DANA RADER

DANA RADER GOLF SCHOOL, CHARLOTTE, NC

INTERVIEW BY PAUL RAMEE, JR.

Even as a young girl, Dana Rader had glimpses of the professional path that lay ahead, vaguely envisioning a sports camp of some kind that she would design and lead. The realization of that youthful dream is the Dana Rader Golf School, a landmark of learning in Charlotte, N.C., and a fixture at the Ballantyne Hotel & Lodge. The school's founder is proud of her celebrated success but candid about the serious business of maintaining lofty standards at a top academy.

One of the keys, naturally, is people management—that's a skill she developed at a particularly high level during her lengthy service as president of the Teaching & Club Professional Division of the LPGA.

Consistent excellence has earned Dana a perennial spot on GOLF Magazine's list of the Top 100 Teachers in America, dating back to its inception in 1996. She is also honored by Golf Digest as one of America's 50 Best Teachers and is No. 3 in the magazine's rankings of the country's Best Women Teachers. Quite early in her career, Rader drew notice, being named the 1990 LPGA National Teacher of the Year.

She founded her eponymous golf academy in 1982, building an operation that GOLF Magazine would honor as one of the Top 25 Golf Schools in the U.S. An LPGA Master Professional since 2003, Rader is the author of the book, "Rock Solid Golf: A Foundation of a Lifetime," and has written numerous articles for such publications as GOLF, Golf Digest, and Golf for Women. She took time recently with Proponent's Q&A specialist Paul Ramee, Jr., looking back and looking ahead, to the next set of challenges and opportunities.

Dana, it's been a good six years since you and I last sat down for a conversation like this—can you catch me up on what's new?

When we spoke last time, I had just started the first of my two terms as president of the LPGA Teaching & Club Professional division—that was in 2009, and the second three-year term I served ran from 2012 through 2015. So, of late I have been back in Charlotte working, and no longer serving that role for the T&CP.

For many years, Rader has been one of the top-rated teachers in the game.

With time to reflect, what would you say about the experience?

Those two terms I served as national president represent probably the best six years of my career. I learned so much about myself and about leadership.

How do you feel about stepping down and focusing more exclusively on the Dana Rader Golf School?

Well, our schools have continued to grow and I am excited to know I have a little more time to allocate to my business, now that my term is over.

As you look back on your presidency, what are some of the insights you gained about our profession?
As I mentioned, I learned a great deal about leadership over those six years. You come in with a perception about how things work, but then you become involved and you see a totally different side of things. There are insights you get about how to act and what to say in particular situations, if you want to lead successfully. I had a great role model in Mike Whan, our commissioner.

"It certainly is vital for our customers to have a great experience. If that doesn't happen, they are not coming back. Nor will they tell 10 or 12 other people about their experience—which we need them to do…You only have two assets, your customers and your staff. It's all about making people want to come back."
— *Dana Rader*

Mike has earned a lot of respect in his time as LPGA Commissioner. How would you describe his way of doing things?
For me it was a revelation, watching Mike and seeing how he treated people—how he treated customers, sponsors, other board members. It was amazing the way he ran our board meetings. They were always so productive. He was so good at "being present," and then when meetings were over he always took care of his follow-up immediately. Mike would make the best decisions he could and carry no regrets about past actions. He also took the time to send personal, hand-written thank-you notes. That's a habit I had gotten out of, because of email. So, Mike did all the little things well and my time with him reminded me how important the little things are.

Is there a specific example of how you personally evolved in your leadership role?
I learned to listen more and talk less. In every discussion, I tried to get an understanding of where an individual was coming from, rather than preparing my rebuttal. I came to realize that the people you serve are your boss. In the beginning, I think I had that backwards. Lastly, don't expect to arrive at total agreement on a subject. Do what's needed to establish unity as a Board, even in those cases where there isn't unanimous agreement.

With respect to unity, you had a lot of different constituencies What was it like, trying to achieve a balance?
We do have a lot of constituencies and it was interesting balancing them all and at times it was intimidating, especially when you walk into a boardroom and the player reps are in the room—Karrie Webb, people of that stature. But in the end it was pretty simple: As an LPGA Tour Board Member, I was there to represent the affairs of the LPGA club pros and teaching professionals.

By coincidence, you and Mike Whan stepped into your respective roles at the same time. Was that a good piece of timing?
To come aboard just as Mike was—yes, that was fortunate. What was not so fortunate in my timing was the state of the LPGA's business. Growth and sponsorship had been declining for the prior couple of years. There were even rumors that the PGA may try and buy the Teaching & Club Professional wing of the LPGA.

The Dana Rader Golf School is a full service academy and has one of the best teaching facilities in all of the Carolinas.

Sounds like one of those roll-up-your-sleeves moments.
Definitely, it was that. Mike, the Executive Committee, Executive Director Nancy Henderson and I worked the problem. Mike was great with the sponsors and players. He took real ownership of the challenges. It helped that he is so skilled at working with the media. I remember how he expanded the LPGA Tour into foreign markets and when approached by the media and asked about all the foreign players and the overseas tournaments, he basically told them to "get over it." He would tell the press, simply, "We are a global tour." End of story. Meanwhile, on the T&CP side, the approach Mike and I took had positive effects. It made the division better. We took the assets we had, worked the problem and made things better.

Rader recently completed a very successful six-year term as president of the LPGA T&CP.

As you were "working the problem" was there resistance to any of the changes you were making?
There was, absolutely. I had to let a couple of programs go and I took some heat over it. I didn't want to eliminate them, but at the time it was necessary. I think the lesson I really learned, at the time, was that you need to articulate what is going to happen and why we need to do what we're doing. I should have done a better job of that. It was early on in my tenure. We supplemented the cancelled programs with new initiatives.

How were you able to run your business and lead the T&CP at the same time?
I am lucky to have some very good people working for me. Julie Cole runs my business. I was typically working seven days a week. I would typically leave Sunday in the morning, attend a tournament or function for a few days, return home Tuesday night, teach Wednesday to Saturday, then either take Sunday off or travel on that day.

What was the highlight of the travel?
Without question, it was the people I got to meet. I loved attending our National Championship and of course, pro-am parties were a lot of fun.

How are things going these days in your academy?
From a staffing standpoint, I currently have eight instructors working for me. We spend a couple months training during the winter. That really helps cultivate team cohesion. Also, it gives a staff instructor the feel of ownership in the school—they realize they are part of a team. And all through this I am focused on trying to be the boss that I, myself, would want to work for. It comes down to giving people the tools they need to do their job.

I would imagine this leads to good retention and longevity, for coaches at your academy?
I have been fortunate to have instructors who have been with me for 10 to 12 years, yes. Then, every couple of years, a few will leave, and we will need to rebuild. Proponent Group has been great in helping me attract new potential employees.

It sounds like the old Marriott Hotels credo—management takes care of the staff and the staff takes care of the customers.
It certainly is vital for our customers to have a great experience. If that doesn't happen, they are not coming back. Nor will they be likely to tell 10 or 12 other people about their experience—which we need them to do. In a business like ours, you only have two assets, your customers and your staff. It's all about making people want to come back.

On that note, how do you deal with a staff member who is having a bad day, and is unable to keep their negative state of mind from affecting the experience of that paying customer?
If an employee of mine is having a bad day and it reflects on the customer, that employee's day just got a whole lot worse! But seriously, by the time a staff

problem gets to me it has to be pretty bad. Nancy Harvey and Doug Brewer, who both do a great job for me, are on top of the issues. They typically will have dealt with it before I hear about it.

What excites you about 2016?
Now that my tenure at the LPGA is over, I am going to have the chance to play some golf, work on my fitness and spend a lot of time coaching some junior players. I am excited about teaching the whole student, which takes in all the mental, emotional and physical aspects of the game. It even extends to helping parents understand how they can help their child along, in a very supportive way.

Rader operates with one of the largest academy staffs in the country.

Interesting subtlety there—teaching the parents, in one particular aspect, how to parent.
Yes, dealing with parents is interesting and there is a lot of information on the web that can help us. I recommend reading "Golf Parent for the Future" by Lynn Marriott and Pia Nilsson, a book that contains excellent information on the subject. What Pia and Lynn write about parents and kids and golf really rings true.

Tell us from your perspective about the future of golf for girls who are learning the game and for younger women players.
Five or six years ago, we put 20,000 girls through the LPGA Junior Golf Club's Camps. That's quite a lot, but then in 2015 we put 50,000 through the program. And there's much more growth on top that—in 2016 we are expecting to have 100,000 girls go through it. Now, for girls playing golf at country clubs, we see some challenges. One, there is not a lot of girls playing at country clubs because we females tend to be more social and if there are not other girls around, they tend not to come out. So, that is a bit of a circular problem. But, all in all, I think girls' golf is growing and thriving. If you show me a club that is thriving, I can promise you they have a great junior program.

How about your bookshelf these days—come across anything provocative lately?
I am an avid reader and one of the best series of books I've read is by Lanny Bassham, who was an Olympic shooter, and then went on to write about Mental Management. He offers courses and I have read everything he wrote and become Level 1 and 2 certified. It is very interesting material and where most psychologists only deal with the conscious and subconscious, Lanny adds self-image to the mix, which creates his Triad System.

Sounds like it has helped you in your coaching.
The Triad System is pretty compelling information, with the conscious incorporated into the aspect of playing, meanwhile the sub-conscious delves into skill acquisition. But the most interesting piece is the self-image concept, which is really where performance lies. So many times I have seen players with a low self-image say something like, "Don't hit it in the water," or "It is just like me to three-putt," which goes to show how important self-image is.

You wrote a book yourself. What was that experience like?
I wrote my one book and truthfully I have no urge to ever do it again. It was a very hard process for me. I rewrote the manuscript three times. It was one of those challenges that you learn from, once the ordeal of it is over.

Any advice for newer teachers?
I would say, be teachable yourself. And then remain teachable. All golf instructors have an ego and we all feel like we may be knowledgable, but you have to stay open to new things. Never stop learning and check out different perspectives. Lastly, surround yourself with a network and have fun!

Social media is part of everyday life now. Good thing? Bad thing?
Do I think we could survive without it? Yes, I do. Social media has a lot of positives. As to whether the positives outweigh the negatives, I'm not sure. Nor could I really measure how it has helped my business. But it is here to stay.

What will you miss most about not being directly involved with decision-making at the LPGA?
I will miss the team, they were great. I remain an ex-officio member of the board. However I am not going to be the type of past president who is giving the current people all kinds of input. If they need my help, they know where to find me, and if they do reach out I will be happy to lend a hand. PG