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When Destinations and Coaching Come Together Teaching + Travel: Ideal Combo for Instructors?

By David Gould, Staff Editor

Attitude surveys keep making the point that golfers play less because they lack leisure time. “Too expensive” and “too frustrating” are also cited as reasons, but the time constraint is a nearly universal problem. That’s why there’s magic in the air when golfers cut loose from the daily grind and “go with the pro” on a multi-course tour someplace far away. The amateur who’s enjoyed one of these trips quite typically says yes when the next invitation arrives.

Lately, a twist on this concept has emerged: The ideal person to lead golfers on memory-making trips is their teacher and coach. Not that there’s anything so wrong with having a head of golf operations lead the way, as traditionally has been the case. It’s just that, with so much golf to be played, and in venues where every amateur yearns to be hitting it well and scoring well, the swing-doctoring, head-shrinking, coach-who-knows-my-game is a logical first choice to lead the expedition.

If you think about it, when the golf director with heavy management duties finally settles into the luxury coach with seven club members, it almost always prompts him or her to say something like, “This is great, because I don’t usually get to spend a lot of quality one-on-one time with my members.” Well, if that’s the case, it could easily mean the D of G won’t recognize Charlie’s swing hitch or know how to get Mr. Johnson to stop hitting hosel rockets during warm-ups with one simple reminder.

More to the point, a teaching-coaching specialist has the type of schedule and job description that lends itself more readily to travel than a head pro’s schedule ever could. In a recent Edufi forum seeking Proponent member comments about trip-taking, Brandon Stooksbury, director of instruction at the Idle Hour Club in Macon, Ga., underscored this point. “I just returned from a trip to Whistling Straits with 11 students and members,” Stooksbury wrote. “I usually try to schedule at least one two-day and one week-long trip each year.” Think about a director of golf taking a regular mid-season trip for getaway golf—it’s simply not in the cards.

Renee Trudeau, a Proponent Group member in Coral Gables, Fla., exploits her scheduling advantage eagerly. “As an instructor, I’ve got more freedom and flexibility to plan out trips and go traveling with golfers,” says Trudeau, who has made



Main photo: Derek Hooper with 15 of his students playing golf and having fun at Sea Island and (inset) Brandon Stooksbury with his students at Whistling Straights.

touring British, Irish and European golf regions a profitable specialty. “We coaches also have the kind of relationships with clients that allows us to reassure any hesitant folks that they’ll be taken care of and really enjoy themselves,” she asserts.

Female golfing travelers are Renee’s sweet-spot clientele. And despite all the golf her travel clients play, the social and sightseeing element are usually top priority. “Women golfers eventually wake up and say, ‘Hey, men get to go on all these golf trips—wouldn’t I want to let someone else look after the kids and the house and go tee it up somewhere beautiful?’”

Brad Redding does an annual getaway that is very much the province of a dedicated instructor. Redding takes students from his International Club base near Myrtle Beach for some pre-season prep in Florida. “I take students down to PGA Village in Port St Lucie in February and March to get their games ready for spring,” says the longtime Proponent member. “The trip is four days, consisting of golf in the morning and three hours of instruction in the afternoon.”

Redding’s concept stands out for a couple of reasons. One is that the format of afternoon instruction naturally includes plenty of supervised practice, an element of game-improvement that has risen in perceived value. Meanwhile the morning 18 can act as a playing lesson with focus on decision-making—another hot topic in teaching. The second notable aspect of this trip is the spring-training paradigm it borrows from baseball—the male athletic psyche is completely com-

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comfortable with the logic of this idea.

Rob Stocke, a Proponent Group member from the Golf Club of Georgia in suburban Atlanta, views travel and touring as the ultimate connection with golfers. “No matter how much time you spend teaching lessons or in the shop,” Stocke maintains, “nothing compares to spending time with members during a golf trip.” Named the 2012 Teacher of the Year for his Georgia PGA chapter, Stocke “gets it” that amateur golfers bask in the double dose of personal attention travel provides. The person in charge of the trip is coaching that golfer and acting as their travel guide at the same time. It’s a powerful service combo.

Stocke recently put together a best-practices message for PGA Magazine’s email program that identified go-with-the-pro golf trips as the ideal way to promote clubfitting. “Travel gives you a great chance to explain clubfitting a bit and build that business,” Rob pointed out. He pays attention to patterns that emerge as he watches an individual play for several consecutive days, and makes mental notes when it seems clear that ill-fitted clubs are fouling that person up.

“As with swing changes, I don’t get into the details while we’re in the middle of a trip,” Stocke explains. “Instead, I’ll wait until the end and tell them to come see me when we get home and I’ll take a look at their clubs to see if there’s any room for improvement.”

One important exception to that rule involves the many adjustable drivers and fairway woods in peoples’ bags these days. “I can use my expertise as a clubfitter to tweak the settings to help them improve their ball flight if they’re struggling



Ryder Cup-type events are always a big hit when traveling.

off the tee,” says Stocke. That’s a great example of an under-utilized gear feature getting exploited because of not just expertise but the luxury of extended interaction time.

Eujone Kim, a Proponent member at the Golf Performance Center at The Woodlands CC, outside Houston, uses clubfitting and the “gearhead” angle on his golf travel expeditions, as well. Kim and a fellow pro take an annual trip west for golf in and around Scottsdale plus personalized clubfitting at the PING headquarters and take a walk through the glittering collection of gilded putters in the PING Gold Vault, considered “the Fort Knox of the golf industry” for its 2,800-plus commemorative putters engraved and gleaming on their racks.

Five Tips for the Travel-Promoting Professional

1) Decide Whether You Can You Handle Trip Arrangements Yourself: It’s a nice addition to a professional’s skill set to be able to organize trips abroad. However, going that route is iffy when the destination is unfamiliar to you. Other reasons to possibly hire a tour operator include: Going with a very large group; trying for tough-ticket courses like Royal County Down, Muirfield or the Old Course at St. Andrews; traveling to a destination that’s hosting an event like the Ryder Cup; or, expecting to cover an extremely large region, especially using boats and/or shuttle flights.

2) Consider Mixing Game-Improving Trips with Pure-Pleasure Trips: You may find there are two separate travel markets among your instruction clientele—those who want to get away for extra coaching and practice and those who want to play great courses at a famed destination with basically zero skill-building activities.

3) Keep a Notebook with Your Observations of How Travelers Played: With multiple days in which to study your amateur travel mates, you’ll be able to address skill areas, strategy problems or issues with equipment that may not

show up in the normal course of club activity back home. At the right time, you can bring these points up and suggest solutions. It’s a chance to deepen the teacher-student relationship and even encourage more travel participation by that student in the future.

4) The Longer the Trip, the More the Personalities Need to Mesh: Experienced travel planner Renee Trudeau believes that golf-intense trips with an all-male clientele have a different dynamic than trips skewed toward women golfers and couples. Especially if the trip is going to be over five days, she makes a serious effort to recruit compatible people and, when that’s not fully possible, to create pairings that create a good match of personalities on the course.

5) Decide If This is More a Work Duty for You, or More a Vacation: As Derek Hooper points out, his autumn golf journeys with longtime students don’t require much of him once they’re underway, so he comes back refreshed and rested. Every hardworking instructor needs a break like that, so if you’re the type who has trouble relaxing, book yourself some time off once the trip is over. – D.G.

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Derek Hooper, who runs the Lake of Isles Golf Academy connected to the Foxwoods Resort in Connecticut, feels the coach-student relationship builds bonds, and those bonds make the annual golf trip particularly warm and rewarding. “On the trip I put together, it’s all about playing golf, competing in a casual way and having a good time,” says Hooper.

“The guys on the trip appreciate the fact that I teach all year and don’t get much chance

to play, so they treat me like anybody else on the trip.” Mid-October is the timeframe for Hooper’s trip, which has selected Sea Island, Ponte Vedra Beach, Pinehurst and this year the Dominican Republic destination of Punta Cana. Thursday through Sunday is the itinerary, with 18 holes on the two travel days, 36 on Friday and 18 on Saturday, to prevent excessive fatigue. “Saturday we walk with caddies, and play the premier course, such as Pinehurst No. 2, so that’s our course-design appreciation day,” he says. And his Lake of Isles director of golf is part of the 16-player traveling party, as well—that’s a good bonding opportunity for two key golf managers of the resort.

Trillium Rose enjoys a similar peer-to-peer benefit, having been part of a trip that her director of golf at Woodmont Country Club, in Rockville, Md., organized for 27 women golfers to the Dominican. On her own this month Rose is scheduled to bring a group of women for golf at a notorious guys’-trip favorite, Bandon Dunes on the Oregon coastline.

Trips within the U.S. to one or two resorts aren’t usually a logistical challenge—the golf professional in charge will typically handle arrangements without difficulty. Journeys abroad, with larger numbers of paying amateurs, will raise the question of working with a tour operator. [See sidebar about self-planning versus using tour companies]. Chris Holmes is a Proponent Group member in charge of golf instruction at Heathrow (Fla.) Country Club, and a British-born keen traveler who brings members on trips regularly. This month he’ll be taking a dozen or so Floridians to play Royal Lytham, Royal Liverpool and Royal Birkdale, with side trips to jewels like Formby and Hillside, which are also part of “England’s Golf Coast,” as the tour books call it.

Holmes is such a veteran trip planner and tour conductor that on a recent trip he actually opted to drive the 17-seat minicoach that would carry the golfing party throughout the Scottish Highlands from links to links. “If you want to be on the



Group trips overseas can create memories and bonds that last a lifetime.

receiving end of ceaseless good-natured tormenting,” he says, “volunteer to drive the coach on a guys’ golf trip.” Chris earns some profit from his trips, only fitting giving the amount of planning and trans-Atlantic communicating they involve. He firmly believes that the typical country club has no stronger member-retention tool than the rollicking, links-roaming golf tour conducted by a club professional.

“If you’re in our Heathrow clubhouse and notice something that looks like a homemade coffee-table book, it’s our photo album from trips to Britain and Ireland for golf,” he says. “For a director of instruction, it’s terrific to do these trips with the people you teach. It creates such strong camaraderie among the travelers that it really boosts morale throughout the club.”

Elizabeth Granahan’s G2 Golf company, based outside Philadelphia, is another instruction-based enterprise that balances travel with coaching in a dynamic way. Along with partner Michele Gajderowicz, Granahan has gone to places as far off the normal golf itineraries as Iceland. They are proof that, at a certain level of interest and dedication, a golf specialist can branch so far into travel as to legitimately make it a business center within their overall golf enterprise.

One trip the longtime Proponent Group member particularly likes is her winter foray to the Tommy Thomas Barona Pro-Am. This event, held at Barona Creek Golf Club just outside San Diego, gives G2 the chance “to treat our students to a week of magnificent weather, fantastic golf, delicious food and lots of fun,” Granahan says. “Over the past three years, we’ve taken 12 or 13 teams out to play and virtually all have returned as better, more committed students and even better friends.”

That’s quite a desirable outcome—from an activity that, in and of itself, was filled with pleasure for the hard-working instructor.

As we continue looking at coaching and travel, it’s worth remembering the analytics showing that lesson-taking members spend more time and money at the club than non-lesson-takers. When you do your half-year and end-of-year activity reviews, try cross-matching the golfers who are involved with instruction with those who have gone golf-trekking with you. Quite possibly you’ll find that the travel spend is yet another category in which lesson-takers show up more prominently than other members.