Learning Tools for Every Facet of Performance (and a Place to Put Every Tool)

As teaching evolves to become coaching, methods of generating data points, analytics and communications multiply. Organizing so much content is the new problem, but creative solutions are appearing.

By David Gould, Staff Editor

In the 1990s, U.S. pro shops were getting wired with golf-management software and the term "cigar box" was being tossed around. Companies that sold point-of-sale terminals and integrated programs used it to satirize antiquated means of taking payments. Mostly they were belittling the digital-but-"dumb" cash register. Of course, many shops lacked even that.

A similar process is occurring right now with golf instruction. The industry's dedicated teachers are examining the systems in use for booking, presenting, follow-up and tracking of the student's progress. Even as they study ways to help students, they are thinking about streamlining and promoting their own businesses. Some have asked: In a perfect world, how could all this information and communication coalesce into a logical sequence or hierarchy?

In other words, is there a system or platform that gathers everything together and makes it basically self-organizing—with inputs from multiple sources dovetailing neatly? At the same time, could that system provide an efficient, effective way to promote, market and merchandise?

The difference between now and 20 years ago is that individual devices and tools allowing the coach to greatly help golfers are highly advanced. Every new way to help golfers improve has been welcomed. In a way it's been like Christmas morning—opening each new present without thinking too much about where to store them all and how these new toys affect the useful life of previous gifts. So, the "cigar box" factor refers only to organization.

At golf facilities nationwide, thousands of important moments in performance enhancement have occurred. It's worth asking how well were they captured. It's also notable how effectively were they placed in context, then translated into new action steps. Likewise we'd want to know how this content can become available to other people who—now or in the future—form part of the golfer's support team. And yes, that includes the parents of competitive junior golfers—most of whom hear very little from their kids about all the great coaching being received. If anything, parents will be privy to some coaching content then misquote it during a round of golf or driving-range session with their child.

Teaching professionals are intent on avoiding the use-it-then-lose-it scenario.

Top coaches like Henry Brunton (right in photo), have more data collection tools at their disposal than ever before and now face the challenge of being able to effectively catalog and review each students' skills record over time.

A breakthrough of sorts can be achieved during a lesson in April, but steps must be taken so it isn't lost or forgotten by May or June. Also, does the golfer's fitness trainer know about the new swing thought? Does the sport psychologist he works with know? What about other new developments—for example, the golfer's return to a previously used set of wedges. The people guiding this player need to know the facts of timing of such events.

Proponent Group member Tim Conaway, based in Sarasota, Fla., has given much thought to this question lately, jumping on a Proponent Group Facebook forum last month to address it. On Conaway's website, every student is assigned a "student locker" with a user name and password that he as coach assigns. "Their locker contains comprehensive review notes for every lesson that we

have," says Conaway. "I use Evernote to dictate my thoughts right after the lesson, and then update their locker within 48 hours." In this system, the locker serves a dual purpose. "The student doesn't have the burden of memorizing the lesson, and I as coach I can review their locker as well prior to their next lesson," Conaway says.

In the same forum thread that contained Tim Conaway's thoughts, Proponent colleague Dee Forsberg McCullagh explained that, following each lesson, she emails each student what could basically be called a thank-you note—except it's a note with lots of functional benefits. These include: a PDF file containing the theme or objective of the lesson, a capsule practice plan plus two or three still photos clipped out of the video, showing any adjustments made in that session to the setup or swing. "I save the Word version of that file so I am always consistent with my advice," explains McCullagh. "I've been doing this now for over five years and it is the No. 1 reason students give me referrals and come back."

"This is all part of the continuing changeover from teaching to coaching," says Lorin Anderson, founder and president of the Proponent Group. "As technology and better tools continue to emerge, less time is spent standing in front of the golfer talking and giving information." Given his role as the primary contact person for Proponent, Anderson gets approached by entrepreneurs on a regular basis. Lately the hot product has been a platform-and-solutions concept to organize teaching and learning.

One of the recent overtures comes from the British company Cadin, which spells out its benefit to instructors in three legs of a stool: Connect, Communicate and Share. The Cadin idea is to deliver coaches a multi-faceted digital clearinghouse that creates connection and cooperative progress between golfers and coaches. Adam Keable, co-founder and director of this London-based firm describes its product as "a new and unique connections platform built for the golf industry," one that "transforms the way in which golfers and coaches connect online. " In reality, he asserts, this is a "sports performance tool that crosses many athletic verticals," golf being just one, but also being the first to test how the system will work. The website, cadingolf.com is currently in beta stage.

Keable reports a successful mid-July launch of that site, "targeting UK coaches who are at the top of their game." As the current phase proceeds, the company's main goal is simple. "We want to get feedback from coaches and golfers, refine the platform where necessary and work on new development items," Keable says. For observers who expect the consumer to respond mildly or matter-of-factly to a system like this, Keable says that may not be accurate. "We are finding," he says, "that both the coach and the golfer relate to the problem of communication between sessions. As the communication is not centralized for either of them, it can be very frustrating. Also as the cur-

rent communication channels are not specifically designed for golf coaching, they provide little value just convenience."

The company's move into the North American market shouldn't be far off. "It's all about getting feedback and building the right platform," says Keable. If coaches in the US want to get involved—at no cost to them or their students during the test phase—that is something we would welcome."

Jupiter, Florida-based Bill Davis has helped bring the playing lesson into the modern era by adding a video element with the assistance of his iPad3. Following the lesson, Davis sends video clips from the round to his students via Dropbox. The approach works well in teaching skills like the knockdown shot. "That type of instruction really benefits from being taped and shown to the student with the fundamentals reinforced," says Davis, a longtime Proponent member.

Russell Warner, a second-generation golf instructor who works to improve the performance of European golfers from his base at the Switzerland golf academy at Heidental, where he has worked since 2004, has "tried online communication, notebooks, student cards, diaries and

Edufii creates a "training space" for the golfer to manage and track all golf-related training information in real time with all concerned parties.

other tools. "At this point I'm curious to investigate all methods. The video summaries have worked great up until now but this is always best on swing work. As I find myself coaching more aspects of the game, sometimes there is now opportunity to put a film together, so I need a standard practice," says Warner.

One such possibility is the U.S. startup company Edufii. Spencer Dennis, the CEO and co-founder of Edufii (pronounced ED-u-fy) puts a heavy emphasis on the youth market and on "sports parents who will spend freely, over a long span of time" on behalf of their child's athletic development. In order to understand an Edufii account, also called a "training space," you should ponder Dennis's compelling notion that an athlete could open one up at age 10 and keep until age 70 or longer. In stating this proposition to people who stand on lesson tees, he then lists all the inputs their clients could be making use of.

"We're talking about the video of golf swings in practice, video clips from tournament play, the swing coach's notes on a session and the player's own notes," says Dennis. "That's just the basics. Now add the shot-tracking and analysis. Add the fitness trainer's report, the Trackman data, SAM PuttLab data, exercises recommend by a sports psychologist, nutrition patterns, clubfitting specs and changes—and there are quite a few others," he points out.

"It's all too much to handle unless it goes in one purpose-built space." The contention of companies like Edufii, Winning Identity and Cadin is that existing "lockers" provided by the companies that sell a single device or program are fine, but they don't solve the challenge of aggregating, sequencing, sharing and otherwise maximizing use of the training content.

"Even the golfer's frame of mind—what's going on in their life—is worthwhile to know as you study past periods to correlate all factors with performance," says Dennis, who was a staff instructor at the Gary Gilchrist Academy in central Florida before veering away from active teaching to work on Edufii full-time. In fact, it's a feather in golf's cap that someone from this industry developed the Edufii concept—it is highly applicable to other venues such as music performance and learning. In fact musicians, gymnasts and other skill developers currently do use the platform.

"One piece that users particularly like is that you can tag items as to their date, type, who should review, and many other characteristics," says Dennis. "At some point the question is: When were you playing your best, and what was going on at that time? All of those factors can be retrieved quickly and reliably." Cost for golfers is $10 per month for hosting and maintenance. "Seven of the Golf Digest Top 50 coaches are active on our system now," says Dennis, "along with the Butch Harmon School in Dubai and some other prominent users."

(Note: All Proponent Group members are invited to email the company at sdennis@edufii.com, mention that they are Proponent members and qualify for an Early Adopter program, which provides free access to the platform at no charge to the coach for a lengthy trial period.)

The tale of Joe Schuchat (pronounced SHOO-chat) is an intriguing one, with implications for how these training platforms or even "solutions" will develop and gain acceptance. Located now at CORE Golf Academy, the Toronto, Ont., native has been a PGA Tour caddie for Matt Richardson and himself played at a high enough level to qualify for the British Amateur. "I had to choose between playing in the British Amateur or caddying for Matt in the U.S. Open—I thought about it and chose the U.S. Open," he says unabashedly.

Kevin Sprecher has been in discussions with Schuchat and expects to be fully operational with Winning Identity in the 2014 season. Having an assistant who takes notes and photographs during Sprecher's lessons makes the process of interacting with students more streamlined for Sprecher, but he wants to make the leap anyway. His current mode is to upload videos to the student's USchedule locker and otherwise use the Microsoft product OneNote to chronicle what happens in the lesson ("I do this during the session, not at night afterward," Sprecher says) and deliver those summaries to mobile and desktop devices, depending on who needs to see it.

This winter, given some down time, he plans to load up his Winning Identity dashboard with all the proprietary content he feels is appropriate. When you get started with Edufii as a golf coach there is already video-instruction you can tap into and distribute to students, although it's expected that most higher-level instructors will be customizing that content fully. "I am going to load my own videos across all the skill categories, and also get my strength guy and one other fitness guy to load custom content," says Sprecher, who is particularly pleased that Shot-by-Shot statistical software comes loaded in with Winning Identity.

If there is a sense that teachers are relying on a "cigar box" full of swing data, ball-flight data, tournament scores, shot statistics, video clips, telestrations, practice journals and the like, then the next stage of development may be at hand to provide a remedy.
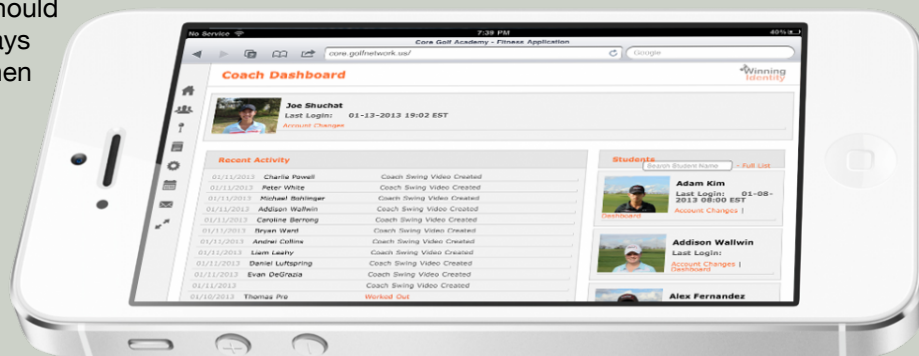
Winning Identity supports a team-oriented culture. It offers a tool to keep a golfer's entire support network unified with fitness, swing, practice information and statistical tracking in one place.