

How to Fill the Missing Links in Player Development

NEW GOLFER TO TRUE GOLFER – SUPPORTED THE WHOLE WAY

by David Gould, Staff Editor



A recent ESPN profile of Cristie Kerr described the LPGA Tour star as an instant devotee of the game. “I loved golf from the first time I picked up a club,” Kerr stated. A quote from Hideki Matsuyama, published in 2015 by *PGA TOUR News*, echoed this sentiment. “Golf has been fun for me since the first day I picked up a club,” said the Japanese-bred standout.

And it isn’t just tour players declaring that it was love-at-first-sight—conduct a web search using the various relevant phrases and you’ll find radio hosts, insurance executives and middle-handicap college kids who all admit they were hooked from the get-go. Come to think of it, *a majority of the people reading this article* would probably say the same thing.

Ironically, this creates a problem for golf’s player-development efforts. When the people who are designing and executing a marketing program for any product have zero ambivalence—thus a lack of objectivity—about that product’s allure, it stands to reason that misunderstandings, logical gaps and missing links will hobble their efforts to promote it.

Regular readers of this newsletter are aware that columnist Ian James, CEO of RetailTribe, points out gaps and breakdowns in grow-the-game initiatives to anyone who will listen. No marketing expert

scrutinizes golf’s push to boost participation and revenue the way James does. His belief in the need to get inside the heads and hearts of would-be golfers (or about-to-quit golfers) is deeply held. These target customers, according to Ian, require a strong “Why” factor in any let’s-play-golf message they receive.

And the “why” element will vary across a spectrum. Personal priorities may include: Spending quality time with my son or daughter; impressing my boss; rehabbing after orthopedic surgery, finding a new competitive outlet; improving my dating life after a breakup; having fun in the daytime because I work nights—the list goes on. When golf is part of an overall life strategy—instead of being a lifelong addiction that started on day one—the orientation and training process has to be comprehensive and stretched-out.

Proponent president Lorin Anderson enjoys an up-close look at the player-development activities of Cheryl Anderson, who is director of golf at the Mike Bender Golf Academy in addition to being Lorin’s wife. When Cheryl became an early adopter of Get Golf Ready, it was clear to the two of them that GGR had much to offer. But as time went by, results and outcomes fell short of expectations. “Cheryl made the decision to start a Get Golf Ready League at the course where

Mike’s academy is located,” says Lorin. “That league has been a big success—it’s a comfortable next phase for the GGR graduates, with camaraderie and a sense of belonging,” he adds.

To Lorin it’s an adaptation by the Bender academy that addresses lack of continuity in player-development generally. “The golf facilities, the professionals and industry organizations seem to like putting pieces in place but not putting the whole chain together,” he observes.

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Ian James shares this view, especially the part about golf pros buying into the philosophy but falling short when it comes to product development. “Once PGA professionals have the right product, they are very good at execution,” says James. “The one extra step they need is to see beyond quality execution—they need to see the execution as a means to an end (i.e., increasing participation and revenue) instead of seeing the execution as the end goal.”

The widely respected CEO of Billy Casper Golf, Peter Hill, has long emphasized the value of any outreach effort that takes the form of an invitation to play. This concept isn't lost on Proponent Group member Ralph Landrum, who won the 2014 PGA of America National Player Development Award. Listen to him describe his Pied Piper approach and you'll hear Landrum constantly use the terms “inviting” or “welcoming.”

Now, you could look at the sprawling grid of events, activities and programs that Landrum's World of Golf facility in Florence, Ky., routinely puts on, and get the



idea that each of them is only marginally successful—otherwise why would there be so many? We're talking about his Ladies Golf Wine and Cheese night, his Ladies Lesson Reunions, the Perfect Practice clinics, Bilingual Golf Lessons, PeeWee After School Golf, Junior Development programs (at six “color” levels, like martial arts), Junior, Lady and Senior Day, Get Golf Ready 1, Get Golf Ready 2, a Couples Outing Series, Parent/Child Tournaments, and much more, including something called the BSS Event.

It works like this: Show up for BSS with \$6 in your hand and you can pay that amount to play mini-golf, or Footgolf, or 9 holes of traditional golf, or all-you-can-beat for a set time period on the range. Landrum long ago decided that there is no “home run” in player development, only a long season of singles up the middle, to keep the game going and to appeal to every different segment of developing—or fully committed—golfer.

The idea for leagues composed of Get Golf Ready graduates isn't limited these days to the Bender academy—in fact it's listed under the FAQ tab on GGR's website as an answer to the question,



“How can I retain my Get Golf Ready graduates?”

Now in its eighth season and long seen as the game's signature tool for player development, GGR underwent an evaluation as to its effectiveness back in 2011. According to that research, a full 80 percent of graduates were staying in the game in the first year, 75 percent remained active in the second year and 65 percent did so in the third year post-grad. The report further stated that frequency of play was averaging 10 to 14 rounds a year—that's enough to make someone a “core” golfer. That study has just been repeated recently and it cites, from 2014 to 2015, “a 9 percent participation increase, introducing golf to 107,485 men and women.” Again, the story on retention could hardly be more positive. “Around 90 percent of GGR students continue to play golf in the first year,” stated the report.

Still, there can be a sense of unease among front-lines golf professionals about the “catch and release” feeling that has surrounded new-beginner onboarding and how “sticky” or not these programs are



proving to be.

In 2013, one of the golf profession's top promoters and teachers, Tony Martinez, was cited by the North Texas PGA for having guided 342 women golfers through his GGR program. Perhaps because data regarding what GGR graduates do afterward has been so upbeat, Martinez wasn't tracking the activities of his own GGR students. But it so happened that he found himself discussing this question with none other than Ian James of RetailTribe, who characterized the lack of follow-up as—indeed—one of those gaps and missing links in player development.

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As James related in a memo to Proponent Group, Martinez reflected on their discussion and wasted no time investigating “conversion” of his own GGR students to the so-called core level of participation. His results were stunningly weak: *Out of those 342 students, only 28 had gone on to play at least one round of golf in the 12 months following their GGR graduation.*

Martinez enlisted his wife to contact each of these students by phone and learn more about their no-show status. “Felt intimidated” was an answer often heard, along with “I’m not good enough” and “I didn’t really feel welcome” at the golf course. As the phone calls continued, it became clear that many of the grads were interested or even eager to take GGR again if only to once more enjoy Tony’s self-styled graduation-day experience. To the great pleasure of the newly Golf-Ready students, it is a golf “bunny run” that consists of nine holes, 40 yards long or shorter, with no water and no sand between the starting points and the holes—which makes it possible to play the entire course with a putter, if you so prefer.

This revelation set Martinez in motion. He worked with the PGA of America to help create a GGR II program that would get rolled out nationally – all GGR graduates being prime targets. He also persuaded the city of Dallas to let him to have field space to create 18 of his trademark 40-yard holes and to run a “40-yard chip and putt” evening open to all of previous GGR graduates. He filled this 40-yard event in hours and on the appointed night was struck to hear that a majority would eagerly play in monthly editions of this event—even *without* the support of a GGR II experience.

With the awareness he’s gained, Martinez does try to convert his GGR students up to GGR II and then up to an additional follow-on program, working to get them to the point where they can tackle a golf course and have fun. However, he continues to run his 40-yard

golf event once a month, working to retain those graduates who haven’t yet moved along to take the next stage. The final tally of 40-yard rounds recorded in 2015 was approximately 4,000, with a likely total of zero clubs snapped over players’ knees in frustration.

Cathy Harbin, an industry veteran who has been executive director of Golf 20/20 and after that a high-ranking ClubCorp executive, among other career stops, knows Martinez well and wonders about the weak conversion rate his GGR program racked up. “It’s hard to imagine that national statistics on GGR graduates would be so high, in terms of continued engagement, while Tony’s would be so low,” Harbin muses. She says further that top-down efforts on player development are well and good but they pale in importance compared to grassroots activity.

“Developing golfers is all about the ‘willing warriors’ out there in the field,” says Harbin. “Compared to what these grassroots professionals are doing, all the reports and brainstorm sessions by industry leadership don’t matter much.” She is quick to point out that a graduate event like the one Martinez runs isn’t just a fine example of the tactic. “It’s not just that what Tony came up with is well-designed,” Harbin says, “it’s a matter that his program would be in the roughly 20 percent of all GGR programs that even have these grad events—and they are considered must-have elements of a Get Golf Ready.”

Now the CEO of her own startup management company, On Course Operations, Harbin looks back at her years with ClubCorp and the extensive site-visit work that was part of her job description. “Whenever I was at a ClubCorp facility where the instruction program was well-supported and popular, I would hear kudos of all kinds about the teachers—except for one,” she says. “I never heard someone say that Teacher XYZ was great at bringing new people into the game and getting them to stay—that isn’t a prestigious coaching achievement, within our industry, at least not yet.”

Golf can capture a person for life as soon as their first shot gets airborne, but the game can also be an acquired taste—no different than broccoli, chess, yoga, woodworking, modern jazz and vintage port wine. Player development, as it evolves, looks more and more like a step-by-step process to help new players acquire their own taste for golf. **PG**

