

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

Watching a Top Teacher Teach – There’s More to it Than You Think

By David Gould, Staff Editor

When asked to describe the craft of coaching, golf instructors use phrases like “tools in the toolbox” or “arrows in the quiver.” Veteran coaches want as many ways as they can get to make good decisions and communicate effectively to students. This may involve interpreting divot shapes and the sound of ball-club impact, then guiding the golfer along with just the right techniques and language for that moment.

An ideal way to learn this challenging craft is to go on-site and watch a talented coach draw upon decades of experience as they work with students. Proponent Group members certainly know to do this, but since there’s a lot of time and energy involved it’s worth examining best practices and protocols for the observation process. The goal would be to accomplish as much as possible and show true professionalism in how you go about it.

A good start is to realize that this activity is all about relationships. The most important one is between the coach you’re observing and the student he or she is working with. For the observer, it’s hard to go wrong if your top priority is studying that interplay and strictly avoiding any behavior that might put a strain on it. Proponent Group member Tiffany Faucette, lead instructor at 1757 Golf Club in Dulles, Va., welcomes instructors who request observation time but she schedules it carefully. On a day when her book is full, a visiting teacher would have lots to see and learn, but Faucette probably won’t extend an invitation in that circumstance.

“On an eight- or nine-lesson day, it takes all your focus to do right by the students,” she says. “Part of that is staying tuned in to their comfort level. Naturally the student has to agree that having an observer is okay, and they will typically want to say yes, because they see the value of it. So they’ll tell you it won’t make them nervous even if it probably will.”

Even trickier, she points out, is the lesson with a student who feels fine about having someone watch but changes



Jim Flick and other top teachers have passed their techniques along willingly to the next generation.

their mind mid-lesson when they start missing shots or struggling with a drill. In situations like that the observing coach may have to vacate the tee, and should not need more than a quick signal to make themselves scarce.

As logical as that sounds, some coaches will actually reverse the situation. John Dunigan, a Proponent member who teaches at White Manor Country Club in Malvern, Pa., describes just such a scenario. With a young instructor observing in the normal, fly-on-the-wall manner, Dunigan’s student will start repeating an improved and effective pass at the ball, producing desired ball flight. “At that point I might wave the visiting teacher over and tell my student that we need to show this off to our observer,” explains Dunigan. “I’ll say, ‘OK, we’re both watching, let’s see some real good ones.’ Can the student do that with a little bit of created pressure? That’s something that both the golfer and the coach need to find out.”

All the coaches interviewed for this article talked about mid-lesson decision-making on the coach’s part, and why a certain drill, swing thought or test club from the fitting cart gets selected at a given point. To a great

degree, this is what visiting observers ask about later—it’s also what the master coaches expect them to bring up. Dunigan calls this the coach’s “thought tree,” a complex set of limbs and branches representing the various points when one or more path could be taken to optimize the golfer’s progress. There are no two alike, and comparing notes on these thought patterns is endlessly intriguing.

Virgil Herring echoes that concept in describing his observed lessons. A Proponent Group member who serves as director of instruction at Westhaven Golf Club in Nashville, Tenn., he enjoys the give-and-take that a curious young teacher will spark. “One coach will decide to focus on path, the other would have focused on face angle—that’s what helps make it interesting,” Herring says.

An issue he considers relevant to the observation process is whether or not the mentor coach should do more ‘nar-

rating' of the process, to enrich the experience for the observer. "I teach mostly low-handicap players, so that works out well for the teacher watching," says Herring. "The student wants me to describe what's going on, the various details of cause and effect. They're curious, the teacher watching is curious, we're all curious, so I'll relate what I think is happening as we go along." Herring goes on to say that, with a higher-handicap student, that is generally not so advisable.

As stated above, the essence of these observation arrangements is relationships—which includes the one you can build with a coach whom you spend time observing. If it clicks, things could progress to a scenario like the one described by Corey Badger, a Salt Lake City-based Proponent Group coach. Badger had an extended visit from a younger instructor last winter that went well. That instructor earned the okay to bring his own lessons into the facility, at a fee less than the standard \$40 per hour for this privilege. "Part of the benefit to me is that I've got another teacher to cover events like corporate clinics and demo days," notes Badger.



Hall of Fame instructor Bob Toski has mentored hundreds of teachers.

There is even a trans-Atlantic version of this, as Proponent member Kenny Nairn prepares to welcome an assistant sent west for the winter by fellow member Russell Warner, from his base at Golfclub Heidental in Zurich, Switzerland. While Nairn splits his time between teaching and multi-course management for Celebration Golf, this mentoring job will be all about instruction. "Russell's assistant is going to learn all he can about my approach, and use a lot of it as a basis for the master's thesis he's writing," says Nairn. Clearly not every observation visit will lead to

a fuller partnership, but the possibility of a long-term relationship is always a consideration.

And, as Tiffany Faucette points out, there is another obvious way of establishing one of these relationships—go online to the veteran coach's scheduler, book a lesson for yourself, show up with clubs and pay the fee just like any other student. "It's a different interaction than watching a lesson, but there are probably times when it's the best learning experience," Faucette says. "For a teacher, there's always something to be gained by putting yourself directly in the role of student."

Do's and Don'ts When "Shadowing"

Many professions employ the term "shadowing" to describe on-the-job observation by someone who is newer to the field. As this practice has gained popularity, a set of dos and don'ts for going about it has emerged. For the would-be shadower, that guidance includes the following:

- Treat an observation session like a paying job: You aren't receiving wages for your shadow workday, but it's good to act as though you are. Show up on time or even a bit early. Think about what you wear and make a good appearance. Be your regular pleasant self but keep an edge of seriousness to your demeanor.
- Help out, as the need arises: You won't be driving the picker or scrubbing clubs all day, but when the instructor you're observing gets low on golf balls, duck away for a moment to replenish the supply.
- Take notes—the old-fashioned way: Questions will arise as a lesson unfolds—write them down in your trusty notebook. Be ready to present them to the master instructor in logical order without struggling to recall them. Other than hand notes, you probably can't and shouldn't record the proceedings. Sometimes it's okay to take a still photo of a training station, set up a certain way. Otherwise you need to honor the student's boundaries and privacy by keeping all cameras stowed.
- Choose the right person to observe: In the business world this usually means don't spend the day with a public-relations executive when your chosen career path is marketing. With golf instruction, you basically can't go wrong if the coach you're observing is skilled and experienced. However, from Proponent member Kenny Nairn, we get a nugget of very good advice. "Assuming your basic teaching skills are established," says Nairn, "observe a certain teacher because they've got mastery in an area you wish to shore up. So, if you don't use teaching aids very skillfully, spend a day or two with Martin Hall. If you don't know how teaching and clubfitting complement each other, you could come watch me, and I'll share my particular expertise in that area."
- Use the Proponent Group website to identify and contact coaches with special expertise: There is something to be learned just by clicking open the Member Mentors tab on the website and studying the craft-of-teaching section. It's so extensive that it now needs two sub-headings, "Specialized Teaching Programs" and "Teaching Technology." Under those two headings there are 26 separate specialty areas, from "Long-term Coaching Programs" and "3D Motion Analysis" to "Motor Learning" and "Teaching Competitive Juniors."
- Do the proper follow-up: A handwritten note is certainly appropriate, thanking the teacher you observed for their help and collegiality. Someday you will be in their position, as the mentor—you might make it clear you intend to do your part when the time comes. That's probably what matters most to the mentor.