

## TEACHING BUILDINGS

### *Inside the Coaches' Studios*

# Academy Building Sampler: Three Distinct Looks

By David Gould, Staff Editor

When golf came to America and curious businessmen took up the game, their expert guides were Scottish immigrants who built clubs and taught lessons. Being humble tradesmen, these pros couldn't venture inside the clubhouse. They were confined to outbuildings found alongside simple practice grounds. Thanks to Walter Hagen's prodding and a change in social attitudes, clubhouses would eventually include a golf shop plus office and work space for the pro.

And now a century later you could say we have come full circle. The clubhouse golf shop does still handle golf retailing and administration. However, golf expertise covering the swing and the equipment is again headquartered in separate, dedicated buildings. Slowly at first, but now at a fast clip, clubs from coast to coast are planning, designing and building impressive structures with hitting bays, coaching technology, clubfitting gear, fitness space and a few creature comforts to enhance the learning experience.

As we go through 2015, Proponent Group will be taking a few pages in the monthly newsletter to spotlight teaching buildings from the member website's extensive photo archive. Next month we'll also include a bonus article from Tim Cutshall. Many of you recognize Tim as a bona fide expert on teaching buildings and in particular on their infrastructure for technology.

Space won't permit us to show every angle of the three buildings we've selected. For that you can go to the Proponent member-only website and click on Member Benefits, then Business Guides, scrolling down to where you'll find the Learning Center Photo Gallery. Meanwhile, here's a sampling to spur your thoughts on new, improved, or slightly tweaked facilities you might establish for yourself.

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It's a core belief of Proponent Group that, within a given market, smart facility owners and top-rank coaches should



**Eagle Springs in Wolcott, CO is home to this tidy, one-bay teaching facility inhabited by Steve Atherton. The building cost about \$250,000 and allows members to make quick learning "pit stops" as needed.**

form alliances that benefit one and all. Scott Dirck's partnership story with **Geneva Golf Club in Alexandria, Minn.**, is a fine example of that synergy. Having developed a large following in the area, Dirck first negotiated with a course across town from Geneva G.C. on construction of an academy complex. "We went through discussions and planning for nearly three years and ran into snags at the end," Scott recalls. "I got a call from the Geneva people at the 11th hour and within a week we had an agreement signed."

The seven-bay, stone-and-clapboard result of that negotiation is The Golf Academy, offering area golfers some 4,500 square feet of weather-beating, tech-wired coaching and practice space. Opened in 2012 and representing almost a half-million-dollar investment by Dirck, it serves as a landmark amenity to semi-private, 27-hole Geneva G.C. “The course had very few golfers among our 500-plus active instruction clients and we weren’t getting much business from among their regulars, either,” says Dirck. Once the academy opened, plenty of crossover began to happen.

The operation of the academy is based on four lines of business: annual practice memberships, walk-up practitioners, instruction clients and equipment sales. Dirck sells annual Academy memberships for \$500 to non-students and for \$350 to golfers who take lessons from him. He started operations with no simulators but has since added two, basically as benefits that attract and retain members.

Year-round practice and coaching, with plenty of technology to support the process, is a strong attraction to golfers in a region known for its long, frigid winters. “The four business segments tend to feed into one another, but you have to keep on top of each one and not let it slip,” says Dirck. He is currently hiring an additional teaching pro and feels positive about the trajectory of the business. “Three years in, we’re well ahead of where I had hoped and projected us to be,” he says.

When **Sleepy Hollow Country Club** went to replace its modest old teaching building—put to great use by Jim McLean in the 1980s and ‘90s—the club took its architectural cues from a classic equestrian center and stables complex on some upland behind the clubhouse. “It’s a beautiful structure to look at,” says Kevin Sprecher, who as director of instruction at SHCC makes the 1,700-square-foot building his second home. Having worked for McLean when the latter went through design and construction of an academy building at Miami’s famed Doral Resort in 1994, Sprecher was able to help guide the planning process.

Kevin’s request for 1.5-inch wiring conduit wasn’t heeded, unfortunately, but other than some complications related to that faulty design spec the building is a pleasure to work in. Sprecher, a longtime Proponent member, “taught all winter—usually 12 to 20 hours on the weekends—which is activity for the members and revenue for me that would have been zero without the building.” One bay is “blank,” meaning it is simply climate-controlled hitting space for a member seeking relief from heat or cold. The other two bays are fully outfitted with technology. “The cost to the club was \$450,000, back in 2006-07,” says Sprecher. “If we had waited two years, until after the financial collapse when contractors were suddenly looking for work, it would have been much less.”

One other shortcoming, lack of room for a simulator, could not have been foreseen in 2006. “Now that simulators give accurate data on what the ball is doing, they’re a



Geneva Golf Club in Alexandria, Minn. is home to the Scott Dirck Golf Academy and this 4,500 square feet of weather-beating, tech-wired coaching and seven bay practice space financed by Dirck.

legitimate piece of equipment for a teaching building,” Sprecher says. “Coaches who are involved right now in planning a building might want to add that to the list.”

From the compact, hip-roofed structure where Proponent member Steve Atherton works with his **Eagle Springs** students, the golf range is vast and the mountains beyond even vaster. A Weiskopf-Morrish golf course and privileged seclusion are the principle attractions of this short-season

private club in Wolcott, Colo., some 18 miles outside of Vail. The one-man golf academy Atherton oversees cost about \$250,000 to build, he says, and its design is quite sound. “I added a second 22-inch monitor at about knee height and left of the target, so players could see what I’m pointing to or telescating without getting out of their stance,” he notes.

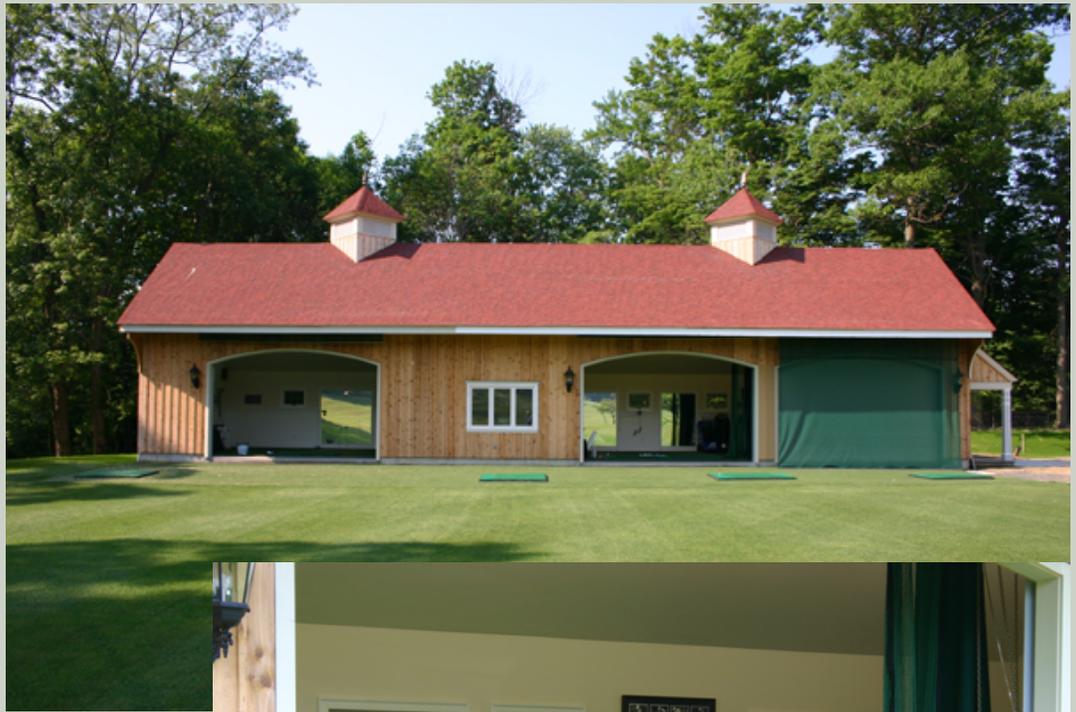
When an academy building has a small membership to serve, the single-bay approach can work well. Atherton’s got a full gamut of technology in his little learning center, nonetheless he has carved out a teaching practice that looks something like those early days of club golf in America. His members are with him for just four months a year, and their daily turnout for golf only comes to about 20 four-somes. Given those conditions, he handles swing coaching with a light hand, and without hesitation he will ride a student out to a quiet spot on the course and put theory immediately into practice.

“Teaching in this environment has simplified my approach to technical swing coaching,” says Atherton, whose golfers stop in to see him the way Indy drivers pull in to see the pit crew. Eagle Springs members enjoy their practice time, but the idea is to be out on the mountain-view fairways.

“We’ve got video, we’ve got FlightScope software and we’ve got my eye as a coach to check out what’s going on,” says Atherton. “Most of the time we can isolate a problem such as shoulder turn, head position or swing path and get going on a drill and a swing thought that will iron out the problem,” he says. “The numbers are great for driving home the point—ball speed, face angles and so forth.”

From there the member hops over to the grass tee area and hits shots, checks his alignment, checks the divots—and is ready to head back out to actually play some golf. In other cases, it’s a free-form playing lesson that comes next—two or three holes of shot-hitting that help translate the “in-studio” technical stuff to fairways and greens. Wise instructors all seem to talk about technology being a hazard because it can overcomplicate mat-

ters, whereas the real value of computer-aided teaching is to keep the process straightforward and understandable. Here’s one example where that’s truly the case.



**Sleepy Hollow C.C. in Scarborough-on-Hudson, NY includes two fully outfitted teaching bays and one “blank” bay for general member practice in its 1,700 square foot space.**