

Where Do All These Gadgets Get You?

TECHNOLOGY FOR TEACHING: THE ROI FACTOR

by David Gould, Staff Editor

In the 21st century, golf instruction converted from a guesswork business to a tech-based, performance-enhancement science. At least that's what happened with teachers at the profession's higher echelons. Proof of this conversion comes from Proponent Group's current Instructor Operations and Compensation Survey—it shows that a full 80 percent of members now teach "using a launch monitor or Doppler radar." Those with putting technology, ground-force plates and other such gear are becoming a healthy percentage of the membership.

One welcome fact about the leading technology in the golf-instruction category—it's quality stuff. Certainly a few gadgets have hit the market, sold some units, then drifted away. But in general the large-ticket items perform extremely well, enough to have shifted teaching from the "eyeball" form of diagnosis to a process of verifiable measurement and assessment.

So, the gear is coveted, and coaches are pleased to own it, but how exactly does the dollars-and-cents part pan out? Should coaches expect that X dollars spent on a particular piece of hardware or software should directly yield Y amount of incremental revenue?

"It was probably easier to figure the return on our investments in video, way back when," surmises Gregg Rogers, a Proponent member in Seattle who is all-in with a trio of tech-laden golf academies. "I bought a video unit in 1997 that, according to a calculation I did, generated a 1,200 percent return on what I spent."

An obvious equation involving teaching technology would go like this: You're charging \$120 per hour for private lessons, you buy, say, a Trackman unit in January, and in March you send a letter to your database saying that your rate is going up to \$150 an hour for the coming season. Not to say that hasn't



TrackMan's Optimizer feature

happened with a handful of Proponent Group members, one of whom noted that his successful rate increase was "partly thanks to my addition of Trackman," but it's not what members usually say about their investment in technology.

Dom DiJulia, a Proponent Member based at Jericho National Golf Club, outside of Philadelphia, is one of a dozen TrackMan University Partners worldwide—he has never needed convincing about the value of this equipment.

"I view the technology I own as a cost of doing business at the highest level," DiJulia says. "I need facts and measurements to be able to not guess when I'm working with a student. So, before I make a technology purchase, I don't specifically ask, 'Is this going to help me make more money?'"

Rogers agrees. "I'm passionate about technology and how it helps us do our job," he says. "Students kept telling me, 'Gregg your instruction has gotten a lot more simple and easy to follow,'" he says. "That's because I tell them what they need to hear in 37 words, instead of 370—that kind of coaching and communication creates demand."

With the big academies, especially those at high-powered private clubs, the investment is a combination of brick-and-mortar plus all the software and hardware. Tim Cutshall, a leading expert on design and infrastructure of golf academy buildings, recently consulted to a large, prestigious club in the Southwest that has other big-name clubs nearby, competing for upscale members and not averse to the “arms race” tactics that teaching technology is often part of.

“This club did a big renovation and could have left its teaching building alone,” says Cutshall.

“However, they decided they wanted something bigger and better.” What Cutshall said next is what’s relevant to the current discussion: “The building they tore down was there for 10 years and has generated tons of revenue—it *had paid for itself many times over.*” So, the ROI—return on investment—was certified in this case.

The “shiny objects” that golf instruction has eagerly embraced involve some risk on the investment side. Dan Lockhart, a longtime Proponent member who’s been teaching in Bonita Springs, Fla. and in the UK for the past several seasons, says there are gear purchases that, for the average successful instructor, will call for some intense due diligence with a calculator as well as peer research.

“I don’t use credit cards to finance the purchases I make on basically anything,” says Lockhart, “but I’ve used a credit card to pay for teaching technology.” He partnered 50-50 with another coach on a Trackman unit with an initial hit of about \$10,000 on his credit card, and has zero misgivings about making that decision and making the payments. As often happens when you ask teaching pros about tech in their arsenal, Lockhart cites an anecdotal case that epitomizes his feelings about this type of investment.

“Once I had Trackman, I put the logo on my website and I was certain it helped business—but I viewed it as a tool for me, and I never up-charged against it,” he begins. “One night at a dinner I met a guy in his 60s who played at Wake Forest long ago and was still an excellent player. We got talking about Trackman and the information really intrigued the guy—he came for three lessons and stayed for a year.” On top of that, he sent six people to Lockhart, all of them higher-handicappers.



Swing Catalyst pressure plates provide a whole new level of swing data for review.

“One recommendation, producing six pretty regular students, that’s going to really help your book,” Lockhart affirms. As a caper, it’s been evident to Dan that the plum job he landed at the super-upscale Queenwood Club outside London was dependent on being tech-savvy. “That part of my resume gave me a shot at the Queenwood job,” he says emphatically.

Dom DiJulia has “done the math” on all this, from many angles. He understands that purchasing more units of technology like K-Vest, Trackman, SAM PuttLab and Swing Catalyst is a natural path toward business expansion. In terms of scale, he scopes out a diverging path with two options for any coach who is established and seeking to grow—tech being an important piece of the growth puzzle. “At this point,” he says, “a very successful coach is either tracking along in the \$200,000s or they’re planning the big leap up toward annual revenues of \$1.5 million and more—you can’t logically shoot for anything in between, because the investment in technology and teaching space is so substantial.”

DiJulia, even though his business retains a second instructor, Mark Walder, owns “one of everything, when it comes to the important technology.” That includes K-Vest, and DiJulia has studied the idea of creating train-yourself programming for his students, using the new, \$2,500 K-Player unit from K-Vest—thus achieving the Holy Grail of earning revenue while not attending to the golfer who’s paying to improve.

“Can teaching tech be used as revenue stream? Yes, it can,” he asserts, “but not for every coach at every particular stage of their business development.

You still have to help set the golfer up, they still need golf balls, you have to fill the divots, pick up the tees—it's trickier than it might initially seem."

At least in Canada, there was no golf coach who could match the technology prowess of Proponent member Liam Mucklow, who broke new ground with his state-of-the-art Golf Lab in suburban Toronto. It's a 26,000-square-foot facility he designed and nurtured until it was a thriving \$2 million-a-year business. Golfers frequenting this performance palace got their fitness evaluated via TPI screens and the efficiency of their swing motions scoped out by AMM 3D body mapping. TrackMan monitors are deployed there to measure patterns in club delivery and ball flight.

What of it all now? Well, Mucklow is no longer attached to the facility.

"I sold the training center," he says. "When I first brought in all my technology, it defined me as a leader, then over time everyone else acquired the same assets."

"Every 30th of the month," he recalls, "I had to meet my note with a \$75,000 payment—I don't miss that part." With many irons in the fire, including a major project in China, Mucklow has moved on to a new model, apparently. "I'm working to get into an overhead-free enterprise zone," he says, with a tinge of humor.

A leader on the vendor side, TrackMan has recently come to market with its TrackMan 4 unit, basically a launch monitor but that term doesn't seem to do it justice. This version uses two radar systems instead of one—which had been the standard in the category, to up the quality of data about what Mr. Smith's club and ball just did. The new system is selling for just \$18,000—that's less than it used to cost to bring in a Trackman.

Also part of this teaching-tech phenomenon is Swing Catalyst, which works on ground forces—the interface between golfers' feet and the surface they're standing on. In a presentation the Swing Catalyst reps like to give, a right-handed golfer who is making what appears to be a perfectly classic weight shift is shown by the plates and sensors to instead be making the old "reverse pivot," with his weight counterproductively loaded on the left foot at the top of his backswing. Many teaching professionals who are already "haves" would surely see this demo and think, "That's another tech tool I gotta have."

For its part, K-Vest has made a pivot that's quite notable—in company parlance it's a move from Measure and Assess to a new tier that's billed as Measure-Assess-Coach-Train.

"Under the model we want to provide," says Tony Morgan of K-Vest, "the coach continues to interpret what he or she sees in the measure-and-assess stage, and then they demonstrate the feel and concepts that they see as being right for that student—that's the Coach part. But the Train aspect of the equation is where the coach doesn't have to be right there anymore, thanks to what the K-Vest Player

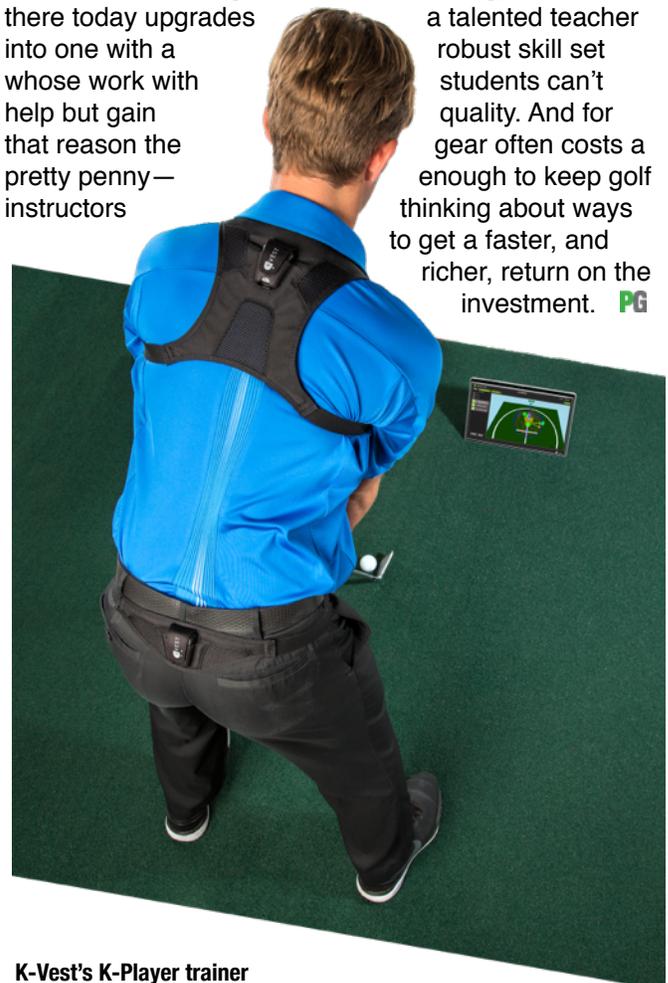
technology can do—that coach can move along and get in front of another student."

Of all the sources interviewed for this article, Morgan, though a vendor, was most frank and explicit about the unsatisfying ROI numbers on technology—if you're looking at it the way a nail salon would look the purchase of several tanning beds. "A coach who's thinking about dropping \$10,000 on Tech Product XYZ with the idea that they'll raise their per-hour rate by \$20 to reap the gains—they're barking up the wrong tree," says Morgan. "You go on that basis and what, 2,000 lessons later you're now profiting? That's not a good model." What does work, in his view, is doubling your per-hour income, without anyone actually realizing—much less paying an up-charge.

Taking a pencil to his own proposition, Morgan points out that the consumer-use K-Player, at a cost of \$2,500, can be acquired now by coaches at no charge if they also purchase the K-Vest 6D, for \$10,000. A player who has gone through Measure-Assess with the coach is given a drill-and-practice regimen they can do with K-Player. Charging \$50 per half hour for this biofeedback training experience, with two students a day, five days a week, for one 10-month season, yields \$500 a week—double the cost of the two-unit package.

Yes, the teaching there today upgrades into one with a whose work with help but gain that reason the pretty penny—instructors

technology that's out a talented teacher robust skill set students can't quality. And for gear often costs a enough to keep golf thinking about ways to get a faster, and richer, return on the investment. PG



K-Vest's K-Player trainer