was lighted until midnight. This gave me time to teach and work in the shop during the evening and play golf during the day. I became a PGA Apprentice and competed in section events. I feel like I came up the old-school way, like guys who came through the caddie ranks. I was at Heartwell for 10 years. It was during that time that Earl and Tida Woods brought Tiger to me for golf lessons. I had started a junior program in 1974. It was mostly a summer program, with three-day camps most summer weeks.

**You weren't strictly thinking of yourself as a teacher, correct?**

That's true. I had an interest in management, and I ended up leasing the Chalk Mountain public course in San Luis Obispo, about four hours north of Los Angeles. I moved up then and for a while I commuted back to southern California to see Tiger. After a while the drive became too much. Tiger then began working with John Anselmo. I had my hands full at Chalk Mountain, where the rounds of golf were on their way from 35,000 a year up to 80,000, by the time we got into the early 90's.

**You were in the midst of a good run, it sounds like.**

Times were certainly good. We were so busy I designed and built another golf course nearby, a links-style layout. I ran the two courses for an 11-year stretch until I decided to retire in 2007. For a while I had my

time to myself, then I took on some consulting work with U.S. Kids Golf. I don't consult for the company any more, although I am involved with the U.S. Kids Golf Los Angeles Local Tour. Things have now evolved to the point where I'm out of retirement. I'm director of instruction at two golf courses and I also work as needed with Vision 54 in Arizona.

**How would you characterize the changes you've seen in the industry since you got started?**

When I started in 1971, golf was growing, which it continued to do, into the 1990s. Then the business changed. For example, our county has only added 50,000 residents since the mid 1980s, but the number of golf courses serving that population has doubled. We got out of balance in the supply-demand curve. That is why I jumped back into coaching—to see if I could help move the needle to help create more golfers or get people who currently play golf to play more. We have a lot of people who are exposed to golf but don't play.

**“If golf pros only got paid when their students played golf, ate in the grill room or hit balls on the range, the coaching world would look completely different. We need to be facilitators of people playing golf.”**

**What did your junior program look like in the mid-70'? Would you say it was similar to today's programs?**

The junior golf programs were practice area-based clinics. We would do chipping, pitching, putting and full swing. In 1979 I started having a Saturday tournament for juniors. They were free of charge and I awarded prizes each week. Having an 18 hole par-3 course was



Today Duran teaches at multiple facilities in Central California and is still in demand for media appearances, including this visit to Morning Drive on Golf Channel.

an ideal on-course learning environment, to go along with the instruction and then the Saturday tournaments. I did the same at Chalk Mountain and had good success with the same formula, free lessons and free access to the golf course. At some point we started charging juniors \$1 for playing the golf course. Today it's still only \$5 for 18 holes any day of the week.

#### **Any changes you may have made in the beginning, looking back?**

Yes, I think more supervised on-course programs and fewer driving-range lessons. Being on the golf course as much as possible is ideal. Learning to play first then learning to play better. I think driving-range lessons are more for the convenience of the coaches. I have far more on-course programs now than in the past. The best way to play better golf is to play more golf.

#### **What do you see as the major flaw of other junior golf programs?**

I wouldn't say I have in-depth knowledge of what other coaches are doing, but based on what I have seen, I would encourage providing less technical input. I would let junior golfers move along and develop with as few technical thoughts as possible.

#### **So, you'd suggest turning kids loose, and focusing less on explaining details of the swing to them?**

I believe playing golf is easy to learn and kids are learning machines. Kids go to the playground and learn to play handball, climb on the jungle gym without lessons. They learn to ride a bike without lessons right away. They start with training wheels. It wouldn't

surprise me if the Tour de France guys are in wind tunnels with coaches and computers finding ways to ride their bikes faster, but you don't see little kids learning how to ride their bikes that way. So, let the sport be the control. As they learn, guide them in learning to play better. There are no coaches on the playgrounds at elementary schools. There may be teachers out there preventing kids from hurting themselves...but seldom is there instruction. Yet the kids are learning.

#### **Ok, let's talk about Tiger. When did you realize he was something special?**

The first day.

#### **Really... what happened?**

His parents had checked around and I was one of the few pros offering a junior program, who had a good reputation and some playing experience. Tida, Tiger's mother, brought Tiger to me in the pro shop. He could barely see over the shop counter. She asked if I could help him. So we went down to the driving range. Tiger had a cut-down 2.5-wood, a 7-iron and a putter—three clubs. I told him to pull out his 2.5-wood and I teed up four balls for him. He stepped up and hit four perfect drives. They carried about 50 yards each, all with a draw. I was stunned. I told him I would be happy to help him and he could play there anytime he wanted! We then went over beside the practice green and I threw some balls down and asked him to chip them. "Do you want me to pop them up?" he asked me. I asked what he meant by that, and he took his 7-iron and started hitting this cluster of balls. He hit

some of them high and some of them low. “Pop it up” meant hitting the shots high. He was 4 at the time.

By the age of 5 he was able to play like a miniature touring pro. I created a personal par for him on the course and he shot 8-under his personal par, playing the ball down, picking his own clubs and holing all putts. A five-year-old kid was doing this. Tiger was able to shoot amazingly low scores with no knowledge of the golf swing. If you asked him anything about his swing, he had no clue. He had a glove that didn't even fit, and he held the club with a split 10-finger grip.

#### **How did you run your sessions with him?**

We would warm up on the range and then we left there. Our work was all on the golf course. If we did happen to work on the range or in the practice area I would just have him try things—curve the ball, hit it low, hit it high. We were playing games with no talk of technique. Sometimes we would talk about what I did to make a ball do different things but it was more of what it felt like than what was happening mechanically. Now and again I did try and change some of his technique, and generally this would make his success go down. I quickly realized it was better not to fix what wasn't broken. At that point we reverted to having contests and making the ball fly different ways.

#### **How long were you with him?**

For six years, age 4 to age 10. In the time after that I would go down and play golf with Tiger and often with his father, too. We always had a good time. Golf was mostly about fun in those days.

#### **Ok, let's fast-forward. What do you think of some of his later swing changes?**

I go back to my analogy about bike riding in a wind tunnel. There are adjustments that the best players in the world will make. If anyone can make changes, it's the best players in the world. It looked to me like Tiger was just trying to get better. I don't fault him for that. I believe all great athletes are always trying to get better. You can never know what small change might help.

#### **Talk about the different stages of your career, as a player, an owner-operator, a teacher.**

As a player I practiced hard, played in tournaments took lessons from noted teachers, brainstormed with other players everything I could... but in the end I just shot too high. Looking back I don't think I gave enough attention to pitching, chipping and putting. But I learned a lot trying and feel I'm a better coach because of it. As a golf professional I made my living and was able to retire at a fairly young age, due to the fact that I was an owner/operator at a good time.

Financial success for me didn't have much to do with teaching golf. In 1971 when I started as a golf professional most of the financially successful head professionals made much of their living by owning the pro shop, renting carts, renting range balls. In those days pro-line golf clubs could only be purchased in a pro shop and at fair-traded full retail prices. The professionals taught, but it wasn't the bulk of their income. That's the model I tried to follow. I never thought teaching was a way of making a living. The few successful teachers spent a lot of time on the driving range. Today the golf business is much different.

#### **In contrast to other Proponent Group members, you seem to see teaching from an opposite angle.**

Maybe so. Here's an unconventional idea for you—set it up so that golf professionals only get paid by the golf course owner and they only get paid when their students play golf. That basically turns the instructor's compensation into a sales commission on green fees. If golf pros only got paid when their students played golf, dined in the grill room or hit balls on the range, the coaching world would look completely different. I believe we need to be facilitators of people playing golf. Lowering a player's handicap has value but facilitating people to play golf or play more golf is what will keep golf courses in business.

#### **Who along the way has been a mentor for you?**

In the 1970's I took quite a few lessons from a guy named Johnny Revolva, the 1935 PGA Champion. Johnny was great. He taught quite a few good players, and he taught old-school. While I was searching for the perfect swing, he would tell me things I didn't want to hear. He would talk about “feels,” “low past the ball,” “chase it” and “inwardly and upwardly.” I wanted him to tell me what the magic swing was but he never did. Now I go back to all the things Johnny said and they all make sense. They were the smallest common denominator of feels to positively influence the outcome. He has become more influential to me now than he was when I was taking lessons from him.

#### **What do you say to a parent who wants their son or daughter to become the next Tiger Woods?**

I tell the parent I would be happy to work with their child but I don't have any magic power to make that happen. If their child works hard and has lots of talent then it's possible. If they asked me do you think my kid could become a great tour player I am not going to say no, because I do not know. I would explain the math. Mathematically it is not very likely, but then again people do win the lottery and that's not likely. I tell them tournament golf as a living is not a real career choice. But it could happen! **PG**