

**PRIVATE, ONE-ON-ONE LESSONS – SECOND BEST TEACHING FORMAT?**

# COACHING ADULTS IN GROUPS: MORE FUN, MORE EFFECTIVE, MORE PROFITABLE (AND MORE COMMON)

By David Gould, *Staff Editor*

Remember back 20 years, when plastic cleats came on the scene as a rival to metal spikes? Reaction by golf's top influencers—tour players—was harsh, foretelling a swift exit for soft-spikes. But the concept turned out to have many advantages over its green-puncturing and carpet-destroying predecessor. In a very short time those colorful, whirly-shaped plastic cleats became standard.

In golf instruction, the private 50-minute lesson—one after another, all day long—is starting to look like a rusty steel spike. The private lesson is simple, utilitarian and certainly traditional, but it's peering over its shoulder at a rival concept loaded with positive attributes.

"Switching to group coaching programs for adults—we've been doing it that way with juniors forever—is a move dedicated instructors are increasingly looking to make," says Proponent Group member Henry Brunton, a pioneer of the practice who learned of its merits from Dr. Rick Jensen. "And why not? It's more appropriate to how humans learn motor skills, it's more enjoyable for students, it's far less draining on the teacher, it makes improvement more accessible for the golfer and it ends up earning the coach a much higher income."

The highly influential Brunton, a Canadian whose summertime base is Toronto and whose winter site is Eagle Creek Golf Club in Orlando, will also tell you it's better for the game of golf. He cites research by Golf Datatech and other sources showing rigid price-resistance to instruction for all but a slim minority of golfers. "If you go to a range and see 40 people hitting balls, no more than a half dozen of them are legitimate candidates for private



Under the supervision of Elena Callas King, an adult learning group works together on their greenside bunker shots at Common Grounds G.C. in Aurora, Colo.

instruction," says Brunton. "An effective group learning program throws open the doors to a much wider audience—probably 80 percent or more of golfers who desire to improve would give that kind of coaching a try, knowing they won't have to pay a whole lot for it."

Brian Jacobs, a Proponent member from Rochester, N.Y. who spoke on this topic at last year's Summit, will sing the praises of adult group programming all day long. However he does add a cautionary note.

"It takes a high level of energy and enthusiasm to do this," says Jacobs. "Coaches who work this way will tell you we aren't burned out at the end of the day, but that's because our students and the overall

atmosphere recharge us as we go” Along with bringing the energy, you must also be able to assess the ‘what and why’ of golf swings on the spot, in Brian’s view. “The trick is to change ball flight quickly,” he says, “because you’ll be moving on from one golfer to the next relatively quickly.”

In short, the format is geared toward higher-quality coaches who continually educate themselves, pile up certifications and base their careers on long-term relationships.

Proponent member John Perna discovered the value of communal golf improvement while working under Dr. Jim Suttie in Naples, Fla. years ago. He noticed how Suttie’s clients would finish their session with Doc then hang around, practicing and watching other students being coached. “All around us were serious golfers with serious ambitions, but the atmosphere was amazingly loose,” recalls Perna. “Guys wanted to be in that setting, because we laughed and cracked jokes basically non-stop—it was the culture under Doc’s leadership.” Perna also realized that creating a fun, relaxed culture would be impossible if the lead coach didn’t know his craft inside and out and wasn’t continually achieving excellent results with students. “Doc had success,” notes Perna, “and by keeping things loose and light-hearted he built on his success.” Clearly, Suttie achieved far better results than a coach with equivalent skills whose training center had a tense or grim feel to it.

So, having serious ambitions is still a good thing, and you can tell a serious instructor when you see them hire a branding expert to help with career growth and pathways to optimal success. Elena Callas King, a Proponent Group member working at Common Ground Golf Course in Aurora, Colo., did just that, and the results pointed her toward group-based teaching.

“The consultant I hired used a bunch of different approaches, one of which was to interview my students,” recalls King, whose facility is owned by the Colorado Golf Association and thus heavily geared toward growth of the game. “That was somewhat nerve-wracking for me, but it turned out to be amazingly helpful.” Between the interviews and a personality test administered to Elena, herself, it became clear that “community” was important to teacher and students alike. “Developing relationships is what the tests showed to be my priority. My ideal client turns out to be an adult 50 or older,” says King, “someone who could be a par shooter or a raw

beginner, but by personality would be committed to long-term growth and development.”

The consultant’s work was completed by the end of the 2015 season, giving King a chance to craft the first version of her group-based programming in time for 2016. “I knew it would work,” she says, “but still I had a fear that nobody would want to do it and I’d be stuck with no customers.” In most cases the teaching pro who does this will have early adopters who form a base. The advice Henry Brunton gives is to take one day of the week—Monday or maybe Tuesday—and set that off as group-coaching day. As for people who are fixated on privacy and having the instructor to

themselves, they may never change over, but King nonetheless invites that type to her supervised-practice sessions—which are essential elements within the group paradigm.

Perhaps the ultimate tool for changing people’s minds is the package of value found in a well-priced group learning program. King’s initial one was priced at \$400 a month, based on golfers making a minimum four-month commitment. For that fee you got an initial 90-minute assessment, one private 45-minute coaching session, unlimited participation in regularly scheduled two-hour sessions of supervised practice, plus two monthly on-course sessions lasting two hours each and using a 4:1 student-coach ratio. In good part the on-course work King was offering reflected concepts learned from the Vision54 team of Lynn Marriott and Pia Nilsson. “On-course is where I feel the most energy, and where everyone involved gets the most enjoyment,” says Elena. It’s also, in her opinion, where the most rapid and long-lasting improvement takes place.

It’s likely that the timing of this wave of change—as it increasingly sweeps up younger instructors—is based on the number of years that Jensen, Brunton, Nilsson, Marriott and their fellow Proponent member Will Robins have been honing their core concepts and preaching the value of a new approach. These five have been leaders in the move toward a group-based, skill-acquisition model that also teaches people how to get the ball in the hole and get their scores out of the 100s and into the 90s, or out of the 90s and into the 80s, etc. Sarah Dant is a Tennessee-based Proponent member who was spurred to move away from the private-lesson model by a realization that the group’s founder, Lorin Anderson, would do fist-pumps upon hearing.

“I did some math one day,” recalls Dant, “and figured out that I couldn’t retire comfortably if I



continued earning my living as a private-lesson instructor.” Bingo.

Since revamping her practice, Dant has gone from averaging \$110 an hour to \$200 an hour, meanwhile helping more people and experiencing an immense upgrade in job satisfaction. “Teaching private lessons all day was sapping my soul,” she laments. “Some nights I’d just lie on the floor and cry. And I was over-teaching people—when you’re in the group-training environment you can’t over-teach.” Others agree, saying intermittent feedback in small doses is far more effective than large doses of input. Having combined what she learned from Jensen and Brunton with the principles of The Scoring Zone, devised and taught by Robins, Dant forged a career path manifestly preferable to what she’d been doing previously. Recently she entered a partnership of sorts with Robins, going out on the road to help him run TSZ golf schools.

One challenge she pondered was how to sell the idea to the golf-operations people. A fellow group-oriented instructor, Mike Dickson of Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md., advised her not to try. “The head pros are going to scratch their heads and walk away if you try to explain this to them,” advises Dant. “Mike told me to say as little as possible, and if they ask just say you’re implementing this little group thing, as an experiment. Try using the term ‘boot camp’—my head pro seemed to like that.” Eventually Dant’s head golf professional at Poinciana came up to her and asked, “What the hell is going on over there?” It was his reaction to the runaway success of the program.

Dant agrees with Brian Jacobs that a sharp eye and an agile coaching mind are needed to succeed with this approach. “I couldn’t do it seven or eight years ago,” she admits. “But I would tell someone who is trying to develop group-training

skills to keep sight of what happens when you’re working one on one and you have all the time in the world—people tune you out, usually after two or three minutes!”

She learned at Vision54 to “talk less and ask more questions,” falling into a pattern of asking the golfer what they’re experiencing when they swing and how they are feeling about the result. “Then they own the feeling, and they can explore what to do next,” Dant says. “If you train with Pia and Lynn they make you give a lesson where you do nothing but ask questions.” Elena Callas King finds that games and contests set up between students provides an ideal structure and energy in the group setting, helping the coach make his or her point then move down the tee line.

If you judge by King’s experience, these programs don’t just work—they work wonders.

### The Takeaways:

- The private golf lesson is a century or two old—it’s appropriate for part-time instructors who spend most of their time in the shop
- Only 12 percent of golfers seek professional coaching each year —price-sensitivity is a major reason
- Motor-skill acquisition is a slow process, but it doesn’t require major information downloads, except at the beginning
- Golf is an individual sport most notably in a tournament setting—training and practice can be as communal as you want it to be
- Without lengthy experience and superior skills, coaching adults in groups can be risky
- Games and competitions in the supervised-practice setting greatly help with skill development and meanwhile they make it much easier for the coach to keep moving down the tee line
- Teaching one-on-one all day drains the instructor—teaching groups seems to do the opposite
- Instructors who teach traditionally should make a gradual move to the group concept
- Golfers engaged in coaching programs spend more time and money at the golf facility, but golfers engaged in group coaching probably spend the most of all—for one thing, they move seamlessly, as a group, from their session to the 19th Hole.

“Students form friendships with each other,” says King, whose annual income increased 15 percent in year one and more still in year two of group-based teaching. “They turn golf into a self-discovery practice, and apply what’s happening for them in golf to everyday life. They spend all kinds of time and money at the golf course. They will tell you, ‘I almost quit, then I found you and I found my group—none of us have ever experienced golf like this.’” They also generate intense word-of-mouth that brings new people in.

The 50-minute private golf lesson will always be with us—even the coaches most dedicated to group training still use it when appropriate. But there’s a wealth of evidence to suggest that a better way of coaching, training and learning has arrived, just in time to enhance the working life and long-term wealth of teaching professionals who are willing and able to adopt it. **PG**