

INDUSTRY INTERVIEW

Golf Datatech Co-Founder—with a View of the Industry from Many Sides Proponent Taps the Insights of Tom Stine

By David Gould, Staff Editor

As part of our initiative to bring voices from various industry sectors into the Proponent newsletter, we're pleased to devote space to our recent conversation with Tom Stine. Born in Toledo, Ohio in 1950, Stine is best known for his success as a co-founder of Golf Datatech, LLC, the industry's trusted and non-partisan source of product sales figures and trends in golf retail. However, many veteran golf editors and writers will associate him closely with Golfweek magazine, which was launched in 1975 by Tom's father.

Charley Stine, a journalist known for sound Midwestern judgement and a wry wit, laid out Golfweek as a newspaper-style tabloid and loaded it with tournament results and short features, at a time when this information was increasingly in demand and long before the Internet. "Working with Dad and growing Golfweek into a national publication was a great golf experience and a great business experience," Tom recalls. "My brother Bob worked with us for a while, and my brother Bill has done great things in the golf-course management end of the business, owning and managing semi-private and daily fee courses." Bill Stine's sons, Buck and Mack, now work in the course-operations business with him.

Several years ago a Golf Datatech research project on behalf of Proponent Group yielded important market data about who takes lessons and why. It utilized the Database of Serious Golfers that Stine's company developed to gather opinions about instruction from 1,500-plus performance-conscious players. That information guided additional Proponent projects and initiatives, all in the name of effectively positioning and promoting what our members provide.

We talked to Tom about player

development, the state of the industry, how teaching has changed over the years and what golf might look like in the future. Here are some highlights of that conversation.

What was your early experience of lessons, practice and generally working on your game?

The time in my life when I most enjoyed being on the range and trying to improve was in the 1980s, in the early days of Golfweek. The planets kind of lined up, because I was living in a quiet town, Winter Haven, Fla., I was single, and there was a new instructor at the resort down the street whose name was David Leadbetter. I would go to his tee on the back of the range many a night after work to relax and hit balls. David and I grew to become good friends. He was living in a little condo right there beside his tee at the Grenelefe Resort. We would talk with each other about a lot of things, including how we

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planned on making our way in the golf business. Of course he gave me some great swing ideas to work on, and there was lots of time to practice, so I was able to get down to a 5-handicap, which is the lowest I've ever been. His teaching talent exceeded my playing ability.



David Overmyer, Tom Stine and John Kryznovek launched Golf Datatech nearly 20 years ago.

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As you were watching David develop his teaching business, could you tell he was on his way to such immense success?

I had no idea he could accomplish what he's accomplished. I had no thought that any golf teacher could do that. This was back in the day, before instruction became cool. Teaching golf was all David knew how to do, so he spent all his time doing it. I could see the passion in him. I could see his talent for getting people to make the appropriate swing changes. It was like he saw golfers' swings in slow motion. He could talk about the swing all day and he studied it constantly. If you happen to meet a great math teacher or a great piano teacher, they have what David has, whatever that is. He had a gift and he worked very hard to develop it.

You weren't the only guy on the back end of that Grenelefe range, correct?

Far from it. Nick Price would be there, hitting balls all day long. I'd run into Denis Watson all the time. Other tour pros, who were on their way up, would come through. At one point I decided to introduce David to a young woman I knew, Kelly Fuiks, who had been a student of Manuel de la Torre during winters in Arizona, where she was from. I guess I was suggesting that he take Kelly on as a student, but it ended up being a lot more than that. They turned out to be a good match and they got married. They're still very happy together.

What exactly does Golf Datatech do?

We track the sales of all golf products—what's been sold, how much it's been sold for and how much inventory is remaining in the on-course and off-course retail channels. We created this business from scratch and have produced our reports every month since 1997. We collect the data from the retailers electronically and run it through proprietary programs we have developed. We then distribute our reports electronically back to the retailers and the manufacturers. The other part of what we do is consumer research, some of it syndicated, some for individual client companies. We conduct studies on the attitudes and usage of serious golfers about their game, their equipment, their likes and dislikes. If a brand is creating a new advertising campaign we can do a study indicating how it will be received—along with general information about consumer attitudes toward the brand and its competitors.

What do your clients want the data to show? What do they wish for?

They commission our reports in order to know what is go-

ing on in the retail market—what's selling and what isn't. Overall, everyone wishes the numbers were better. No matter how good the numbers are they would like their business and golf in general to be doing better.

Your company works with golf brands and businesses across the board. How often will you see a new entry in the golf industry and think, "Hey, this is a great business they've got."

That doesn't happen very often. You don't see startups come to market and do well the way you did years ago. At least in golf hardgoods you don't. The amount of R&D and marketing that's needed is daunting. Even if you had that great new idea, you can't build the machinery of a full-fledged company to compete with established brands if there isn't that second great product waiting behind the first one, then the third, even the fourth. It's a high barrier to entry.

OK, what's the hottest club or piece of gear coming down the pipeline?

Don't want to disappoint you but, in this role, I don't make predictions. "We just count 'em" is the Golf Datatech slogan. Basically, the strong will survive. Some companies that have been leaders may fall back, and others will come forward. But shelf space is hard to get, so if you don't have any you've got a difficult row to hoe.

What do you see in the Golf Datatech numbers that a golf coach should take note of?

One thing I notice is how distance-measuring devices continue to grow in popularity. Right now there is more money spent on distance-finders than on putters. Think about that. Golfers seem to be buying their third and fourth rangefinder, as the technology improves. So, by now, the golfer really ought to know how far they hit their 24-degree hybrid and how far their 7-iron carries. It seems that golf academies could work on that angle—having golfers track those yardages, then come to them for a game-improvement program, then measure again.

Companies that use your services are marketing a product, letting you tell them how well it fares against the competition, then making adjustments. Do you see golf coaches doing that?

Obviously, there are some teachers who just hang their shingle and then wait for golfers to find them. That doesn't seem like a recipe for success. There is a way to be out there on the tee line, "working the range," if you will, that I think is perfectly appropriate.

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You think golfers are open to having the teaching professional approach them that way?

I think golfers are confused about lesson-taking and how it works. Someone like myself, who's been in the game and been in the business for decades, is right now unsure where to go to get help for his major weakness as a player—in my case that's the shots from 30 to 60 yards away. I putt very well and I play very well from greenside bunkers, but those other shots ruin me. I have no confidence over them and I don't know where to get instruction to help me fix this. If some teaching pro framed it for me correctly, where they wouldn't be working on my full swing, but this 50-yard problem would be addressed, I would sign up for that right away.

There have been several in-depth studies of the Millennial generation, gauging their interest in golf and how likely they are to stick with it. Your thoughts on that?

Our company has been trying to get its arms around that data and the various interpretations. We've made some progress. Personally, I hear people throwing the term Millennial around as though they really know what they're talking about, when I suspect they probably don't. It boils down to the characterization of the behavior and attitudes of an age group—people currently in their 20s and 30s. My response a lot of the time is to ask the question: What did we call "people in their 20s and 30s" when other generations were in their 20s and 30s? Does tagging a name on people who are a particular age at a given time maybe over-complicate things?

Do you pay much attention to Topgolf?

I do pay attention to it. I like Topgolf. I've been to three of them, including the one in England. They've got something that's really pretty terrific. It's a great place to introduce someone to golf. If I were the owner of a golf facility nearby a Topgolf center, I'd want to have them hand out a coupon for a nine-hole round at my course, if they were open to that. Topgolf is fun, entertaining, social... and the activity that holds it all together is hitting golf balls. "Real" golf doesn't need all the Topgolfers, just maybe a dozen or so

out of 100. I always come back to the idea that only 10 to 20 people out of every 100 are really going to like this game, and 20 is up on the high side when you are talking about America's participation rate.

What are the issues for the game and the industry, in your view?

I see real estate-driven activity as the cause of most of our big problems. What happened with golf courses in planned communities was unsustainable from the beginning. The courses were long so they could fit more homes around them. People moved into them and thought they would take up the game, and many of those home buyers who tried golf found out they didn't like it, or they didn't have time to teach their kids, or they lost their job and then lost their house.

So you think we're just dealing with a real-estate-golf bust?

Let's just say that golf's recovery is about the game returning to its "normal" proportions, if that's the right word. Courses have closed in big numbers over the last few years but that trend is slowing down. We'd like to keep the participation rate in line with what it was prior to the real estate boom and bust. That would keep the sport healthy. Personally, I don't know one person who has quit playing golf in the past five years. I know some who have dropped their club memberships, and now play at public courses, but they still play. They take their clubs on vacation. They're still golfers.

Does the game's health depend on juniors being brought into golf early? The junior segment has turned into a major revenue source for in-demand golf instructors.

That's great, and I'm sure it will continue as a strong market segment for the teachers. But again, I've seen golf do pretty well in times where there weren't a lot of children visible at the private club or at the high-end daily fee. As a kid I played every sport—all the team sports—and I loved all of them. Meanwhile, I played enough golf when I was young to get a taste for the game. Well, I don't play baseball or basketball anymore. Same as most every guy my age who still plays a sport, I play golf.

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