

## Tell Me Something I Don't Know

# DR. BOB CHRISTINA: ONE OF GOLF'S TOP RESEARCHERS, KEEPS TESTING THEORIES

by David Gould, Staff Editor

On a visit to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), you will find the one-time Dean of the School of Health and Human Sciences and Professor of Kinesiology currently filling a more modest role. Dr. Bob Christina, whose credits as a scientist in the study of golf performance are too lengthy to fully cover in this article, serves as an assistant coach of the UNCG men's golf team. Despite appearing to be overqualified for the job, Christina nonetheless finds it demanding.

"What sort of coaching can we provide," he asks, "that will lead to the best competitive performances for these young athletes, who are all so different from each other?"

Dr. Bob was a pioneer in the movement to change how golfers practice, publishing articles in the very early 2000s that discussed block, random and variable formats, among other nuances. "At this point with our UNCG players, block practice is very limited," he says. "If we find them hitting the same shot repeatedly, we're going to ask them to describe the specific mechanics they're working on, and they better have an answer for us."

The state of the art of golf instruction, in his view, is notches above where it was a generation ago, when Christina first consulted with GOLF Magazine on its Top 100 Teachers program. "The very good teachers are capable of improving the skills of just about anyone who is willing to practice," he says.

The big qualifier to that statement, he would suggest, involves what happens in competition with those newly refined ball-striking and scoring-shot skills. "How much of it carries over, is the question," Christina says. Might the answer lie in how competitive or pressurized a practice environment you establish?

"A player whose driving accuracy improves by 30 percent on the range," says Bob, "plays three tournaments and you find that his driving accuracy in those competitions improves by 15 percent—where is that on the scale of what you expect or what you consider possible?" In studying this question, instructors might ask how competitive and how gamefied the



Dr. Bob Christina (right) strokes a putt under the watchful eye of Proponent member Eric Alpenfels.

player's practice sessions are. "Can you simulate competitive conditions 100 percent? Probably not," says Christina. "At UNCG, we encourage one-on-one competitions along the range, similar to 'horse' in basketball—you call the shot, do your pre-shot routine, execute, and if you're successful I have to match it or I'm one-down in an 18-shot match. That might be 30 percent simulation—it really does put some heat on."

Many of Dr. Bob's research projects are co-conducted with Proponent Group member Eric Alpenfels, director of instruction at Pinehurst Resort. Recently they have been studying "aim small, miss small" as a target-selection strategy for golfers. "It's a concept that began in the shooting sports and was popularized by the movie, 'The Patriot,'" says Christina. "In golf it's associated with Jordan Spieth and lately it's been getting more attention from golf coaches."

If you haven't employed the aim-small, miss-small approach (ASMS) as a means of tightening dispersion patterns, Christina is not encouraging you to hurry and do so. "We couldn't find scientific evidence proving its value," says Dr. Bob. "In some driver-accuracy testing we did ourselves, we found that the opposite happened—golfers who created fairway-wide targets for themselves hit more shots down the middle than golfers who picked a narrow target down the middle—they also hit longer drives than the other group hit."

His interpretation is that golfers with bigger targets are "more freed up in their motion" than small-target players. "Think about shooting sports—your goal is to eliminate motion in everything but the trigger squeeze," says Christina. "Golf, by contrast, requires a full, flowing movement of the entire body."

Christina enjoys the part of the job that involves working with his players' swing coaches back home. "We know and work with each of their swing coaches," says Dr. Bob. "It requires an investment of time, but it's absolutely worth it." Even if a college coach wants to take over as swing coach to a recruited player, it likely wouldn't work, in Christina's estimation. **PG**