

PGA Leadership: Tilting Hard Toward Teaching and Player Development?



By David Gould, Staff Editor

A little-known event takes place each year at the PGA Merchandise Show. It's an invitation-only press gathering of about 20 journalists, held in a private space on the convention center's quiet upper floors. Well-credentialed and closely familiar with PGA politics, they

get summoned to what the association calls its "Off the Show Floor" Briefing and Update. The event has a double purpose. Mainly it's to acquaint knowledgeable media members with a set of messages and concepts that are high-priority to PGA of America leadership. But the exchange is two-way—responses and questions from inner-circle journalists offer a sense of how these messages and statements will be interpreted by media in general.

Held this year at the Osprey, a small tavern atop the OCCC's main lobby, the 2014 Briefing and Update was more intimate than usual. There was no long dais with guest panelists (Jack Nicklaus, the USGA's Mike Davis and other dignitaries have appeared in recent years) and the usual luncheon format was set aside in favor of a 4 p.m. time slot that allowed for hors d'oeuvres plus beer and wine afterward. At the front of the room answering questions were PGA president Ted Bishop and CEO Pete Bevacqua—the two of them even skipped customary opening remarks to get straight to the Q&A.

To golf professionals whose careers strongly steer them toward the instruction category—obviously, that's any Proponent Group member—this year's Briefing and Update was particularly interesting. The very first "industry" question asked (following several concerning Ryder Cup and Tom Watson's captaincy) hit upon the PGA of America's just-announced partnership with

GameGolf. In so many words, it asked:

"Aren't you afraid you are going down a slippery slope by forming a partnership with a

golf-industry vendor?" The second part of the question was along these lines: "Isn't it likely you will get flooded with proposals from other companies—many of them your own PGA Show exhibitors—wanting the PGA stamp of approval that GameGolf received?"

Without hesitation, Bevacqua nodded emphatically and said, "We absolutely have gone down a slippery slope and yes, we already do have proposals and inquiries coming to us, in response to this announcement." He went on to say that potential complaints were worth the trouble, in order for golf's professional trade organization to leverage what GameGolf has to offer. In a comment Bevacqua had previously made for public release, he called GameGolf a technology that would "grow the sport, make it more accessible, [and serve as] a tremendous asset to our PGA of America members as it relates to training and instruction." The reasoning behind that comment was his observation that "the playing of sports and the use of data to measure oneself continues to converge." In that light, he added: "GameGolf provides an opportunity to harness that data."

For those unfamiliar with GameGolf, it is the brainchild of famed Swiss product designer Yves Behar, and is officially described as "a wearable device and integrated software platform that

tracks and displays rounds of golf in a dynamic, socially driven interface."

Proponent Group teaching professionals have, of course, been busy studying various technologies for tracking and measuring on-course performance along with data generated in the practice environment. Via partnerships with Ath-



Every January the golf industry sets its course for the coming year—in recent times that course has increasingly been about player development and retention. The industry is in a state of flux and the key issues it confronts are placing instructors and the ever-proliferating technology for golf coaching right at the crossroads where solutions are to be found.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

lete Nation, Shot by Shot, Swingbyte, Swing Catalyst, TrackMan and now Edufii, the Proponent Group community has been up-close with entities that serve the process of tracking, measuring, storing and sharing these data points. Little accustomed to seeing the PGA of America dive deep into cutting-edge instruction platforms and programs, the serious teaching pro must now figure out what it means to have this type of awareness suddenly added to the mix.

It is absolutely relevant to add that Golf Channel, in tandem with the PGA, is itself a partner and investor in GameGolf. In general, Golf Channel's presence at the 2014 PGA Show was remarkable to see—and to query PGA leaders about. Bevacqua made multiple references to the importance of having the network's "Morning Drive" and "Feherty Live" programs broadcast directly from the OCCG, complete with lots of PGA Show references and B-roll footage. The PGA chief exec even made what sounded like an admission about the presence of Donald Trump on a PGA Forum stage with Bishop, Anika Sorenstam, Mark King of TaylorMade, the USGA's David Fay and Golf Channel CEO Mike McCarley—suggesting that Trump was on the panel to drive TV ratings rather than contribute ideas about growing the game.

As a longtime attendee of the PGA's "Off the Show Floor" press briefing, this reporter took note of a new and more open attitude on the part of the association's top decision-makers. As president, Bishop has broken new ground in his bold statements about, most notably, the USGA/R&A and the anchored putting stroke. At this gathering he talked about Tee it Forward and the need, at his club in Indiana, "to PR that idea with older white guys," who proved initially

resistant. In general, Bishop portrays himself and his top managers at Palm Beach Gardens as being politically more progressive and liberal than the rank-and-file Class A PGA member. A question about Get Golf Ready illustrated this.

"Despite the very high success rate, they don't all buy in," Bishop said, when asked about PGA members and their acceptance of the program, which still achieves just a sub-40 percent penetration of the golf-facility market. Bishop gave an interesting answer when asked whether bold ideas for player development—yes, GameGolf included—would be embraced and pushed by the rising class of PGA professionals who are now Apprentice members.

Given their youth, that would be expected, he reasoned, but saw fit to add: "Apprentices today seem to be not entrepreneurial enough and not innovative enough, unfortunately. We may have over-professionalized their training."

Having attended the "Hack Golf" grow-the-game presentation that TaylorMade sponsored on the eve of the show's opening day, president Bishop said he had "thought about Hack Golf

all week" and would continue to keep unconventional concepts front-of-mind as his term of office went forward.

For the progressive instructor or academy owner, the PGA of America mindset these days is worth paying attention to, given its restless tone and its seemingly strong push for innovation that connects directly with the tech side of teaching and coaching.



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-Ted Bishop**

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