

Off the Conveyor Belt and... Into a Coaching Model for Your Business

By David Gould, Staff Editor

As a high-schooler in the 1970s, Proponent Group member Mike Perpich played golf and other sports, including some football for his dad, who was the team's head coach. Motivated even then to learn about cause-and-effect in golf mechanics, Mike persuaded his father to film a few of his swings with the football team's movie camera.

"I took that film my dad shot and drove around Kentucky asking golf pros who were considered good teachers to look at it," Perpich recalls. "I already knew what didn't look right to me, and I thought they might see the same problems. The guys were generous with their time, but basically all they said was, 'Swing looks good, kid.'" Driving home, the teenager who would grow up to become a renowned teaching professional realized he had studied playback of a golfer hitting shots before any of the big-name teachers in his region had.

It's critical for us to remember that in-depth knowledge about the way the golf swing works has not been around very long. As a result, the number of professionals able to diagnose technical flaws and suggest appropriate drills or fixes was very limited, even as recently as 15-20 years ago. Therefore, providing quality golf instruction meant explaining to people what was happening in their swing in a way that convinced them you knew your stuff.

"Teaching is talking—or at least that's what we as golf professionals decided it had to be," Mike Hebron once lamented. Hebron, a recent PGA of America Hall of Fame inductee, was vocal early on about the need to evolve away from that model.

In the 21st century, it isn't hard to feel the paradigm finally changing. Giving lessons to a stream of people listed in your book is seemingly not a best-practice for the future. Taking its place are long-term coaching relationships and a new set of formats for scheduling, interacting and charging fees. The reasons for this are numerous and compelling.

Henry Brunton, the Proponent member in Stouffville, Ontario whose business tagline is "Serious Coaching for Serious Golfers," regularly speaks on this topic at forums and summits. Working with talented juniors and surveying them about approaches that were most effective for their development, Brunton went through major changes in his thinking about how golf skill is acquired and how mastery is approached. Having arrived at the coaching-style

method, he declares it to be "simply a better way." Asked to elaborate, Henry says: "You get better results, have more fun and make more money."

As a traditional golf instructor morphs toward becoming more of a "coach," he or she should be conscious of terminology, in Brunton's view. He points out the "top-down" or even "military-style" tone that comes with "instruct" and reminds fellow professionals that "a coach literally gets you from where you are to where you want to go—whether horses are pulling it or a jet engine is powering it."

There are interesting turnabouts in the coach-player relationship when a shift is made to this concept. The paying customer is given more say in how the professional will work with them—but at the same time that client has requirements and responsibilities placed upon them. To improve takes commitment from the golfer, and coaches by nature are more demanding of the necessary effort than someone who simply presents ideas and information.

Of course, putting responsibility on the athlete or student doesn't mean you are condescending to them—quite the contrary. An effective, coaching-based communication will reveal to the golfer that it's their experience and their evolution that matters. In fact, Brunton considers the classic take-home DVD, containing the player's swing and a critique plus "fix" ideas from the instructor, to be an unpleasant and often counter-productive episode in the learning process. "Survey data shows that very few people watch them more than once," he reports.

Pia Nilsson, who with partner Lynn Marriott operates the Vision54 approach to golf training, agrees. "Too often you will see a misdiagnosis based on what the video is showing," says Nilsson. "We believe the coach should watch a golfer play several holes and recognize what they are doing on the golf course." For her part, Marriott encourages a step away from the telestrator, to see movement in real time on a human scale. "There is a strong tendency to make a quick assessment of the golfer's motion," says Marriott. "The golf instructor gets the idea they are in the 'fix-it' business, when they ought to be in the 'play better golf on the golf course' business."

At the Proponent Group, company president Lorin Anderson views the changeover from instructing to coaching through an economic and a quality-of-life lens. The shift to a coaching model from traditional lesson-giving, in his view, prevents fatigue and blindness to new, broader op-

Coming Soon: Long-term coaching relationships and new formats for scheduling, interacting and charging fees.

portunities. “The Coaching model that Dr. Rick Jensen and Henry Brunton first showed me a few years ago arguably creates more improvement and is delivered in a more varied and engaging format for the instructor,” says Anderson. “This is the win-win this industry has been searching for.”

Proponent member Susana Contreras, on staff at the Gary Gilchrist Golf Academy in central Florida, attempts to build a coaching-style continuity into all her client relationships. “The academy here has started a weekly adult clinic program, which the golfer can use as a casual brush-up opportunity if that’s what they want,” says Contreras. “But when I follow up with these students and talk about progress with them, often they will get more engaged. We set goals and I make the relationship interactive.” The result is more energy and enthusiasm on the golfer’s part, she says. “People act low-key about their golf because they doubt whether they could advance their skills,” Contreras says. “If you get them past the doubt, they will take the goals seriously.”

Indeed, for golf professionals still developing their style this model seems very natural. Kai Aoki, a 23-year-old Proponent Associate Member who works at the Cordevalle Club and Resort south of San Jose, Calif., hardly sounds top-down or old-school in explaining his process.

“My connection to the golfers I work with basically has to work on a personal level,” says Aoki, who shadowed a long list of veteran teaching professionals to learn as many ways of communicating kinesthetic cues as possible. “I also learned from them about rapport—the best teachers have always been good at that,” he says. One tendency Aoki notices is that supervised practice will become a ma-

ior part of the interaction—and that’s a very “coach approach” indicator—even if it’s never explicitly stated as an intention by golfer or golf professional. “People want you to take the time to get to know the move they make, how the shots fly, how they respond, the whole process or cycle they go through,” he says.

The types of facilities and technology that are taking over the golf learning landscape tend to support coaching over instructing. Many early adopters of the better launch monitor equipment praise it for providing baseline data. If skills are going to be acquired and the golfer is going to be coached to a completely new, higher level of competence, the skills they arrive with have to be known, catalogued and discussed as improvement plans get formed. Their physical readiness for golf improvement also needs to be known if the coach is going to devise a workable plan that carries the golfer through the stages of skill acquisition

Likewise, the layout provided by a practice complex that has the full array of short-game and long-game shot-hitting sends a message: To acquire skills takes information or other inputs about proper biomechanics, but it also takes lots of “reps” to make the movement fully integrated, from the neural pathways all the way through big muscle movements and down to fine motor controls.

The scope and scale of this paradigm shift is obviously too far-reaching and complex to cover in a two-page article. Throughout 2013 and beyond, new ideas and understandings about coaching and true player development will be an important part of Proponent’s content stream and the upcoming Summit. Very likely it will be a bigger part of the ongoing conversation among teaching pros in general.

A Form of Professional Relationship That’s Built on Golf but Goes Far Beyond

It’s common for teaching pros at private clubs to gain a level of personal trust and closeness with the paying customers that no other staff member reaches. Especially for female teachers, that rapport can carry the weekly interaction on the lesson tee far beyond golf. Alison Curdt, a Proponent Group member who teaches golf at prestigious Sherwood Country Club outside Los Angeles, is taking formal steps to recognize and respond to that reality.



Allison Curdt

Within the next year, Curdt will complete her Masters degree in clinical psychology and take board exams to earn California’s official Marriage and Family Therapy license, allowing her to hang a second shingle. “When someone works with me, they are trying to reach a new stage or level in what they’re capable of,” says Curdt. “Obviously we focus on the biomechanical elements of golf motion and technique. We may also use sports-psychology concepts to transfer their technical im-

provements onto the golf course. But so often there is something else, some big issue in their lives, that is blocking development of every kind, not just their golf game.”

A psychology major in college, Curdt brings a high level of emotional attunement to her work on the tee. Golfers respond to it and gradually share experiences from work, child-rearing, spousal relationships and other sources of conflict or woundedness. “Part of what’s happening is they pay to build a relationship with me that will improve their lives,” she says. “With formal training, an advanced degree and a license I’ll be able to serve them as a professional guide or counselor who works on more than just golf skill and performance.”

Does that mean she will need to find a teaching academy that has a separate, private room, set up in the classic talk-therapy configuration? “I actually might need that,” Curdt says. “My practice will be a hybrid, with the goal of helping people achieve their potential and live better, happier lives. I know there’s a way I can combine golf instruction and psychological counseling to do that.” – D.G.