

**“TELL ME SOMETHING I DON’T KNOW”**

## IN PHILADELPHIA, SEAN PALMER RUNS THE-CLUB-THAT-TEACHING-BUILT

By David Gould, *Staff Editor*

John Doe is a lapsed golfer but the game appeals to him. The city club he belongs to in Philadelphia decides to buy a local country club, which is creaking along with a membership that’s two-thirds empty. Suddenly there’s a vast pool to recruit from—thousands of affluent people who belong to the 165-year-old city club, though not to any golf club. For most of these folks, the first tee is foreign terrain. *Let’s quickly teach them*, someone suggests—and the “quickly” part gets addressed by offering instruction at no charge. This plan works like a charm, leading the organization—The Union League of Philadelphia—to

go out and buy a second golf property, with full intent to use no-charge coaching as a membership-builder there, as well. Along with dues, members pay \$10 a round into a pool, from which instructors receive a portion as part of their compensation.

Acquired in 2014, the Torresdale Frankfort Country Club is now Union League Golf Club of Torresdale, with former Merion assistant Sean Palmer as director of golf. Palmer also oversees



The Union League of Philadelphia uses no-charge coaching as a membership-builder. Along with dues, members pay \$10 a round into a pool, from which instructors receive a portion as part of their compensation. Top photo: Sean Palmer



**Former Merion assistant Sean Palmer (second from right) is director of golf at the two Union League golf clubs, the original Torresdale facility and now Sand Barrens in New Jersey.**

the former Sand Barrens course on the New Jersey shore (27 holes by Hurdzan-Fry) rebranded as Union League National Golf Club. Palmer is on the record saying that “complimentary lessons allow a friction-free approach to learning the game.” He’s also reported that, in a single season, 11 different Union League golfers who had never broken 100 shot 85 or better. Having the proper golf gear is certainly helping these new and returning players make decent swings. Give credit to a juggernaut clubfitting program that last year made ULGC Torresdale No. 1 in hardgoods sales among Philly’s private clubs.

The DNA of Proponent Group is about top golf instructors getting highly compensated for what they do, but experiments in player development that use teaching as the core will catch our interest every time. Proponent also searches constantly for data showing comparative “spend-per-golfer” between those who get coaching and those who don’t. The Union League’s top executive, Jeff McFadden, is no stranger to this concept—he told a trade journal that “for every dollar we give up in instruction revenue we take in \$7 from a satisfied, better-playing golfer.”

Curiosity for further details prompted a recent phone call to Palmer, who gladly fielded questions on

The Union League’s new golf division and its sudden prominence in the field of teaching and coaching. Here’s how that discussion went.

**Your organization bought a struggling club in 2014 and all reports say you hit a home run with it. How are you measuring success there?**

Golf memberships at the original club were around 115 when we came in. They rose at a fast clip, to our max of 450. At that point we established a waiting list. Retention is high, attrition is very low. If you’re a full golf member you’re entitled to one free lesson or clinic a week. Last year we gave 2,000 private lessons. The club’s revenue went from \$2.5 million in 2014 to \$6.5 million in 2017. People are happy.

**You’re not starting with raw beginners in every case, right?**

We did a survey and found that 60 percent of our city club members had played golf in the past, or are involved with golf currently. But the approach we use works just fine with absolute beginners. This afternoon I was teaching a guy who is a poster child for what we’re doing. He had never played and within

one year of joining the club he shot an 87. Now he breaks 80 regularly.

**Maybe the guy is a natural, and you got lucky?**

This gentleman is not an athlete. He's in management and works long hours. His two sons are always here with him, playing golf, which is a big motivator for him. But if he were at a traditional high-end Philadelphia golf club he could never have done what he did here.

**You worked at one of those great clubs, Merion. How would you compare the two situations?**

It's a totally different model. The fact that we don't charge for lessons resonates with people, but not having to pay—pay directly, that is—might only be part of it. What seems to matter is that taking lessons and learning and practicing and getting better are the regular thing, for members here. You're completely normal if you do it.

**That's certainly not the typical club culture when it comes to instruction. But coverage must be demanding, right?**

Of course we need a big professional staff, but once you have a lot of teachers, and the model isn't telling you that Teacher A has a student Teacher B can't work with, everything becomes fluid. You can do whatever's best to turn a person with no clue into someone who can make bogeys and a couple pars and get around the golf course. If I don't gel with a student pretty quickly, there are six other teaching pros and one of them is probably perfect for that student. So, we switch off, when it's indicated.

**What does all this look like—the process and what you're able to accomplish?**

Lessons are set up to run from a half hour to an hour, but you become good at noticing when the points you've made are sinking in and the session can end. I have what I call checkups with people that could last 15 minutes, because what I showed them last time has clicked and they have what they need for the time being.

**Apparently you also work with golfers as they come off the course?**

All the time. When a player walks off 18 shaking their head we'll get with them on the range right away and

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**— Sean Palmer**

straighten things out. Approaching it our way, you are going to improve as an instructor. You'll help more people, faster. I know I have.

**Your clubfitting program gets a lot of attention. With customfitting, it's easy to build half sets for a newer golfer, or just sell the person three or four clubs to get them going. Is that type of approach common at Union League Torresdale?**

It really isn't. With a woman student who is first coming to us it might happen, but generally there's no need for that. People aren't taking a halfway approach—they're buying the whole set. It's part of their overall commitment and wanting to be all in. We have “Fitting Saturday” every week in season, with every major vendor represented. Last year our golf shop

did over \$1 million in sales.

**Along with financial compensation, job satisfaction does matter to a dedicated teacher. Sounds like you do well in that area.**

It's a solid team of professionals that we've put together, for sure. They're motivated. In part that's because we're able to pay a little higher than market rate for salary, and partly it's the working environment. We have a drug, which we call golf. We're drug dealers. Only, with this drug, your health doesn't deteriorate, it improves.

**Who came up with this concept?**

It was Jeff McFadden's idea—he's the GM and chief operating officer of the organization. We were starting from scratch with our golf program and there were lots of us saying “wouldn't it be great if we did this, or if we did that.” So, we were ready to experiment. You need to, in today's golf market.

**Your concept is bold, but it's also simple. Could the idea catch on like wildfire?**

It's hard to say. I probably get three calls a week from people who are looking for information and giving thought to trying what we've done. So that tells you something. But my guess is that it would be quite difficult to do this at a traditional, long-established club. It would depend on how committed a club could be about going in a new direction. You would definitely need golf professionals who were ready and willing to lead the way. **PG**