

Staying Enthusiastic About Your Own Game

ACCOMPLISHED GOLF INSTRUCTOR — AND STILL A GOLFER?

by David Gould, Staff Editor

When industry sources discuss obstacles to golf participation—especially lack of time or frustration at how difficult the game can be—do you ever hear an echo of your own inner thoughts? In other words, has playing the game become problematic? Do you think about how busy you are on the lesson tee and decide that there's no time to play 9 or 18—especially if you suspect you won't hit the ball well?

People who teach golf are expected to put out a Pied Piper-type energy, selling students on the joys of a day on the links and the satisfaction of making a few pars or perhaps that one memorable birdie. And yet that joy and satisfaction isn't always something the teacher still personally experiences, as a player. Long, draining days at the golf facility—thinking constantly about swing mechanics—can make playing the game and working on skill mastery unappealing.

In talks with Proponent Group members about their own golf games—and in reviewing a recent Proponent survey on the subject—both the enjoyment factor and the fatigue or disenchantment factor do emerge.

Proponent members who have played at a high level years ago may grapple with that age-old disappointment of not being able to replicate past brilliance. Meanwhile, members who haven't played much tournament golf on the way up may come to identify themselves as instructors and not feel a desire to master golf skills or shoot a number.

At the same time, any serious golf coach needs to competently demonstrate sound golf swings and show their students how to hit crisp approaches, solid drives, flop shots, knockdowns and the rest of the standard repertoire. That's a responsibility that calls to mind the miseries endured by Hank Haney through an extended early segment of his career. A brutal case of the driver yips haunted Haney, even as his teaching reputation soared.

Looking at the spectrum of playing patterns among instructors, Haney's case lies all the way at one end of it—from 1985 to 2002 the former NCAA Division 1 golfer avoided hitting a teed ball with anyone watching, until he was able to concoct an odd,



A few holes early in the morning or late in the afternoon will reset your personal compass, clear your head and help keep you in shape. It's a critical piece to having a long and prosperous career teaching the game that many members have gotten away from.

pre-swing contortion that broke the hex. On the the opposite end of the spectrum is a character everyone recognizes—the young assistant professional who’s assigned to handle most of the teaching at his club but instead plays so much golf he’s sent packing before the season ends.

Proponent members, based on our exclusive survey results, are a mixed assortment when it comes to their own games. The questionnaire distributed earlier this year drew 80 responses—certainly a representative sampling. Most respondents (52 among the 80 total) were members carrying the title of either “Teaching Professional” or “Director of Instruction.” There were also four head golf professionals and seven assistant pros in the mix, plus a dozen academy owners.

A Proponent member just starting out in his career, Patrick Hagenbucher, explained in follow-up interviews that he had given his own game a full overhaul last summer, fixing a power-and-distance problem that plagued him through the junior and college ranks. “I’m 20 yards longer through the bag than I was a year ago,” says Hagenbucher, a note of satisfaction in his voice. “It was a combination of technique, strength training and equipment changes.” Still only 24, he says he’s noticed that there are “some older golf professionals around who have lost the spark” to play and practice. “You start out with a passion to play the game, and as a teacher you share that passion with students,” Hagenbucher says, pinpointing a strong reason for doing what it takes to keep the flame burning.

Proponent member Gina Yoder, a 22-year veteran of the golf profession, was asked about this phenomenon on a day when she had hit the ball well while guiding a group of “boot camp” learners through a nine-hole playing lesson. One of Yoder’s intermediate women had posted a high score, and the student felt badly about it, despite having



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struck the ball well. “She needs a little help with her wedge, and she could really play,” Yoder notes. “I said to her, ‘I just wish you were as excited about your golf game as I am right now.’”

Yoder won a high school state championship in Indiana back in 1988 and played on the women’s team at Michigan State. Her training in TPI has helped her heal a back ailment that had taken away some enjoyment of the game. “I would say that if you feel good and work isn’t stressing you out, it’s easy to enjoy playing,” she says. “I had some years when I was injured and overbooked, teaching at a club and coaching a college team—it made me lose my interest in playing, but it was really just circumstances that caused that.”

Takeaways from the survey reveal a true gusto for the game among respondents, as well as what appears to be indifference. Responses that point to a continued zeal include the following:

- Of the 80 members who completed the survey, over half of them said they competed in at least one PGA section tournament in 2015.
- Asked about their playing aspirations, 26 percent said “I currently have serious goals for my own game/playing ability/competitive performance” while 51 percent said “I currently have a ‘wish list’ for my game and playing skills, but not serious goals.”
- Of the 80 respondents, 23 said: “In the past year I finished top-5 in a tournament against tough competition.” And somewhere in those 80 golfer are five who made at least one ace in 2015.
- If you work at a golf facility you can play a lot of holes without actually completing many 18-hole rounds—that being the case, the results of our question about number of 18-hole rounds played are fairly robust, showing that 51 percent played more than 20 18-hole rounds in 2015, with most of that 51 percent reporting that they played 30-plus rounds.

How to Fall Back in Love with the Game

One way to regain your enthusiasm for playing and practicing is to treat any physical ailments that might have been holding you back. Proponent member Peggy Gustafson, who splits her teaching year between Scottsdale and Anchorage, AK, feels “like a kid again” after last fall’s joint replacement surgery on her right knee. “I had forgotten what’s it like to hit the ball solidly,” she says. “This knee problem had been affecting my game for years—my trail leg wasn’t supporting me through impact.” The excuse, if that’s the right word, for not seeking help was “normal golf instructor workaholism,” according to Gustafson. “You work hurt, you work sick, you don’t question it,” she says.

Gustafson never quit playing, but she was in denial about her disappointment with full-swing results. “When I was healed up and starting to take full swings with the driver and fairway woods I had memories come flooding back—of what a flush hit and good trajectory is all about,” she admits. The process has helped Gustafson relate to students who have minor or even major orthopedic issues, a development she is glad of. Ironically, Peggy’s longtime students felt free to say previously unspoken things to her about her swing and her golf shots, once the knee problem got fixed. “They told me, ‘It was painful for us to watch you,’” says Gustafson. If that’s not proof that students notice your form and your performance as a player, we’re not sure what is.

As Proponent member Skip Guss will attest, there can be mental impediments to enjoyment of the game as well as physical ones. The former PGA Tour player is known for his deep enjoyment of golf’s challenges,



but even his friends may not realize he felt close to quitting not long ago. The problem Guss has experienced is on the greens, and it vaguely resembles putting yips, but it’s something different — “fear of making contact” with the putter face, is how he describes it. A round of golf in Florida early last year featured the only four-putt greens of Guss’s adult life—“I did that three times,” he moans. The experience caused considerable fear and dread.

Right now there appears to be viable, sustainable cure for the problem, a change of equipment to the AccuLock ACE putter from BioMech Golf. Its tilt-shafted design allows the grip to rest against the leading forearm’s inner surface—and pre-sets the stroke in a way that could seemingly do a lot to offset fear of the hit. Skip Guss’s mind-game problem on the greens wouldn’t reach the magnitude of Hank Haney’s driver yips, but they come under the same category of impediment or obstruction to enjoyment of the game—and thus the ability to teach it most effectively.

Mixed in with those data points are some others that show members putting their own golf participation on the back burner. For example:

- Just about 23 percent of survey-takers say they played 10 rounds or fewer in 2015.
- Nine percent said “I’m not interested enough in my own game to really work on it,” while 21 percent agreed with the statement: “I don’t have time to practice properly—as a result I don’t practice much at all.”
- The comment, “I really don’t spend any time thinking about my own game anymore” was checked off by 23 percent of respondents.
- Why is that Proponent members would let their own clubs gather dust? An answer can be glimpsed in the following admissions: “In the past year or two, my swing has really deserted me” was a self-description chosen by 14 percent of survey-takers, while the statement, “In the past year or two, my short game has been erratic and frustrating” was

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selected by a full 31 percent. One thinks of the comment often made by Proponent member Martin Hall: “Golf is a hard game—don’t let anybody tell you different.”

- Meanwhile, our avid and non-avid players alike showed nonchalance about carrying a GHIN card in their wallets. Of the 78 members who disclosed whether or not they “keep a current USGA handicap,” only 14 said they did while 64 said they did not—it just ain’t worth the money if you’re always playing gross-score competitions, apparently.

Along the spectrum of teaching pros who are devoted players, Henry Brunton is an interesting variation:

Brunton not only plays every week to keep up his game and stay in touch with the playing experience, he also uses 18-hole rounds with his buddies as proof he isn’t forgetting to have fun in life, to help offset all those long workdays. What a concept: Golf as a simple, enjoyable form of recreation—for the golf professional. **PG**



Your love of the game is why you do what you do. The game is patiently waiting for many of you to return.