

Tell Me Something I Don't Know

JOHN KELLEY, CEO OF COACHUP

By David Gould, Staff Editor

The logic behind CoachUp is well known to any Proponent Group member: "If you enjoy an activity that involves a skill, you'll want to get better at it so you can enjoy the activity even more"—that's the core concept of the four-year-old Boston-based company, as expressed by its CEO, John Kelley.

California-bred and Harvard-educated, Kelley is a marketing specialist with a shiny corporate resume who took over as chief executive two years ago when CoachUp was still a startup. Under his watch the company has enjoyed double- and triple-digit revenue growth and spread its operation into all 50 U.S. states. Endorsement deals carved out with Steph Curry and Julian Edelman have boosted awareness and helped tell the company's story. Meanwhile, Kelley is also a CoachUp customer, working with two coaches of his own. One is for golf and one is for distance running, the two activities he wants to get better at.

He has a second core belief that guides his strategic planning, not about students but about those who teach them: "No matter what the sport is, coaches just want to coach," says Kelley. "Very few of them take pleasure in the administrative or marketing aspects of the process."

The basic CoachUp mission is handling those tasks for the 20,000-plus coaches registered on the company's website (to apply you need to have played your sport collegiately or professionally, or coached at the high school level). "Half our business is basketball and soccer," says Kelley, "and 80 percent of our lessons are booked by a parent on behalf of their kid," with the typical age range of the kid being grade 6 through grade 10 or 11. Individual sports like golf or tennis certainly aren't the company's sweet spot, ranking way down below baseball, lacrosse, track-and-field and volleyball in CoachUp's revenue sheet.

"Even though golf is a small part of our business, we would love to have more golf instructors register with us," comments Kelley, who values his own weekly golf training in part because it helps him see first-hand how a skilled coach handles technology and the stream of data it kicks out.

"Golf instruction has been an early adopter of 'teaching tech,' which means golf coaches have been thinking for a long time about how to interpret the data technology generates, and how to talk about it to the golfer in an understandable way," he points out. "We're going to need to help our coaches do that in all these other sports."



John Kelley (left) with NBA star Steph Curry

Among the products in this category that he's impressed with, the wearable tech company Whoop is probably tops. Although it resembles a FitBit or an Apple Watch, the Whoop device is billed as much more big-picture in its data collection and interpretation, applying predictive analytics so that teams and individuals can better understand their bodies and how they recover after a hard game or workout. "No one was thinking about rest and recovery, which is a big factor in performance, so Whoop went and tackled that piece of it," says Kelley admiringly.

The golf instruction industry might take note of Kelley's keen interest in the business models of organizations like Crossfit, November Project and Class Pass. These emerging companies sell their expertise and programming, which a student experiences in a fitness facility that some third party has built and manages. Or, they simply sell the freedom to take fitness, yoga and exercise-dance classes at studios all over town, or all over the U.S. and Canada.

Indeed, managers of CrossFit and Class Pass refer to the gyms and studios where their customers take classes or do workouts as "boxes"—these facilities are overbuilt and have excess capacity, so in comes a new concept based on the notion that "people want to be taught and motivated by experts" in sports and fitness. They also want to avoid boredom in their training, as well as find ways to make it more social. "Someone who spends half her life on a stationary bike in one gym, wearing headphones, suddenly finds herself in a cardio boxing class," Kelley suggests. "That flexibility and spontaneity has a lot of consumer appeal."

People who like to stay fit and play sports "look over the fence," he says, at other sports they lack an entree to—cardio boxing and golf would be two fine examples. Companies like CrossFit and ClassPass send a message that says we'll-provide-the-entree, and make it so you feel entitled to at least try the activity.

Through his capital-raising activities Kelley has become friendly with an investor in Topgolf, and from that has pursued a potential partnership. "Just to be associated with an organization that has harnessed the power of fun and enjoyment golf offers, even to new players, is exciting," he says. "We all loved to play games and sports when we were kids—but I'd say most people who quit playing sports do so because it isn't fun anymore." True enough—and we'll take heed of that reminder every time. **PG**