

KEITH LYFORD

THE GOLF ACADEMY AT OLD GREENWOOD, LAKE TAHOE, NV

INTERVIEW BY PAUL RAMEE, JR.

The New England PGA bestowed its Teacher of the Year award on Keith Lyford in 1997, during Lyford's tenure at the Stratton Golf School in Vermont. Three years later, having relocated to the Cranwell Resort on the New York-Massachusetts border, Keith received a section Teacher of the Year award from the Northeastern New York PGA. Opportunity then beckoned in the West, luring Keith to the Sacramento - Lake Tahoe market. Apparently the Northern California PGA wasn't afraid they would lose a prominent member if they gave Lyford their own Teacher of the Year honors—the Section did just that in 2011.

All the while, Keith Lyford's name has been found on the GOLF Magazine Top 100 Teacher list—he is coming up on 20 straight years with that distinction. As a former PGA Tour player Lyford represents the rare combination of highly accomplished player and dedicated, expert teacher. During the winter months, he teaches at Whitney Oaks Golf Course in Rocklin, California, where he spends most of his time on private lessons and

junior-development programs.

Lately—as we'll see in his interview with Paul Ramee, Jr.—

Lyford has been reflecting on the process he's followed to train the nearly 100 golf instructors who have enjoyed and benefitted from his mentorship.

Keith, can you give us the highlights of how you got to where you are in the golf industry?

I played college golf at Cal State Northridge, and after college I turned pro and competed in seven or eight Tour schools before I managed get my card and compete on the PGA Tour for one year. I lost my card and tried to re-qualify but started to develop back problems. I actually had to withdraw from the second stage of Tour School that last year due to back issues. I eventually had to give up that pursuit.

What did you do next?

As it happened, our Cal State Northridge coach, Bill



Keith Lyford has spent the past two decades on GOLF Magazine's Top 100 Teacher list and has had very successful career stops on both the East and West Coasts.



Lyford loves the challenge of teaching in a group setting and having the ability to work with each golfer on every portion of their game.

Collum ran the Arnold Palmer Junior Golf Academy back East in Vermont, which later got rebranded to its current name, the Stratton Golf School.

And so, when we played for Bill we would help out as counselors there in the summer. That is how I got my first taste of teaching. After Bill left the Stratton job one of the players from Cal State Northridge by the name of Bob Lendizon took over and shifted the school from a junior focus to adults. I worked for Bob as an assistant instructor. When Bob left there to assume the head golf professional position at a large Vermont property called the Quechee Club, I took over at Stratton.

That was during the boom years.

Without a doubt. Golf was in a huge growth period and I was able to leverage that to dramatically expand the Stratton Golf School business. We had 800 students the first year—a good base. By my twelfth and final season we instructed 2,700 students. In what was only a 20-week season we produced \$1.3 million in instruction revenue. We had 15 instructors teaching 60 students a day.

And you had seven more months in the year to make hay.

Yes, so in the winters I would go out to Arizona to McCormick Ranch where I ran the Stratton–Scottsdale School, which I later changed to the Lyford–Scottsdale School. I operated that for nine

years. Along the way I switched my summertime base from Stratton to a resort in Lenox, Mass., eventually operating that business in affiliation with Golf Digest. I did that for three years, then did a season in the Boston area working at The Harmon Club, then I headed back home to the West Coast.

Which has become a pretty permanent base for you, correct?

Well, I've just finished my eighth season at Old Greenwood in Lake Tahoe. My winters I spend in Sacramento at Whitney Oaks.

What are some of the challenges in overseeing as many instructors as you do?

When you hire, train and oversee 15 teaching pros the biggest priority is that we are all on the same page. If I am teaching a husband chipping and one of my pros is teaching his wife chipping we can't contradict each other. My goal is to get everyone on the same page and train them quickly.

What happens if someone has a different philosophy?

That's fine, different philosophies are always welcomed—and hey, maybe the other teacher's way is better than my way. What I'm really talking about are the nuts and bolts, the actual fundamentals of the game. Most important, when I am looking for new staff, is that I am looking for great personalities. I can train them to teach the golf swing, but I can't teach personality.

Lyford's golf school operation at its peak helped 2,700 golfers a year and included 15 instructors teaching up to 60 students per day.



You didn't mention any mentors when we discussed your background.

I really didn't have any mentors in golf instruction. At this point, in kind of a reversal, I now consider the 15 instructors I oversee to be my mentors. That's based on the fact that we spend so much time together doing roundtable discussions about the swing and different philosophies.

So, in your view, the boss doesn't need to be all-knowing?

No, not at all. I always learn from the group. We have "pizza nights" and "teach-ins" and we all learn from each other. We've put together a great forum for sharing ideas.

What are some lessons your staff members have taught you?

I've learned some great drills and teaching techniques. One of my guys was very into using spray paint, and now I use paint all the time, drawing lines for direction, path, and so forth. We used to play a game that was like the old show "Name That Tune." We would play "Fix That Swing" and we would see who could fix a swing in the fewest number of shots—similar to naming the song in the fewest notes. Most pros can identify the flaw, but how quickly can they fix it? Personally, I have developed at least three or four drills for each flaw and have them ready to go whenever I diagnose a problem.

When you bring a new staff member on board how do you get their training started?

We work on getting them to understand the systematic approach to teaching, which starts with the interview process. This is where you learn about the student's thoughts, goals, strengths, weaknesses. Then it's on to the analysis stage, using ball-flight cause-and-effect tools such as video analysis or our FlightScope launch monitor. Then they learn to create a lesson plan prioritizing the swing faults and finding the root causes of the issues. Then it's time to decide how to make the fix, so, which drill do I use? How do I communicate it to the student? Next is the correction stage which is fixing the ball flight as quickly as possible. Now we move from teaching to coaching and then we do a wrap-up. Each part of the lesson should take five to 10 minutes. We use this approach for every lesson.

Running two academies, you better be pretty organized, correct?

Luckily they are close to each other geographically. The season in Tahoe is May to October and in Sacramento it's November to March. That leaves April—typically I'll spend that month in Arizona doing some golf schools.

What's the toughest aspect of it?

The hard part is the marketing. I create all our brochures and pricing, but really the two facilities handle the marketing, which involves harder decision-

making than in the old days. When I was at Stratton, we would spend \$50,000 a year advertising in two places—Golf Digest and GOLF Magazine. Now there are so many places to advertise that it becomes very difficult.

As teachers, how well would you say we do on the marketing side?

As with any group, I would say that some are skilled at it and some aren't. Personally I am not into Facebook or social media generally. I let the people at the club handle it, I really don't have the time.

Are we in peril now of becoming better promoters than teachers?

I don't think any more so than in the past. Look at Mike Adams. Mike doesn't use any social media and his lesson book is packed, all through word of mouth. So, any instructor should ask himself or herself: "Can I fill my book using just word of mouth?"

In the past you managed numerous instructors, how many are you managing in Tahoe?

It is a smaller operation, just a couple of guys. When we have a corporate group I bring in a few other instructors. We have two courses and there are probably 10 instructors on property, so there are always guys around to help out. I have gotten to a point where it is mainly golf schools that I specialize in—very few one-on-one lessons. So, we have it well organized.

Mainly group instruction—that's interesting. What is that like?

First, I love group instruction. The challenge of working with four or five people at the same time gets me going. We get to teach them every shot in the book, where with individual lessons, instructors tend to stay on the range and work on full swing. For example, we have each student fill out a questionnaire. In that questionnaire a student may well say that putting is the worst part of their game. For some reason, they go and schedule a full swing one-on-one lesson. If they

“Two action areas for 2016: The first is a trend towards families, using increased junior clinics—six of them a week. Also we will do three-day junior camps—three of them over the course of the season. The second new wrinkle is a putting assessment / test. I am using data from Strokes Gained Putting and ShotLink to create the assessment.”

— Keith Lyford

attend our golf schools, putting and all aspects will be addressed.

What kind of information do they leave with?

We send them a video lesson from our V1 4-Camera System. I actually let a week go by before I send them the lesson. By waiting a week, it makes it seem to them that they are getting a second lesson a week later. In other words, they received the first lesson when they were on property and the second lesson on this video follow-up.

Based on this conversation it sounds like you spend a lot of time on the golf course teaching. Is that the case?

We do. And things can change dramatically when we take them from the lesson tee to the course. Jim Flick used to take players right to the golf course.

What do you work on in particular, out there when you're out on the golf course?

We work on the pre-shot, around the greens, less technique and more about scoring. As instructors we don't do it enough. In our golf school surveys on-course instruction is the customers' most common request. I believe the targets mean more to people, on the course.

What are you doing new for 2016?

Two action areas for 2016: The first is a trend towards families. We have full-family lessons, parents and kids together. The second new wrinkle is a putting assessment / test. I am using data from Strokes Gained Putting and ShotLink to create the assessment.

What are some things we need to get better at as instructors?

My primary goal is improving the student's ball flight as quickly as possible, I think too many instructors focus on the body motion instead of ball flight. It is important for me and the instructors who work for me to keep that priority in mind. **PG**

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