

COACHING AND CLUBFITTING

In the Coach-Student Relationship, How Does Clubfitting Fit In?

By David Gould, Staff Editor

The clubfitting credentials of gear expert Joe Moravick are too lengthy to list in this article. You can check them out on the website for his Minneapolis studio and shop, known as Ultimate Fit Golf. Proponent Group member Brent Snyder, located just east of St. Paul, Minn., will vouch for Moravick strenuously.

“For anybody in the Twin Cities who really knows golf,” says Snyder, “Joe is the go-to equipment person.” Snyder relies heavily on Moravick’s services for his own equipment and that of his students. Brent is a self-described “feel player” who has won 26 Minnesota PGA section tournaments and considers himself a “feel teacher” as well. His coaching practice is heavily tilted toward tournament golfers young and old.

Snyder is usually present when Moravick is evaluating and fitting one of his students—in every case his opinion is integral to the fitting process. “Before I developed my relationship with Joe I did all the fits myself,” says Snyder, for whom the Mizuno Shaft Analyzer was a favorite fitting tool—one he still often uses. He stresses the importance of having club specs and swing technique mesh together, but he chooses to outsource his clubfitting and couldn’t be happier with the service and product his golfers receive. “If the clubs aren’t correct in the way they’re fit and built, the golfer and the coach both have a problem,” Snyder says. “In the teaching profession, we’re at a point where there are multiple ways to address that problem.”

Bill Abrams wouldn’t disagree, he just happens to be very hands-on when it comes to clubfitting. “I’m one of those coaches who doesn’t like to give his fits away,” says Abrams. “To me the relationship between coach and student has to be wide open and it has to be across-the-board. If you are talking about ball flight and the ways that teaching and clubfitting affect it, there’s an art to that. It’s



Bill Abrams likes to make sure his relationship with students includes both their swing and their equipment

very hard to separate the two.”

The Chicago-based Proponent member does agree that having the swing coach on hand as a fit gets conducted by an equipment specialist is far different than not having the coach present. That said, there is an organic flow to Abrams’ coaching style that would be interrupted or even blocked if clubfitting wasn’t woven into the process.

“It comes into the conversation in a lot of different ways,” he says, “depending on the student’s swing, their personality and how much they’re compensating for their clubs.” Generally the fitting factor gets broached by Abrams in a low-key but emphatic manner. “I will be talking about ball flight or swing path or how they are releasing the club and I will mention that the lie angle or grip size of the club could be a factor,” he says. “I’ll hand them a test club with different specs and have them hit a few. We’ll talk about cause-effect. This approach gets results. People appreciate the expertise.”

This coach’s study of how equipment affects the swing motion and influences ball flight extends all the way to the shoes his player is wearing. “There are cases where a stu-

dent of ours gets fit for new golf shoes and they've gained 20 yards with the driver," Abrams says. That's quite a thought to wrap your brain around, but research shows that all energy for the swing and the shot originates with the feet "pushing" against the ground, so why not?

"You'll find situations where the shoes aren't supporting the player's footwork pattern," Abrams says. "This is one of the benefits of force-plate technology and I urge any fellow Proponent member to look into this. You can really help people with it."

The viewpoint Abrams has developed makes total sense given his veteran status. Since his career began, there's been a parade of new specialized skills coming into golf instruction, with custom clubfitting at or near the head of it. Megan Padua, a 29-year-old Proponent Group member who spends winters near Hilton Head and summers on Long Island, is in a different position. "Any clubfitting training I've been able to participate in I have completely enjoyed," says Padua. "It's a part of our field that is great to learn about and become skilled at. But I've also devoted a big amount of time to learning Aimpoint, to learning Vision54, to getting my TPI certifications—a lot of different areas of expertise."

At the Belfair golf community in Bluffton, S.C., where Padua teaches half the year, the golf staff includes one of those gear experts, Chris Robinson, who fits clubs but doesn't do any swing coaching. Along with his professional golf training, Robinson has a degree in chemical engineering from Ohio State—indeed, these staff clubfitters at top academies tend to have science backgrounds.

"The way I've structured my career so far, I'm just not educated in fitting the way Chris is," Padua says. "But as a staff we communicate constantly about what every student needs. Chris will know what I am trying to do from a swing perspective before he starts fitting one of my students, and we'll keep that conversation going."

It's pretty impressive to watch the full-time clubfitters at top academies deploy high-speed video, Doppler-radar devices and perhaps even motion-analysis with 3D imaging.

Then to see them check lie angle on every single iron when the clubs come back, and bend hosels to fix a lie that's off by one-quarter of a degree—not to mention all the shaft-truing and spine-finding—certainly inspires confidence.

That being said, deep expertise, in any field, can make the big picture harder to see.

"As our profession becomes more subdivided," says Proponent member Charlie King, "we have to be careful that each specialty doesn't become a lens that distorts what you're seeing. If there's a guy beating balls and his shots don't look very good, a swing coach who's watching



The person who is improving a student's swing is also the most obvious choice to improve their equipment

will say the problem is the swing technique. The clubfitter who's watching will say it's incorrect club specs. Ask a golf fitness expert and he'll tell you it's about flexibility. A mental-side coach will say it's all in the guy's head."

King, who heads up the golf academy at Reynolds Plantation, was an early adopter of dynamic clubfitting back in the 1990s when only Henry-Griffitts and one or two other brands offered the demo carts, the training and a truly customized product. These days, with a Taylor Made Kingdom facility right next door to him at Reynolds Plantation, King is no longer actively fitting, but the collaboration between Kingdom staffers and the Reynolds swing-coach crew is close. "The goal at Reynolds is to 'fit to improvement,' not to what is going on in the swing when the golfer first comes to you," says King.

He brings up one of the central points about this piece of the golf-improvement puzzle—it can sometimes feel like



Charlie King “fits for improvement,” not for what is going on in a golfer’s swing when he first arrives for instruction

an isolated event, compared to swing coaching, strength and flexibility training, on-course coaching, mental-side teaching, and so forth. The custom clubs arrive, get checked and into the bag they go. At that point the player should be pretty comfortable with them, if the fit was skillfully handled. And yet that wouldn’t be the case if there was a real “stretch” in the specs—meaning that major compensating moves need to disappear if ball flight with the new gear is going to happen as planned.

Proponent member Alison Curdt, director of instruction at Wood Ranch Golf Club in Simi Valley, Calif., is always looking at the coach-teacher interaction as something that unfolds over time with as little abruptness as possible. This includes the clubfitting facet, which in her opinion can’t be rushed on the front side because “golfers very often have an emotional attachment to their clubs.” The super-expert clubfitter may gasp to see a swing coach working even for 30 minutes on technique with someone whose clubs are ill-fitted and causing compensations. That coach will beg to differ, explaining that they are building trust, introducing new concepts and working on adjustments that won’t go out the window when new custom clubs someday arrive.

“Fortunately, there are many times when you can help somebody without having to tell them their whole set is obsolete,” says Curdt. “I had a student whose clubs were fairly new and he was really proud of them,” she recalls. “I said, ‘Great, tell me about these awesome clubs.’ Pretty soon he was

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explaining that his 3-wood didn’t fly any farther than his 5-wood.” Turns out it was a simple static-loft problem, one that led Curdt to fit him with a new hybrid—and that filled the yardage gap perfectly.

“I felt like I was educating this gentleman,” says Curdt. “That’s a lot of what we do in this job, and he appreciated it.” That said, she didn’t brush off a question about being female versus male in the teaching-clubfitting role. “Even when I was a junior golfer and a college player, if a male instructor talked to me about changing

clubs it would go through my head that this is something he’d make a profit on, whereas with a female teacher I wouldn’t feel that way.”

Bill Abrams isn’t interested in debating the fairness or prevalence of this gender differential. He sees the pro’s recommendation of equipment to a client as a rubber-meets-the-road moment in golf instruction. In other words, it doesn’t cost Mr. Smith a dime if he takes your advice and narrows his stance, but clubfitting recommendations have an investment factor that often demands some guts on the part of the pro. That “emotional attachment” Alison Curdt mentions isn’t always to the actual clubs, sometimes it’s about the two grand Mr. Smith spent to buy them. Abrams sees clubfitting as the job skill that tests whether a professional “is really able to assert their expertise” versus letting themselves become “mealy-mouthed” at key moments.

“To be fair,” he says, “it helps that you can get money back for high-end golf clubs much more easily than you could in the early days of clubfitting.” Credit for that goes to PGA Trade-In and other online liquidators. “When a fitter can lay out multiple resale or trade-in options that he has experience with,” Abrams adds, “that’s one more indicator

for the student that they have come to the right person.”

Abrams mentors many young teachers seeking to hone their clubfitting skills. It’s not a specialty every young instructor will head toward—but it’s a very good one if you wish to prove you’ve got the courage of your convictions.