

INSTRUCTION IN THE ERA OF FUN - FUN - FUN

A 'CHAMELEON' COACH GROWS THE GAME AND HELPS PRESERVE ITS TRADITIONS

By David Gould, *Staff Editor*

Bowling became instantly less frustrating with the invention 30 years ago of gutter bumpers. Proponent Group member Brendan Post would be happy to see a golf equivalent—he pictures two immense nets rising at the push of a button from treelines along each hole corridor.

“Obviously it’s not practical, but anything like that is fine in my book,” says Post, director of instruction at ClubGolf Performance Center in Gaithersburg, Md. “I’m at the liberal end of the spectrum when it comes to making golf easy for newer players—because you can always make it hard again.”

Back when he worked at a course that had a footgolf routing, Post would routinely have his less-experienced students play to the tub-sized footgolf holes, thus lowering the frustration factor. By all means he is fine with the new emphasis on pure fun that marks the Topgolf Era we live in.

His fellow Proponent member Karen Noble reaches out to newer players with her own assortment of make-it-easy, make-it-fun activities (she’s a big fan of the Operation 36 program developed by Matt Reagan

and Ryan Dailey) but Noble wonders whether something isn’t getting lost in the translation.

“I long for the days when more students got their introduction to golf and then got motivated to improve, play tournaments, get themselves a handicap and shoot a real score,” says Noble, the director of instruction at Fairmount Country Club in Chatham, N.J.

Some of those same feelings arise for Suellen Northrop, a Proponent member who teaches at Admirals Cove in Jupiter, Fla. Her “newbie” is often a high-powered business person who semi-retires at 45 and wants to be good at golf immediately.

“I’m at a very high-end facility but there’s still a lot of player-development work to be done, so I’ll use whatever program gets members out there playing some version of golf,” says Northrop.

“However there are times I think we might be going too far down this path. The game’s culture can change, and over time it has, which is fine, but at some point we may lose important values and not be able to get them

back.” This raises an interesting question: Is it part of an instructor’s job to help preserve the integrity of the game—however you might best define that? “It most definitely is,” replies Jeff Otto, staff instructor at the tradition-minded Lafayette Club just outside Minneapolis.

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Call it the two faces of golf—grimly serious in the name of fair competition and casually social in the name of pure enjoyment. Can today’s golf instructor balance the two extremes?



As clubs seek to create a fun, festive atmosphere at all times, can golf instructors still carry the torch of tradition?

“Golf has important traditions that teachers have always helped pass along.” In his work with junior beginners, Otto has them swing at water balloons. And he freely admits to using “Jordan Spieth’s marshmallow trick” in clinics with the youngsters. For Otto that tends to be the extent of the fun-and-games approach. “With the grownups I keep it more like regular golf,” Jeff says.

During a recent clinic on scoring strategy, Otto pointed out the wisdom of laying up on the more daunting par-3 holes. He invoked the example of Billy Casper laying up on a par-3 in all four rounds of the 1959 U.S.

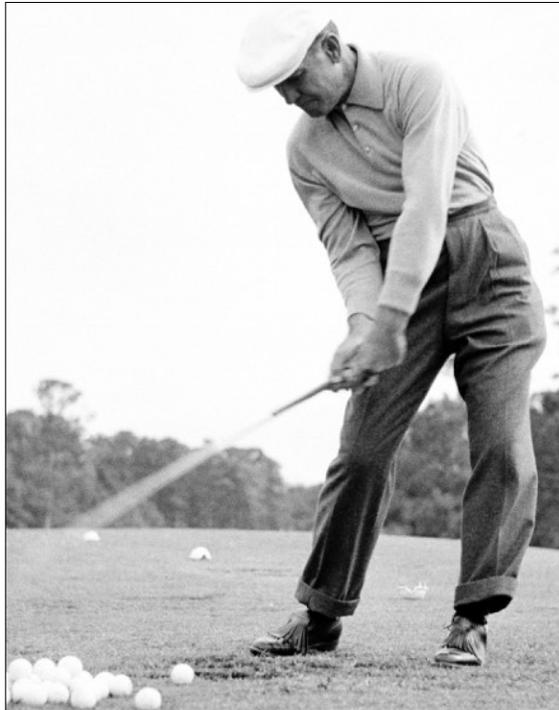
Open, making four straight pars on that hole en route to victory at Winged Foot.

“People in the clinic didn’t know what I was talking about,” says Otto, with a tinge of regret. “To me that takes away from their enjoyment of the game, not to know its history. Most 8-year-old kids who come out to try golf aren’t even sure who Tiger Woods is.”

Clubs have received good advice about being less starchy and stodgy, as they work to attract and retain members in this speeded-up, fast-changing world. But can coaches still carry the torch of tradition? As clubs seek out professionals who know how to program golf activities so that the atmosphere is always lively and festive, is it a disadvantage to be known as a serious swing teacher who works with dedicated players and urges them to practice diligently?

Dr. Jim Suttie recalls a point in his career when, victimized by his own success, he lost half the population as potential lesson-takers.

“I was motivated to help every type of golfer,” says Suttie. “I was all about seeing the looks on their faces when



we achieved results—that’s what gave me satisfaction.” In part because of his pioneering research into the biokinetics of the golf swing, tournament players flocked to Suttie. This intimidated all but a very few women golfers.

“The women would say, ‘Doc, I’ll come and work with you once I get good enough.’ That doesn’t make much sense, but it shows how much perception means in this business.”

As Karen Noble looks back on her early years as a teacher (under Mike Breed at Sunningdale G.C.

It wouldn’t work to stand on the tee advising students to practice the way Ben Hogan did, even though discipline does yield benefits. The lesson from events like the 2016 Ryder Cup, where pros like Patrick Reed mixed intensity with exuberance, is that seriousness needn’t always look joyless.

in suburban New York), she recognizes that she was expected to coach tournament players and help them win trophies. That was because she’d been a star player herself, a second-place finisher in the U.S. Women’s Amateur who went on to play the LPGA Tour for eight years, tying for second in the 1992 LPGA Championship.

“People look for certain signs that you’re a top teacher, and that includes working with elite players,” says Noble. “When I started doing this 17 years ago, I evaluated whether I was good at the job by whether I had a full lesson book,” she adds, in some ways stating the obvious. “I was interested in working with all skill levels, and in order to keep my book full I needed to do that.”

Cheryl Anderson, director of instruction at the Mike Bender Golf Academy outside Orlando, saw herself becoming, in her words, “a chameleon instructor,” able to work with every type of golfer. In Cheryl’s view that was partly because being female makes you approachable and partly because, regardless of the facts, being female blocks you from gaining a reputation as a

brilliant sculptor of the golf swing. Male coaches, many have noticed, tend to corner the market on that perception.

But never before has it been so possible to succeed as a teacher without having scratch players among your
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stable of students. That's good news to any golf instructor who finds it onerous or intimidating to coach the player who—out of necessity—will behave like a prima donna. “The higher you go up the skill curve, the more responsibility you have for whether someone gets their Division 1 scholarship, or earns their tour card, or keeps their card,” says Mike Tabbert, a Proponent member based in Beloit, Wisc., at the downtown Ironworks Golf Lab. “A lot of your energy can go into making that player feel OK about themselves. You end up having to justify everything you suggest.”



Proponent member Michael Wheeler has helped mini-tour players by showing them the value of fun—now he's angling for ways to show newer women players the potential value of a deeper commitment to the game.

Tabbert's base of operations these days is a true mix of the serious and the light-hearted. Within the urban setting where he and fellow Proponent member Travis Becker ply their trade, there is state-of-the-art technology for fine-tuning an elite swing but also a diverse set of simulators upon which any drop-in can play digital golf games like Tic Tac Toe, Poker, Tractor Range and something called Window Smash. That part sounds very non-traditional, even adolescent, but Tabbert doesn't look down his nose at it.

“To score well at Window Smash, you have to strike the ball cleanly and you actually have to flight it in a particular way, in order to get the proper angle into your target,” he says. “If you spend a fair amount of time on an HD Golf simulator smashing windows, you'll have some skills you can take out to the course and get results with.”

The storefront facility that Ironworks inhabits is over 8,000 square feet in area and it's expressly designed to bring intense training for hardcore players into direct contact with the 12-years-olds at a birthday party who start with the other arcade games then wander into a golf bay.

“These are kids who never had their hands on a club but now they do, so it's a start,” says Tabbert. “If they come back some winter day to take some more swings, I'll be there to give them a tip, with the idea that tips turn into golf lessons—which is what's been happening.”

Michael Wheeler, a Proponent member at Whitford Country Club in Exton, Pa., was asked about navigating between fun-golf and serious-golf. He turned the question around.

“Half the battle when you work with serious players is making everything *less serious*,” says Wheeler, a mini-tour player turned golf instructor who was recently named to the Golf Digest list of Best Young Teachers in America. “No matter what the activity, a person can be fully intent on the thing they're trying to do and still keep their sense of humor,” he believes. “I work with a tournament golfer who is the epitome of serious. I tell him we can put our heads down and grind for two hours, but if you make golf into something that is only a job, your performance will fall short.”

Wheeler harks back to the 2016 Ryder Cup at Hazeltine, and the explosive emotional reactions shown by Rory McIlroy and Patrick Reed—among others—during their birdie binges in singles play. “That's the most serious those guys have ever been in their lives,” he says, “and it's the most fun they've ever had in their lives.”

At Wheeler's club, the he and the head pro are



Due to her distinguished playing career, Karen Noble was expected to work primarily with elite golfers—her preference was to teach all levels, which was also best for her business.

studying a tricky stage in the player-development chain—getting a crop of newer women players to graduate from the nine-hole group into the 18-hole group. They're reaching a point along the spectrum that's beyond hit-and-giggle, where a degree of determination and goal-setting is needed to make the next step.

This may be the wrong thing to say—here in golf's make-it-fun era—but perhaps it's time for those ladies to get serious. **PG**

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– Dr. Jim Suttie**