

IMPROVING TOGETHER

BUILDING A COMMUNITY AROUND YOUR TEACHING PRACTICE

By David Gould, Staff Editor

No matter the subject being taught, great teaching has a magnetic quality. People respond to the opportunity to truly learn—often they respond with energy and passion. As a result, the inspiring teacher ends up at the center of things, especially in a team-sports setting.

In golf there is a long tradition of one-on-one interaction, and community or bonds among students won't typically happen. A golf instructor could have a lesson book full of people who never cross paths and don't feel connected to each other. But the intrinsic social aspect of golf, the social-media tools that foster student-to-student interaction, and the recent tilt toward more group training, all suggest that a top teacher has a community of students around him or her, not a collection of isolated individuals.

Juniors, more than adults, end up in the communal-learning context. As Proponent Group member Chris Foley points out, schedule flexibility alone is a big factor. Foley, director of instruction at Cragun's Legacy Courses in Brainerd, Minn., uses a road-trip program to deepen the bonds of togetherness among students, thus elevating his own presence in the lives of the families involved.

Community Creates Opportunities for Life Lessons

"This is the fifth year in a row that I've joined with another teaching professional from up north and each taken a group of eight—four boys and four girls—down to another pro's facility in San Antonio," says Foley. "That pro also has a group and the whole collection of kids ends up with new friendships." The training format of practice and play, according to Foley, is designed to mimic what it's like when "you travel with your college golf team and compete in an invitational tournament." There is plenty of "life learning," he points out, in addition to the golf training and development. He plans to soon adapt what he's done with

the 14-to-18 set to a somewhat similar program for adults, albeit without the travel aspect.

For Cheryl Anderson, managing the Mike Bender Golf Academy's Junior Champions program has included an ongoing focus in getting the participants to engage with each other in monthly evening meetings where a variety of competitive issues are discussed. Between these monthly group meetings the juniors have a play with the pro outing where the coach plays with three juniors, numerous supervised group practices and various practice-time competitions all designed to create camaraderie and to sharpen each participant's competitiveness.

"The parents are also invited to some of the monthly meetings especially when we have guest speakers such as Zach Johnson's caddie, Damon Green's recent visit," says Anderson. "Having the parents involved in this community building exercise also helps them better appreciate all of the areas we help their kids with besides building a golf swing. There is a lot of things we focus on that help with maturity and personal growth that the parents really appreciate when they see the process for themselves."

Anderson is convinced that the more group time the program adds, the more improvement the participants achieve and the more buy-in the program gets from parents.

Leveraging Existing Social Bonds

Newly relocated to a golf-intense, 36-hole club in Fort Myers, Fla., Proponent Group member Dan Lockhart has

established a communal feel among his clients by leveraging the social bonds already existing at the facility, Fiddlesticks Country Club. Golfers there are almost all residents of the gated community, and in a peculiar way they organize themselves as named "mini-societies" of players. There are some 70 of these groupings total, ranging from foursome-sized up to the largest, known as the "Nooners," which numbers nearly 70 people.

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Cheryl Anderson includes multiple group activities at the Mike Bender Golf Academy Junior Champions program to stimulate competition and camaraderie

“On a day the Nooners were out in full force I set up my TrackMan at a par-3 and captured everybody’s data,” Lockhart says, “then I emailed each person a brief explanation of cause-effect between their swing metrics and their ball flight.” That evening Lockhart was introduced at the group’s informal awards gathering and got some nice applause for his efforts—yet another way to find yourself immersed in the social web. “I got some significant lesson business out of it, too,” Dan adds.

Brian Jacobs, a Proponent member and GCA coach in Rochester, N.Y., has done particularly well at this community-of-students concept. Jacobs uses a funnel-style structure in which his innovative digital-media efforts expose him to prospective students from near and far, some of whom make it all the way to in-person sessions. But even without all his podcasts, his Skype forums with Proponent ally Bernie Sheridan and the videos he shares on Twitter (with 9,000-plus followers), Jacobs would be doing well as a community builder merely via local activity.

“I conduct month-by-month game-improvement practice with groups, set up in 75-minute sessions at a fee of \$125 per golfer,” says Jacobs. “We devote each session to a topic and each one has a food-and-beverage component and maybe a shop-merchandise aspect, such as wedge fitting.” His environment is a private club (privately owned) with his academy on-site, operating independently and open to outside clientele for teaching. He aims for a class of 12 in this group-practice program and either fills it or goes over, in which case he adds an instructor.

“Once people start with me in May, they basically stay for all 10 sessions through August,” reports Jacobs. “Members mix with non-members, which I feel enhances the social element, and everyone just loves it.”

Key point: Among the outside customers who come onto club property for coaching from Jacobs, six of them bought memberships just in the last year. That’s a by-product quite pleasing to the facility owner. Another key point: Working a supervised-practice event at a 12-to-1 ratio isn’t for newbies or low-energy types—“you’ve got to be on your ‘A’ game and know how to manage the clock,” cautions Brian.

The basic building block of all this community stuff is referral activity. Now situated at the Omni



Brian Jacobs mixes members and non-members in his group activities to create new social circles

Interlachen Resort in Broomfield, Colo., Proponent Group member Dan Sniffin has plans for group supervised practice programs as he continues building his core business there. And already Sniffin uses Twitter to post client successes and other Pied Piper-type material, achieving a high “follow rate” of over 50 percent among his lesson-takers. But the basic way of building social circles within your clientele is proving itself for him. “I’m finding that one new student will come in and make good progress with me, then I’ll start hearing from the other three guys in his regular foursome,” says Dan.

Visibility Matters

He shares a physical-setting factor with Dan Lockhart—each of them sets up on the main end of the range, Sniffin in the off-season only, Lockhart full-time.

“At my present facility the range isn’t double-ended, so I don’t have that privacy and quiet I’m used to when you’re down the far end,” says Lockhart. One upshot is a need to tune out distractions while teaching, which he’s learned to do. Another result comes on the positive side. “I’m more visible now, and between lessons my regulars always come up and chat or ask questions,” says Lockhart. “Those interactions get noticed, and non-students realize I’m approachable and have good relationships with current students, so it plants a seed with them.”

Sounds like yet another example of that aforementioned magnetic force—it happens for teachers who are visibly at the center of things, gathering golfers together. **PG**