

NEW SERIES: CASE STUDIES OF TEACHER-STUDENT COLLABORATION

FIRST LESSON AT 14 STARTED A JOURNEY

Kenny Nairn was on the phone from Blackpool, Lancashire answering questions about Jacqui Concolino. He wanted to go to sleep. It was 11 p.m. and Nairn had been coaching his way around Scotland and England for a few weeks now.

Here in the summer of 2018 his student of 16 years duration, now age 31, was playing some of the best golf of her life. Kenny spoke about the KPMG tour stop at Hazeltine National in late June—Concolino tied for 8th there. He mentioned the Women's PGA in Chicago in early July—another tie for 8th place. Two weeks later, at the LPGA Tour stop in northern Ohio, she tied for 5th—"and should have closed it out," her coach insists. A couple weeks after that, in the Ladies Scottish Open, Jacqui had another T8—on the rugged links of Gullane, where her final-round 66 was equaled only by the winner and the runner-up.

"Her fellow professionals looked at her differently after that 66, and her 5-under finish," says Nairn. "Any coach whose student takes their game to a new level gets rewarded by the look in the eyes of that student's peers. It's extremely satisfying. I've taught 20-handicappers who got down to 10 and seen the respect they've earned. It's validation, and we all want that."

The journey that turns a talented kid into a world-class player is long and unpredictable. With success comes greater demands on the player, coach and caddie. This past winter the task was to evaluate Concolino's best year—\$469,300 in earnings, three top-10 finishes including a 2nd in Asia, only a handful of missed cuts—and decide on a next step. "A tour player's skill set gets built from the ground up," observes Nairn. "Some parts of the process reach completion. At that point the coach has to adapt."

Nairn is one of the best clubfitters in the business but he made what he considers an error in judgment last off-season. Concolino's notion of how to improve her long game in 2018 was to up the trajectory. "She wanted to hit the ball higher to improve her landing angle into greens, especially with the longer irons," says Nairn. "We switched her to a shaft with a different kickpoint that would produce that higher flight. It achieved that goal but the overall effect wasn't positive."



Nairn and Concolino at the recent Women's British Open

Concolino is an unusual modern player—powerful but extremely creative in her shotmaking, with a repertoire of shot shapes. "My hero in golf will always be Seve Ballesteros," Nairn says, "so it makes sense that I'd end up coaching Jacqui. But her imagination and her unique ball control depend on a fine degree of feel, and in the early events we could see that the new shafts took some of that away." It was up to the coach, in tandem with caddie Jeff Howanitz, to tell a visual player that the higher ball flight, so appealing to her eye, wasn't in her best interest and to work on other aspects of her swing.

It's a bit of a thrill for any tour player when they can add a new tool to their toolbox. Taking away one of those shiny objects is something you've got to be able to do. Nairn found himself saying, essentially, "You have to play with what you've got, and do it on a more consistent basis." Concolino is a woman of great inner strength, but when the two males who act as her guides bring a joint message of "we're your team and this is what we need you to do," it can put her in a vulnerable position.

The toolbox did end up with an addition, however. On an early-summer visit to the UK Nairn noticed what a dry season it was turning into. He insisted on making Jacqui an alternative set of wedges with notably less bounce on the soles. She liked the suggestion, and liked the idea all the more once she got to Gullane. "All of Scotland was brick-hard," says Nairn. "She was absolutely glad to have those wedges and she performed very well with them."

Kenny is not on tour very much, so he studies Concolino intently when he is. "There is nothing better than being with your student in the height of competition," he says with emphasis. "You see everything."

Still, there's a paradox around all the subtle detail a top coach can and must observe. The responsibility to not miss anything is quite grave, and yet being able to fulfill that responsibility really just works at the margins. "You walk these events and see competitors from all over the world, you see the talent and what's supporting it, and it gives you perspective," says Nairn. "I need to be the best coach possible, and I need to keep in mind that most of what happens is out of my hands." **PG**