

PROPONENT GROUP BOOK EXCERPT

SOMETHING NEW FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF FROM BERNIE NAJAR

One positive sign for any book is a reader's inkling that the author had a good time writing it. That's certainly the sense you get reading Bernie Najjar's newly completed book, "The Game: Enjoying Golf On and Off the Course." Anyone who knows the longtime Proponent member firsthand will also notice how Najjar's natural voice comes through. A gentlemanly, sincere and occasionally folksy tone marks the narration throughout.

At a slim 132 pages divided into eight chapters, "The Game" is a highlight reel of what this award-winning coach knows, hardly the whole encyclopedia. It's illustrated by a few well-chosen graphs and by surprisingly engaging black-and-white photography, taken at Caves Valley Golf Club in Maryland, where the author has served as director of instruction since 2012.

At the outset Bernie asks, "What makes this book different?" Best way to answer is that it blends explanation of swing mechanics with a lot of "the soft skills" that make a golfer successful—however the player decides to define that. If anything, this is a book that lives on the borderline between how to play and why to play.

Here's an excerpt from the book co-written with veteran journalist Matt Rudy and features a foreword by the famed New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman. We opted to include the chapter titled, "How to Take a Golf Lesson." To obtain a copy visit amazon.com. Cost is \$23.95.

If you're committed to improving your game, the best way to do that is to get a golf lesson. Many people make the commitment to take lessons but they don't get the most out of the experience right away because they didn't come in with the right mindset. That's like expecting to go to a movie and being taken to a concert instead. The concert could be terrific, but you might struggle to get your head around the change in your plan.

My favorite new students are the ones who come in with a well-rounded knowledge base and clear expectations. I'm not expecting them to know what's wrong with their swings—after all, that's why they're coming for a lesson. But if they've done some homework on me and know what I'm about, and they are clear where they want to be with their game, we're starting in the right place.

One of the most common questions I get from friends in different parts of the country who are looking for a regular teacher is about technology. Does a teacher have to have a lot of diagnostic gear to really know what's going on? Do I

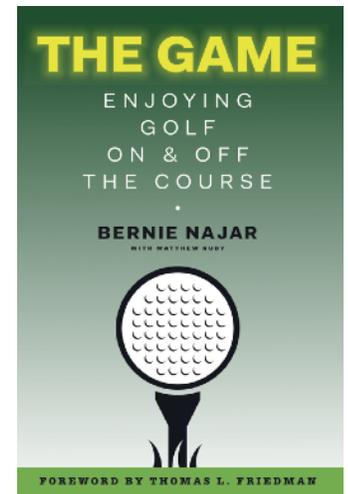
have to go to some high-tech studio just to get a good lesson? I'm lucky to have one of the most technologically advanced studios in North America here at Caves Valley, but I'd be the first person to say that technology isn't absolutely essential to improvement.

You can get a good lesson from someone on the driving range with nothing more than an experienced set of eyes and ears to diagnose and correct ball flight. But what the technology does—in the right hands—is make the diagnostic process more efficient. If I put you on my GEARS 3D measuring system, there are things I'm going to be able to see right away that might not be so easy to catch with a naked eye. And when you have the measuring tools that can show exactly what a player is doing, it's easy for me to reinforce with the student the progress we're making.

Take TrackMan as an example. If you came in with a very steep, out-to-in swing, your TrackMan numbers would clearly show this. As we made some improvements, you'd see those numbers start to change. Even if we didn't get to the ultimate destination, you'd see that we were going in the right direction.

The other benefit I get as a teacher who uses technology is that the technology has informed my eyes over the years. When I see you make a certain movement pattern, it's probably matching one I've seen while using my force plates, GEARS or launch monitors. We'll be able to get to the root cause of your issues a little faster.

I will say that some of the criticism of technology in teaching is valid in that uncontrolled information can overwhelm even the sharpest student. If a teacher doesn't give you some context for all of the information coming your way—and pick which information to share at a given time—it can be like drinking from a fire hose. It isn't a contest to see who can lay the most information onto a student. But even identifying your biggest problem isn't what's going to make you better. You have to get the right diagnosis, the right prescription and then you have to connect with the advice that gets you where you need to be.



How should you actually choose a teacher? I think it comes down to a few variables. The first is that you want to work with a teacher who has had success with players who fit the same pattern as you. If you're a junior player who wants to get a college scholarship, a scratch player who wants to win the club championship or a 20-handicapper who doesn't have a huge amount of time to practice, you want to a teacher who understands those advantages and limitations and knows how to work with you.

Another important variable is a good personality match. If you're a super detail-oriented person who wants a lot of technical information, you're going to be frustrated by a teacher who stands back and watches you hit a lot of balls without saying anything. The opposite is equally true. You might like to get a quiet piece of advice here and there, but you'll be driven up the wall by a teacher who is bringing the instruction fast and furious. You can see some of this at the tour level, when players move between instructors. When Tiger Woods moved to Sean Foley, I'm sure part of it was because Sean talked about things in a different way than Hank Haney did. Sean was a guy Tiger's own age who could talk about more than just the golf swing.

When you look at Mike Bender and Zach Johnson working together, it just makes sense. They're both extremely analytical, hard-working guys. When you work with Mike, you know what's on his menu every day. He has a lot of drills and practice stations, and some players really respond to that. Contrast that with Butch Harmon, who might spend three quarters of the lesson telling stories and making you feel good and the rest of the time sneaking in a tip or two. Both ways are great, as long as the player and teacher match.

A third element—and one that gets overlooked a lot—is scheduling. If you're interested in frequent lessons, you need to pick a teacher who can accommodate that—and fit within your budget. If you're a weekend player who wants a checkup once a month, the same holds true in the other direction. You don't want to build a relationship with a teacher who is interested in getting you to the practice tee weekly for intensive sessions.

Regardless of a teacher's style or the terminology or technology they use, a good teacher will be able to give you simple, direct solutions for the main problems in your game, and be able to explain to you the why behind the problems and the solutions he or she is offering.

When I start with new students, I'm interested to hear how they assess their own swing, and then I like to take



Bernie Najar presenting at the 2016 Proponent Summit.

them through some skills testing to see how their assessment matches what they really do. Many times, players think they're better or worse at a certain skill than they really are. The assessment gives you a very specific report card. You might hit your clubs very straight, but you don't have much difference in yardage between your 6-iron and 7-iron. Or you hit your sand wedge with 20 yards difference in distances from one shot to the next.

The tendency during those evaluations is to grind away and try to impress the teacher with what you can do—or make excuses why you aren't hitting certain shots. But really, there's no upside to trying to trick the teacher. First off, we know. When

you make some swings, we can tell what kinds of shots you usually hit. Second, we're on the same team, and the faster I can get a handle on what you really do when you're out on the course, the faster you can get better.

Let's talk about the difference between what a good lesson looks like and what a less successful one looks like. You might think that the quality of the shots you're hitting at the beginning of the lesson versus the end of one is the main consideration, but that's really only a relatively small piece.

In a good lesson, a player comes in with an open mind—but isn't a blank slate. He or she has a clear idea of what needs improvement. Speaking up is very useful: "Here's what I'm noticing in my game—I'm having a hard time getting up and down from bunkers," or "This is where I'm struggling... My tee shots are a big problem because they're going low and left."

Throughout the lesson, we're then able to work on things to improve their ability to hit the shot they want to hit—and ultimately test their ability to recreate that shot time after time. That means it's a blend of teaching (giving new information) and coaching (helping a student use what they know).

For example, when a student comes to me and talks about having a problem with his driver, we start by discussing what that actually looks like on the course. Is it inconsistency in direction? Lack of distance? One particular bad shot that shows up at the wrong time? The fix is obviously particular to that player's problem, but my overall goal is to give them both the tools to do better stuff with their swing but also to improve their awareness of the warning signs that lead up to those misses. When that shot starts to crop up on the range, or out of the course, what can that player do to make an adjustment that works until they have a chance to come to the mechanic (so to speak) for a lesson?

And at the end of it, the player leaves the lesson with a playbook for what they need to do in between visits to incorporate what we've talked about. They go and do what they've been asked to do, because ultimately they need to have ownership in the process for it to work. The contrast with a bad lesson is pretty striking. Instead of being an open conversation between two people, it becomes one-sided. Either the teacher is telling the student a laundry list of things to do, or the student is rattling off a long list of what they want to have happen. (That can also turn into a problem when parents get over-involved in a child's lesson. It can be tempting to interrupt when you hear something you aren't sure about, but it's better to let the lesson play out and address any concerns privately, afterward.) Often times, this is a matter of misaligned expectations. The student doesn't come in with a specific idea of what they want to accomplish, and the teacher starts taking him or her down a road they don't necessarily want to go.

Sometimes a lesson will get derailed by the common distractions that have become so much a part of everyday life. The student could be constantly checking a phone for text messages, or show up late and distracted because of a work or family problem. Those things happen, but you're obviously going to get a better experience if you come in open, ready to learn and focused on the task at hand. It's obviously no better when the teacher is answering calls or leaving the practice area to have a conversation while your lesson is going on. It's a two-way commitment to sharing and learning.

I'll often get a question from a student about how long I think it will take to get "better." That's a hard question to answer, because it depends on your definition of better. Relative to ball flight, if you have a bad shot that curves wildly off line, you should see a reduction in the size of your miss fairly quickly assuming your teacher is on the right fix and you understand what to do. This doesn't mean you're necessarily fixed, but you are certainly on the right path to improvement. At the same time, if you keep experiencing the same miss patterns and don't see some improvement, you and your teacher need to try a different solution. My mentor, Jim Hardy, is adamant about the "Next Ball Better" in this scenario which has been a great influence on my approach to ball flight correction.

You can do several things to make sure the improvements you're seeing stay in your game over the long term. First, you can ask your teacher to make you a short video summary of each lesson you take, recapping



Najar uses high-tech tools to make his lessons more efficient.

the main points and reinforcing the "homework" assignments you have in between lessons. (Be sure to store the video on your phone for easy reference). That way, you can be sure you're following the right prescription. The other thing to consider is taking at least one playing lesson. A teacher can see so much more of your game—and how it looks in the wild—when you're out on the golf course and not on the practice range. Hitting shots in a controlled environment from consistent lies is different than doing it on a golf

hole when the score counts—and it will help you to give your teacher some first-person insight. A nine-hole playing lesson will not only show your teacher what you do, but it will give you a chance to get some helpful insight on some of the game's softer skills—like strategy and shot selection.

Even when you've done everything your teacher has asked and your swing has made some progress, there may come a time when you feel like you need to make a change. How do you know when it's time? If you're hearing a lot of the same things from your teacher but it isn't helping you make changes to your ball flight, it might be time. Students and teachers disconnect for lots of reasons—from philosophical issues to scheduling issues. Sometimes it's as simple as needing a different opinion. That's OK, and it's nothing to shy away from.

You might be feeling great about the general state of your swing, but you want to add to your knowledge base. Just as in the medical community, there are some great specialists in teaching who can help you with a particular part of your game even if you're happy with your full swing instructor. Spending time with a specialist like Dave Stockton or James Sieckmann to learn more about the short game is so valuable, and there are so many great mental coaches, like Dr. Rick Jensen. A good teacher will encourage you to go out and find that information and not be threatened by it—because the goal has to be getting you happy and satisfied with your game!

In the end, the goal isn't to create a swing that looks just like Adam Scott's—or anybody else's. It's to improve your ball control. Everybody wants to look good in the video, but this isn't a beauty pageant. It isn't about swing positions, and it isn't about posing over shots. You're looking for predictability about where your ball is going, and the confidence to use all of your skills and tools out on the course, when it counts.

The right teacher can make that job easier, more fun and more interesting. **PG**