

SECOND OF A TWO-PART SERIES: NEW THINKING ON WHAT TO CHARGE

PRICING CONCEPTS AND THE GOLF INSTRUCTOR, PART 2

By David Gould, Staff Editor

Longtime members of Proponent Group are used to hearing guidance on pricing and programming that's aimed at boosting their compensation. Recently the notion of dynamic pricing — Saturday morning lessons priced higher than non-peak times — has entered that conversation. Meanwhile there's been a recognition that rate increases may trigger an uptick not in annual pay but in free time—if that's your priority. Paul Johnson, a Proponent member who recently relocated to an unusual facility in Savannah, GA., has been pondering some dynamic pricing that would contribute to his work-life balance.

"So far I haven't done dynamic pricing," says Johnson, who runs the whole show at 9-hole Mary Calder Golf Club, a hideaway on 400 acres owned by International Paper Company. "But I would raise my rates after 5 p.m. in order to get home earlier. Doing so would lower my bottom line, and that's a tradeoff, but I'd consider it."

Johnson was selected by IPC to lead a five-year plan for revitalizing the Mary Calder golf facility, which at least for now charges rock-bottom rates: \$20 a day, including cart. It's hardly a shock that Paul has made coaching and player development a cornerstone of his efforts—which have kicked revenues up by 22 percent in one year. And it won't surprise anyone that group-based programs dominate his coaching activities. After all, when a public facility is charging low green fees and trying to build play, the clinic strategy is standard. But Johnson, a distinguished player who won two NAIA championships in college, favors group learning in every circumstance. For him it's made



teaching more remunerative, more enjoyable and more effective.

"Working at a private club in Alabama, my ratio of group-to-individual was 90-10," he says. "Here it's 70-30, and I'm working to increase that split." His group-heavy pattern started with juniors and ladies, but Johnson found that he could persuade adult male golfers of its efficacy. "Improvement at golf is more efficient in a group setting—players learn from each other. Two or three in the group figure it out and the others say, 'I can do that, too.'"

Johnson also contends that pods are a setting in which excellence can be attained. "They say you'll never get someone to be great just through group teaching, but I disagree," says the two-time All-American. "You can pull someone out for an individual lesson in order to fine-tune things, but that's all the one-on-one you need."

He's realized something about group-versus-private that is myth-bustingly brilliant: Put six or seven people in a coaching pod and you create a social experience, but if

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Meanwhile, stand on the tee with one person for an hour and you create "an interaction that is actually more social than clinics or supervised practice," says Johnson. Sure, it's only two people—instructor plus student—but with so much time to fill, the atmosphere naturally becomes more interpersonal and relational. Face it: Students who come every week but aren't truly motivated to improve are paying you for a social experience in the golf environment.

This subtlety wasn't lost on Bob Toski, who understood the teacher-student relationship in golf better than anyone. Toski once told a protégé that "people will take comfort over improvement." The young instructor he said that to, Brian Varsey, is a longtime Proponent member recently brought in to oversee instruction at Metropolis Country Club, another standout private facility in metro New York. There's been a strong instruction program at Metropolis since even before Cheryl Anderson's long, successful tenure there, but it's always been based on the money-for-time structure of the private lesson.

Varsey believes that, here in 2018, what he offers and what he earns can be tinkered with.

He's strongly influenced by his training under Dr. Rick Jensen and his admiration for the way fellow Proponent member Bill Davis brought on-course coaching and innovative practice regimens to the private club environment. And he's using his AimPoint certification as a way to set the tone.

"Because AimPoint is generally taught in groups, I should be able to make it my model for additional group-based teaching," says Varsey. "One student I did



Dr. Rick Jensen believes that there are financial and learning benefits to packaging your time into long-term coaching programs.

AimPoint with—a guy who owns a private aviation company—told me, 'This is great because it's a system.' He was psyched to have something in his golf skill set

that would stay there—he won't lose it. He may need a refresher, and we can get him into some putting instruction that's an extension of AimPoint, but basically he paid for something he gets to keep." As price-and-program trailblazer Will Robins has proven, charging for a "keeper" skill is a better way to do business.

Varsey is doing all he can, from the get-go, to "teach to a quality practice regimen" as well as "teach short game out on the golf course." He knows that if his clients take the equivalent of a "BunkerPoint" coaching program with him, he can finish up by putting them through combines and skills-

THE TAKEAWAY: PRICING AND PROGRAMMING ARE INTERWOVEN

- 1) The variety of group-instruction formats is expanding, to cover a wide range of skill levels and motivation levels. Coaches are able to package, program and price their services advantageously, as they serve each type of player.
- 2) Teaching groups and selling your ability to teach a specific skill go hand in hand. The AimPoint green-reading instruction series is a classic example. Golfers who can't read greens pay to learn how, and that skill—though it may need refreshers—is something they maintain.
- 3) It's constantly said that group learning is more social than individual learning, but some veteran coaches disagree. A group session can emphasize socializing if you and the students want it to, but the most social teaching of all is that weekly one-on-one with a regular who doesn't have particular playing goals—that golfer wants your pleasant company.
- 4) Public golfers are being trained to play golf by the hour, or pay for a short loop of holes. Instruction that teaches on-course skills can be grafted right onto this new pattern.
- 5) If your staff is large enough, you can create an afternoon-evening event reminiscent of the Apple Genius Bar, with experts on hand to help anyone who stops by with a golf question or problem—except this bar can serve wine and beer while the brilliant advice gets dispensed.

challenge games that produce a score. Once the paying customer is able to post good scores, much improved over their original assessment, he or she accepts it when the coach says, "I taught you a skill." Do that enough and you can start to charge per-skill instead of per-hour. Now time is much more on your side.

A pricing innovation that emerged on the green-fee side of the business—the 3-hole and 6-hole loop, or even golf by-the-hour—is getting merged into instruction by Proponent member Bill Baldwin. Lured out of retirement to run a Virginia Beach facility on a military base, Baldwin is emulating Robins by accompanying golfers on those mini-loops at his Eagle Haven Golf Course with the promise of coaching them to lower scores free of any work on swing mechanics. "Better golf is so often about turning 6's on the par-4s into 5's," says Baldwin. "I've got a list of students who are shooting five strokes lower for 18 and they know from the start that they won't go backwards, because we're not taking anything apart."

Five years ago Proponent Group member Bob Usher took over instruction at Grey Oaks Country Club and used "traditional instruction stuff" presented in best-practices fashion to push annual lesson revenue at the Naples enclave up to \$400,000. "Our goal is to reach \$500,000," says Usher, "and we'll be using our first rate increase since I got here to help do that." But even hitting a half-million doing things the old way is short of what Usher and his cohorts have in mind. "We're riding a wave of improvements here, which has attracted a lot of younger families with children," he says. "We need to offer them innovative services that will build great relationships between our golf staff and the members."

If you visit Grey Oaks on a typical weeknight around 4 p.m., look for an "instruction food court" atmosphere with music playing, a bar setup and coaches on hand to work on swing mechanics, specialty shots or whatever is requested—including sit-down sessions to walk the golfer through on-course strategy. "It's going to be supervised practice plus socializing, along with TrackMan combines, putter fitting (using the Edel system) and somewhat of a Topgolf atmosphere," Bob explains.

"We don't know how we're



Will Robins builds a continuing revenue stream by creating multiple program levels and then moving golfers through each level.

going to charge for it yet," he admits, "but we don't expect much price resistance if everything works the way we expect it do. Golfers could pay per-night or they could probably pay monthly—our wellness department runs something similar and that's how they charge." This all sounds similar in appeal to the Apple Genius Bar, with experts hanging out to help curious drop-ins solve problems and learn skills—except it sounds a lot more fun.

Coming up with stimulating programs that golfers love and that club managers value as player-retention tools—that's the fun part. Figuring out what to charge for them—and not being shy about pricing it pretty high—well, that's pretty fun too. **PG**

VALUE AND PRICE NEED BIG PICTURE CONTEXT

Modern economies contain so much interconnection that this article about charging for golf instruction needs to include a prediction about higher education, from author Thomas Frey. "State support is dropping and college tuition is far too expensive," Frey has declared. "Colleges are pricing themselves out of existence." Okay, now take that credible comment and pair it with the fact that many of our most in-demand and high-priced golf coaches exclusively train skilled youth golfers who have at least some chance to earn four-year scholarships. Teaching golf and the cost of college were never linked, but now they are.

Proponent Group member John Perna talks in a new book about The Player Service, or TPS, his seven-year-old golf academy specializing in talented juniors: "TPS has become extremely successful financially," writes Perna "Teaching groups of players who all pay an annual retainer over \$10,000 is a good model." Perna's success rate is phenomenal—85 students on golf scholarship in seven years—but his business wouldn't be as lucrative if the price of a university education had been trending down instead of up. — D.G.