

ARE TEACHING AND CLUB FITTING DIVERGING (AND WOULD THAT BE OK?)

by David Gould,
Staff Editor

In the field of economics when a theory gets disproven many times yet keeps resurfacing, it becomes known as a “zombie idea.” Clubfitting has been plagued for decades by the zombie idea (in the consumer’s mind) that some golfers are “not good enough to need custom clubs.” It’s fine if you’re a single-digit player, goes the theory, but everyone else should be OK buying off-the-rack.

Tracy Schooler, a Proponent member based at an affluent club outside Indianapolis, sees that zombie idea on its way toward extinction. Schooler’s students have been looking at fitting carts on the range for so long and have heard so much word-of-mouth praise for fitted clubs that they very seldom raise the not-good-enough objection anymore.

Schooler gives a fair amount of credit to launch monitors and social media for quashing that zombie notion. The same Trackman or Flightscope that’s being used to diagnose Joe Golfer’s swing issues is usually a vital tool in the fitting process — Schooler sees golfers sharing this realization on social media the way people share everything else on social media. “Working with a professional clubfitter has become yet another way for technology to improve your life,” says Schooler, director of instruction at Wood Wind Golf Club. “The golfers I talk to are very receptive to it.”

Wood Wind is under the same management group as Prairie View Golf Club, a semi-private in nearby Carmel, Ind., where Proponent Group



member Sean Bolduc is director of instruction. Tracy Schooler’s Wood Wind students who need clubfitting actually get sent down to Bolduc, who is geared up and staffed up to do all the fitting anyone might need. “They come back very happy,” says Schooler. “They might add in a kidding way that it was ‘a \$2,500 trip,’ but they’re always pleased with the results.”

This scenario is one of many that raises a question of specialization in the clubfitting end of golf performance.

In the 1980s, when the first Henry-Griffitts fitting carts appeared on lesson tees, a core philosophy of the young company was that the golf club purchase should be a transaction between a teacher and his or her student, using the precision-fitting methodology. Under that premise, any dedicated teacher would want to learn the clubfitting craft and every skilled custom-fitter would be a golf instructor with a stable of satisfied students.

In the time since, golf coaches have studied and mastered specialties such as green-reading, biomechanics, elite junior training, the psychology of

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The fitting cart parked near the teaching tee has become a staple at most quality golf facilities over the past couple of decades.

competition and the like. Among the larger academies, a new role—specialist in golf gear—has emerged. At the Mike Bender Golf Academy, Matt Wilkes is one such expert, although Wilkes does teach his own roster of students along with running junior clinics and coaching groups of women players.

Despite how advanced his golf-equipment skills have become, Wilkes still sees the world through the eyes of a teacher. No matter how inappropriate a client's clubs may be, Wilkes will still “point them to instruction” if their baseline ability to make a swing that advances the ball are below a certain level. And yes, his nationally known colleagues Cheryl Anderson and Mike Bender do assign to Wilkes the step-by-step work of a clubfitting session when one of their student's needs it, albeit with heavy consultation based on their diagnosis of what's happening in the swing.

It goes without saying that coaches of that stature and experience could easily develop into excellent fitters. But walk into Wilkes's studio within the Bender academy and you'll see immediately how and why this division of labor works. Laid out in workshop fashion, Matt's space is equipped almost on par with a manufacturer's equipment van on the PGA Tour. If you happen to be there when a box containing custom-fitted clubs arrives you'll understand something else—the academy counts on Wilkes to correct factory errors, which by his report are disturbingly common.

“I check every set of irons that comes in,” Wilkes says, “and I'd estimate that 90 percent of them have lie angles that are off. Some of the lofts are off, as well. Cast clubs are way

worse than forged, regarding lie angle,” he adds, “and occasionally there will be a length error, or some weights could be off.” As a result Wilkes is constantly bending irons to fix the lie angles. “The farther from standard the spec sheet calls for, the more likely that the factory doesn't get it right,” he reports.

With his shop all tricked out to handle repairs, reshafting, regripping and the like, and with Wilkes so skilled in these arts, it starts to look normal for an academy-scale operation to have a specialist of this type—and hey why not have him or her do most of the hands-on clubfitting, as well? It should be said that the Bender academy is not at all unique in this area—the setup described above is one you'll find in any large golf market across the U.S.

And lest it go unsaid, some very fine instructors simply do not enjoy clubfitting and have no serious ambition to become experts at it. Fitting, when you think about it, is only needed once or twice with any student—compared to the dozens of lessons that same golfer might take—and it does seem to use a slightly different part of the brain than teaching calls upon. Furthermore, if you're going to become a true gear wizard like Wilkes you will eventually find yourself straining at a loft and lie machine, wondering if one more degree of bend will crack the hosel you're clamped onto.

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A good indicator of industry opinion on clubfitting's role can be found by looking at Professional Golf Management programs and how they approach that question. Proponent member Rob Comerer is a 2012 graduate of Penn State's PGM program who went through a fairly intense clubmaking and clubfitting unit during his sophomore year.

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According to Comerer, who co-directs a dual-site teaching practice called Smash Factory Golf, outside Rochester, N.Y., the Penn State PGM faculty “puts a definite emphasis” on understanding how clubs are designed and how they enhance or hobble a golfer’s swing motion. However, in Comerer’s view, they expect only a certain percentage of students to become deeply immersed in it.

“When I was there we talked about fitting and club design quite a bit,” says Rob. “In year two of the program, you could see how your fellow students were tracking—the ones headed into golf operations weren’t as intense about golf equipment as the students who were tracking toward teaching and coaching.” Even among the latter group, he found that only a subset seemed to be “gear hounds who want to know all about fiber weaves and the bend profile of some new shaft.”

Component shaft expertise is the sharp tip of the spear when it comes to specialization in fitting and customizing. It’s a corner of the golf market that is highly innovative and pretty heavy with the hype, as well—making it a challenge to stay abreast of. “It’s gotten much harder to stay current on the shaft market—I would guess there are 50 people in the whole U.S. who know all the designs and how they perform,” says Jacques Intriere, who owns and operates Greenwich Golf Fitting Studio in western Connecticut. He was recently honored as Worldwide Clubmaker of the Year by the International Clubmakers Guild (ICG), a valued Proponent Group sponsor.

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“It’s even more challenging now that there are branded components available for purchase from the big OEMs,” says Jacques. “That wrinkle originated with Chip Brewer when he moved to Callaway Golf as CEO.” Indeed, it is now possible for clubmakers to acquire branded heads from these leading companies, in order to mix and match them with whatever shaft performs best.

Intriere tells of a Met Section professional early in his career who has sent business to the Greenwich Golf Fitting Studio and had many follow-up discussions with Jacques about the sets their collaboration has produced. “We’re working with a good assistant pro in the section,” Intriere says, “and he is amazed at how much goes into the process of fitting and building—down to things like shaft profiling, Puring the shafts and what have you.” And yet the assistant professional’s teaching skill remains a vital ingredient. Intriere describes the extent of his own expertise by saying, simply: “I don’t give golf lessons. People in my niche of the golf industry, we don’t know the swing and we certainly shouldn’t pretend to.” Specialization is only natural, in his estimation. “The areas of expertise in helping people play better golf are diverse,” he observes, “and they are only getting more so.”

Proponent member David LaPour of Colleton River Plantation in Bluffton, S.C., will someday soon have a finished academy building to work from, which would raise the prospect of setting up a repair and customizing shop with digital frequency machines and other exotica.

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Summit ’16 to Take a Close Look at Clubfitting’s Future

Seeing that fitting and teaching are so closely intertwined, Proponent has included a panel discussion on the agenda for Summit 2016 at Talking Stick Resort in Scottsdale next month.

The panel includes three of the most accomplished clubfitters in our membership: **Randy Henry** of Randy Henry’s Dynamic Golf at the Coeur D’Alene Resort in Idaho, **Kenny Nairn** of Celebration Golf Academy in Orlando and **Gregg Rogers** of Gregg Rogers Golf Performance Centers in Seattle.

The panel will discuss **The Performance Triangle: The Club, The Swing and Ball Flight** as a starting point, but will also take a

look at where clubfitting is heading next. As always, the panel will take questions from our members on all things fitting-related.



Randy Henry



Kenny Nairn



Gregg Rogers

"If we were like Sea Island and doing 10,000 sets of clubs a year, I would go that route, including having an equipment specialist on staff," says La Pour, whose academy lies within an upscale 36-hole golf community which is not a resort by any means. For now, La Pour still has a fondness for the idea of the golf coach who is a competent fitter, doesn't shy from the task and can navigate any golf-swing or ball-flight issues a student may have. "We want to be the experts for our golfers, rather than bring in a specialist," says LaPour, who has some limited experience with Tour Spec Golf, the tech-heavy company that parachutes in and fits en masse using almost a demo-day model.

La Pour does check all lie angles on custom irons his members order, and finds plenty that need bending, though not nearly as many as Wilkes deals with. He recently received a set of 3-SW that had spot-on specs for the 3- through 7-iron and completely incorrect specs for 8-SW. "I checked with the factory and they told me the assembly work gets split into two departments, one of which read the order correctly and one that misread it," explains LaPour. "That was a new one on me." Word to the wise: LaPour always carries a star-tip wrench in his pocket and is constantly checking for loose set screws in adjustable-angle drivers, and he is constantly finding them.

Meanwhile, the debate about specialization vs. every-teacher-fits isn't a static one. There will continue to be refinements and developments on the tech side, therefore a continuing task for the teacher-fitter who wants to stay current. Matt Frelich of Trackman, well known to Proponent members who have attended annual Summits, says his company will be debuting a new advancement in the fitting-through-technology march of progress late this year. Meanwhile there is already a specification—landing angle—that Trackman measures precisely and that fitters should rightly be including on their spec sheets.

"Typically, the fitter will be watching for launch angle, spin rate and ball speed, meanwhile checking on trajectory," says Frelich, "but are they paying attention to landing

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angle? It has a big effect on tee-to-green play and fitters can use it strategically to improve performance." A landing angle of 50 degrees or more is considered plenty steep to have the shot accepted and settle on the green as desired. What Frelich would urge teachers and clubfitters to consider is some experimentation with shafts and head designs so that, for example, a 6-iron that was producing a 50-degree landing angle based on a 6500 RPM initial spin rate might keep that same landing angle

based on a 5500 RPM spin rate. "On a calm day that won't make much difference but in a 10 mile-per-hour wind you'll have better control with the lower spin rate," he says.

Point being, the subject of club specs and ball flight is getting more nuanced rather than less. The old ideal of the teacher who fits and the fitter who teaches is certainly still adhered to successfully by many professionals. That being said, this seems like an appropriate time for the question of specialization within the custom-club niche to be examined and discussed, so that best practices in the years to come can be formulated in a way that makes the most sense for all concerned. PG



Matt Wilkes at the Mike Bender Golf Academy conducting an iron fitting session.