

IS YOUR TEACHING BUSINESS 'ON-COURSE'?



By Andy Hilts, *Director*

If a young instructor came to watch you teach, they would expect to sit alongside you on the range and fill up a notebook. After your last student left, they would figure on asking questions, gaining insights, saying thanks and heading home. *They would not expect to watch you give a playing lesson.*

In the mainstream world of lesson-giving and lesson-taking, the range is the place where coach and student interact. But from recent talks with Proponent members, I can picture some of you inviting that young pro to observe an on-course coaching session that's all about strategy and scoring.

If this were to happen, the observer might witness even more coaching creativity than they'd see on the range. That's because the golf course is full of shot variety, odd angles, deceiving yardages and tricky decision-making. Furthermore, students reveal much more about how they approach this challenging game when they're on the field of play, and this gives the coach more "teachable moments" than a range session offers. On-course is where you learn about awful short games that students think are "pretty good," and where you spot their inability to recover from trouble.

And so, a question: What does your repertoire of playing-lesson techniques look like? Likewise, what do you try and accomplish when you're coaching on-course?

Among top teachers, there doesn't seem to be a consensus about how often to bring a student onto the fairways. Nor is there one opinion about how much time to spend, what to emphasize or how many students can be coached at once out there. So, there's plenty for all of us to investigate on the playing-lesson front. Even Proponent Group itself is playing catch-up here: If you check the website's vast archive of how-to-coach presentations, you won't find much that covers on-course work.

One reason golf instruction has been anchored to the practice tee is logistical. Directors of golf are concerned about maximizing rounds, pace of play, foursomes being held up, turf wear and tear, and other complications a playing lesson could trigger. Another logistical head-scratcher involves pricing and the on-course teaching

process. How do we charge for longer time periods on-course? Can we handle a small group adequately? Does technology play a role, and if so what type? Then there's the increasing prominence of tech-based performance tracking: Some coaches will leverage it to increase on-course work, some may figure it lessens the need—at least for the diagnostic aspect of playing lessons.

Over the years I've heard about many different types of playing lesson. While this certainly isn't a comprehensive list, it may help you organize your thoughts and program more on-course interactions.

1. Play with the Pro: This is a round that's all about building deeper relationships. Not a lot of instruction given, just time spent playing golf. You provide a tip here or there and make mental notes on the areas that need attention.

2. 'Every 10th Lesson': Students I've worked with appreciate receiving notice that after every 10 lessons we will assess how their improvement translates to scoring. Once the playing lesson gets scheduled like this, it becomes a real thing rather than a possibility.

3. Game Evaluation: Some coaches consider an assessment-style on-course session the ideal way to start a long-term program with a new student. On-course coaching and teaching will come later—this is to evaluate every aspect of their game and build an all-encompassing plan to reach their goals. It focuses on what they need versus what they think they want.

4. Lesson Program Renewal: A great way to review progress you've made and talk about next steps and new goals to shoot for. Allows you to "ask for the sale."

5. Course Management/Specialty Shots: Not really playing, this is about traveling around the course teaching a student how to get out of trouble and how to avoid it.

6. Teaching On-Course All the Time?: I'm hearing stories of Proponent members transitioning from the range toward almost full-time on-course work with their students.

Coaches have developed ways to simulate a round of golf with their students on the lesson tee, and that remains valuable. Going forward, however, Proponent will be asking more members to share their best practices in on-course coaching. It seems indisputable that if we get on course with our students it will lead them to faster improvement, even as it deepens the teacher-golfer relationship—both of which are excellent outcomes. **PG**

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