

PROPONENT PROFILE

Liam Mucklow: Academy Reclaimed, National Honor and New Opportunities Beckoning

By David Gould, Staff Editor



You fly back home after a Golf Channel audition that went well and head to work at one of North America's premier indoor golf learning centers—designed by you and back in your control following some lengthy unpleasantness. Meanwhile there is a new PGA of Ontario Teacher of the Year award, plus finalist status for the national PGA of Canada honor. For Liam Mucklow, young at age 34 but with some newly gained wisdom, it's a welcome career phase.

Mucklow, a Proponent Group member based in the Toronto suburb of Vaughn, Ont., is scheduled to speak before fellow Proponent members at the upcoming PGA Merchandise Show in Orlando. His presentation will cover a lot of ground, but it won't leave out the cautionary tale of how he sold his stake in the coaching facility, Golf Lab, to his original partner under expectations that weren't fulfilled and in hindsight seemed unrealistic. A year-plus of mismanagement and customer defection followed Mucklow's equity sale, ending in the partner declaring insolvency. At that point it became possible for Liam to find a new partner and buy Golf Lab back from the bankruptcy-court trustees.

A son of a science professor, Mucklow set up his original Golf Lab as a small, modest teaching studio. In 2009 he and the original partner built a gleaming, 26,000-square-foot facility that soon became a \$2 million-a-year business. Earning mostly

sweat equity through the first several years of its operation, Mucklow welcomed the partner's 2013 cash offer for his shares. Staying on as head of operations, Liam continued his dedication to first-class coaching and the student's experience, but under the new arrangement witnessed a pattern of ill-advised decisions.

In the meantime he kept extremely busy—mainly outside Golf Lab—coaching a large following of players, of varied skill levels, who make a 10-month commitment to the format and each pay \$4,500 over that period. He worked with Team Canada golfers, gave AimPoint clinics all over and made a presentation at the World Scientific Congress of Golf. He also took on the role of facilitator for the Coach of Developing Competitors program, which is the highest-level coaching certification program in Canada.

The mini-crisis of Golf Lab's brief shutdown is thankfully in the past and guided again by Mucklow along with a new business partner. A rejuvenated veteran staff and a swiftly rebuilding membership augur well for the facility's future. Golfers who frequent this performance palace don't miss out on much. They get their fitness evaluated via TPI screens and the efficiency of their swing motions scoped



Liam Mucklow's Golf Lab in Ontario includes 26,000 square feet of golf improvement paradise even during the winters.

out by AMM 3D body mapping. TrackMan monitors are deployed to measure patterns in club delivery and ball flight. SAM PuttLab is used to measure changes in putting stroke parameters and the SAM Balance Lab is used to get exact readings of ground-force reactions. Liam sometimes uses the phrase “Mucklow-metrics” to describe the unfuzzy approach he and his Golf Lab associates have developed to help clients.

You could say that all this is quite impressive for someone who spent a decade just trying to out-bash fellow competitors on the World Long Drive Tour, but Mucklow would beg to differ. Bias against the game’s top distance

guys isn’t valid, in his view. “Long-drive golfers are dedicated athletes who study efficiency in the golf motion with a lot of discipline,” he asserts, adding that rapid advancements in the kinesiology of golf have been fueled in part by that search for ultimate driving yardage. In 2013, Mucklow was recruited to help the Titleist Performance Institute launch its worldwide Power Coach Certification program.

An open mind to what works in any sporting endeavor is probably Mucklow’s core asset. As a student at the University of Alberta he played varsity golf but was also an all-star volleyball player and a medalist in badminton. After graduation, he set off to pursue his long-drive endeavors

TrackMan-based Study: Liam’s Deep Dive into "Brain-based Learning"

When the coaching process goes well, a student’s movement skills steadily develop. That development is governed by activity in the motor cortex segment of the athlete’s brain—which is heavily reliant on proprioception, a term describing how muscles and connective tissue send reports to the brain about what movements have been made. A golf coach can’t see inside someone’s neural pathways nor surf along their central nervous system, so Liam Mucklow attempted to do the next best thing.

He was frustrated by the firehose approach taken by members at his Golf Lab—hitting in bays equipped with TrackMan and getting lost in the data while failing to improve performance. To break that cycle, he came up with an experiment in 2013 that used a limited set of TrackMan data along with golfers’ responses to sets of questions and periodic “naked” tests (no digital data allowed). The idea was to link the coach’s guidance to what the golfer does and, importantly, what the golfer perceives he is doing.

“I would start with an orientation to familiarize them with the two data points, then conduct an early 10-shot test of their awareness of the values their ball-striking produced,” he explains. “We recorded those test results, then started on an eight-week program in which they would practice regularly seeing those two data points and nothing else.” The two TrackMan-generated stats the study used are Swing Direction and Launch Direction. The point of the experiment was to show players that their bodies/brains could become much better at knowing what had just happened with those measurements, even indoors.

The wonkish-sounding acronym for the regimen he put golfers through is the “IMPCaTT Model,” which stands for “Improvement Measures and Predictive Capacity using TrackMan Technology.” The final report he produced has this revealing sub-title: “A Technology-Based Learning model for Self-Guided Instruction.” It studied 30 golfers over a 16-week period, recording the Swing Direction and Launch Direction metrics before, during and after. At its most basic level, this overall concept echoes the familiar scenario of the tour pro whose coach praises him for

“knowing his own swing” and being able to fix problems on the range when the coach isn’t around. But this was a formal and scientific version.

The impetus for Mucklow’s experiment came in part from a paper titled “Neuro Learning for Golf,” written by former National PGA Teacher of the Year Mike Hebron. In it, Hebron examines the mechanics of brain-body activity and looks for ways to create a performance-feedback loop within the golfer’s own physical-mental system. The payoff? Physical sensations feeding the brain with an understanding of how the body has just moved (outdoors, ball flight would also factor in) and self-guiding it to adjust those movements next time. To Mucklow and other “coach-don’t-teach” believers, that’s an obvious upgrade over stimuli in the form of spoken instructions from the teaching pro. In this approach, the coach’s responsibility shifts a bit—principally it includes helping the student build and hone their kinesthetic awareness. Meanwhile, technology like Trackman is there and available, to support the process and verify results.

By the end of the experiment, the 30 test subjects were dramatically better—43 percent higher test scores—at predicting their Swing Direction and Launch Direction numbers. In his overview of the experiment’s findings, Mucklow described what he had done as “using Trackman to draw on what golfers already know and understand from their past experiences – then helping that individual invent their personal golf swing while improving their prediction, their mind-body connection, as well as their problem-solving, creativity and deduction skills.” Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime, as the adage goes.

“Improving a student’s individual learning potential enhances their performance potential,” Mucklow believes. “The environment that this creates, and that Golf Lab adheres to, is a learning-developing environment, as opposed to the traditional ‘teaching and fixing to get it right’ approach.” In some ways this approach treats every golfer as a “feel golfer”—and we know that people who self-describe that way tend to attack the golf course confidently. – D.G.

and also compete on mini-tours in the U.S. and Asia. That led to the launch of a coaching career, but as an athlete Mucklow continued to develop, gradually making himself a tournament-quality squash player. He is now ranked among Canada's top 20 amateur squash players nationally.

One element of Mucklow's broad education in the study of golf performance was his stint as a tech specialist on a PGA Tour van traveling the U.S. Sunbelt. During two long Canadian winters, he worked for Scott Garrison, whose van carried the gear of smaller brands like Harrison Shafts, Bobby Grace putters and the like. "Within the many paths you can take to gain expertise as a clubfitter, I found that fitting PGA Tour players was uniquely valuable," says Mucklow. He eventually decided that the gear aspect was



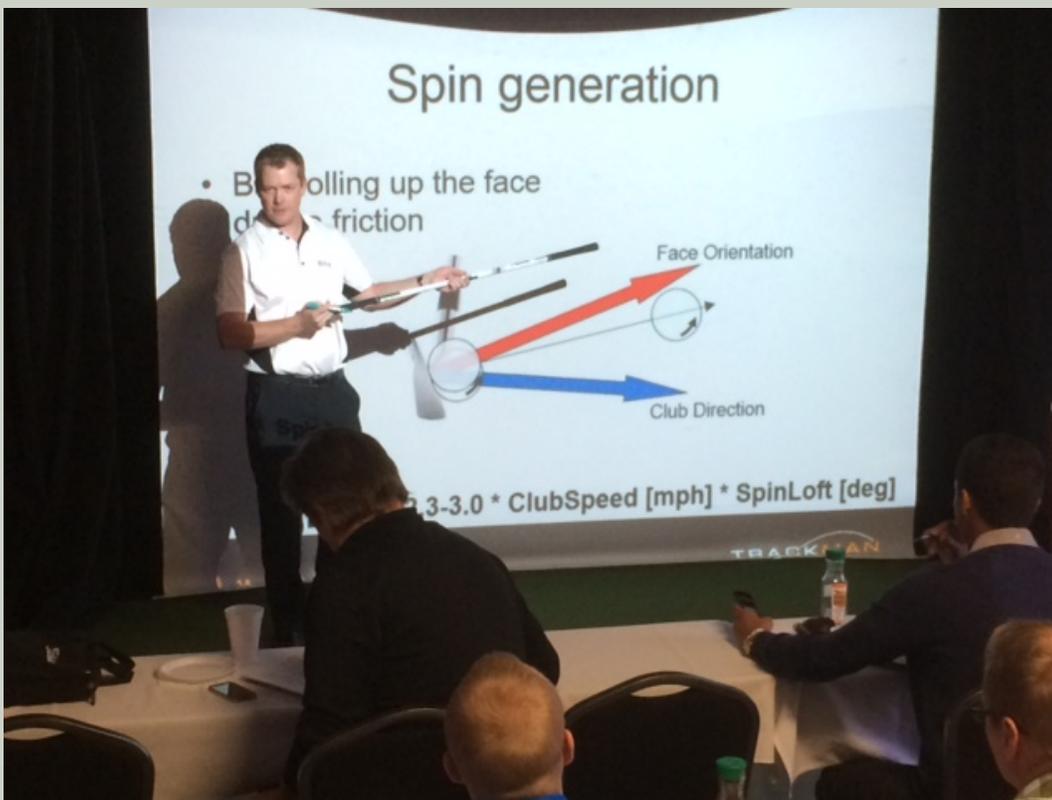
Mucklow believed that if he could provide "everything a golfer might want, other than a golf course," and put it all under one roof, he would really have something.

critical enough to warrant a senior Golf Lab position with a most intriguing title: Director of Equipment.

Reflecting on the five-year process of building and nurturing the Lab, Mucklow says he knew he wanted to offer the curious golfer "all aspects of game-improvement, from technical instructions to coaching to equipment to golf-specific fitness." He felt that if he could provide "everything

a golfer might want, other than a golf course," and put it all under one roof, he would really have something. Visitors tend to be duly impressed. In June, one of Canada's wealthiest industrialists flew Mucklow to Florida to have him conceptualize a "Golf Lab South" as part of a sprawling tract that will be developed for golf, housing and other amenitized activities. That project is in a waiting period, pending an actual launch of the golf club in the first quarter of 2015, but it holds promise.

Next month in Orlando the ideas and achievements—and business-decision mishaps—of this tireless and curious Canadian professional will be featured in his Proponent Group presentation during Show Week. By then another chapter or two may have been written.



Mucklow recently spoke at the World Scientific Congress of Golf.