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Professionalism, Golf Coaching and a Master of Science Degree

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

The article by Simon Jenkins raises many excellent points about the professionalization of golf coaching in recent years, and the professionalism now inherent in high-level coaching in the sport. In this commentary, I shall limit my observations to the importance of coach-player relationships to which the article alludes in the comments by Sean Foley, Hank Haney, Butch Harmon and Peter Kostis. Additionally, the Master of Science in Golf Coaching lists two potential modules in 'mentoring' and 'reflective practice', and I shall briefly explain how these activities can be instrumental in developing effective relationships and high-level golf coaching.

COACH-PLAYER RELATIONSHIPS

Through working as a consultant sport psychologist in professional and international amateur golf for nearly twenty years, I have been incredibly privileged to closely observe the characteristics of successful player-coach relationships. I have often remarked to national coaches that the best coaches seem to be more like mentors to players in that they transcend the idea of being only a traditional 'swing coach' to cover all aspects of golf. This does not mean merely also covering putting and short game skills, but endeavouring to help a player manage themselves, help structure their practice, develop course management skills, and to pass knowledge in equipment matters, biomechanics, psychology and strength/conditioning. The high-level coach is not a 'font of all knowledge' and often engages specialist advice for the player, or accompanies the player to find the advice that is needed. Often this means the coach is still learning, and acts as an information filter for the player.

Clearly, golf coaches can be very skilled at observing, listening, demonstrating and refining game related skills to engage a player and develop rapport, but the human element in forming player-coach relationships should also not be neglected. The challenges for the coach in initiating and maintaining working relationships with players are demanding, particularly in the high pressured, media driven and huge financial reward environment of professional golf. I believe the effectiveness of the coach in these situations is as much about their relationship and communication skills as it is about their technical knowledge. Simon Jenkins invites the reader to consider the interpersonal skills involved in golf coaching, and how leading coaches try and match the nature, timing and delivery of coaching information with the personality of the player and the situational demands. The reflections by Sean Foley and other coaches about player-coach relationships reminded me of the words of Peter

Cowen, another world-renowned golf coach:

I think golf coaches are a bit like hairdressers for women. They're comfortable with them. They might not be the best hairdresser, but if you're comfortable with somebody around you, you're more likely to have a better feeling about them. So personalities come through a lot. [1, p.199]

Even at the highest levels of performance, golf coaching is essentially about a human relationship and an interaction between two people; the coach and the player. Any coach looking to develop their competencies and knowledge needs to better understand the mechanisms that underpin effective player-coach relationships. Mentoring and reflective practice may help in this regard.

MENTORING

Successful coaching in golf requires a wide range of practical knowledge and competencies, as well as possessing high level general communication skills. To be able to meet the changing needs of players, a coach must continue to strive for new knowledge and innovative skills that will impact on the delivery of their coaching programmes. While the PGA of Great Britain and Ireland now has a more established coach education/development programme, the use of *peer* mentoring is relatively rare.

Peer mentoring is a process whereby two coaches meet on a regular basis to mutually discuss their coaching practice to exchange views and ideas, and the current challenges or issues they face with specific players and situations. This type of mentoring is suggested to promote good practice in that it:

- Helps the golf coach to assess strengths and weaknesses before forming ongoing plans for personal development
- Identifies the most relevant challenges and opportunities facing the golf coach
- Provides guidance on how to influence and manage different player-coach relationships
- Gives impetus to the golf coach to explore and exchange new ideas
- Enables the golf coach to use self-reflection to inform their coaching practice
- Provides an ongoing trusting, confidential relationship to discuss individual professional challenges

Within other sports, the use of mentoring has been widely adopted as a sound approach to promoting excellence within coaches through increasing positive change, engaging energy, imagination and commitment, and by instilling resourcefulness. For the golf coach, it may also offer another viable form of activity for professional development and increased professionalism.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

In sport psychology, reflective practice is now a widely used process for personal and professional development. Coaches in other sports are also encouraged to engage in regular reflective practice to self-assess their effectiveness. Yet in golf coaching there seems to be little evidence of this process reaching coach education programmes. This process can be implemented within a triangular format involving critical appraisal of seemingly important events, discussion of these events with peers, and documentation of the learning that takes

place. Typical reflective questions for the aspiring golf coach could be:

- What happened in that coaching session?
- What was I thinking and feeling?
- What was good and bad about the coaching session?
- How did I communicate any information?
- How were my interpersonal skills?
- What sense did I make of the player's progress?
- What else could I have done?
- If the same situation arose again what would I do?

While the advancement of science within golf and a growing base of sport-specific literature enables coaches make greater use of evidence-based practice, there are occasions when relevant literature is not available to inform practice. In this regard, reflective practice offers the coach a process to make sense of their coaching experiences in structured professional manner that may lead to *practice-based* evidence and future research questions (e.g. coach-player relationships).

CONCLUSION

The article by Simon Jenkins sets out the professionalization of golf coaching, and how the Master of Science in Golf Coaching could facilitate the development of professionalism in that role. Part of the narrative of his article explores views from prominent coaches on player-coach relationships. I firmly believe that future golf coach education programmes (such as the Master of Science) will encompass both mentoring and reflective practice as 'professionalism' activities to help coaches develop effective player-coach relationships.

REFERENCES

1. Hemmings, B., Mantle, H. and Ellwood, J. *Mental Toughness for Golf: The Minds of Winners*, Green Umbrella Publishing, Swindon, 2007.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Brian Hemmings, C.Psychol., FBASES, has over 20 years of experience in sport psychology consultancy. Working full-time in private practice since 2006, he is also currently a Research Fellow at St. Mary's University, Twickenham. He was the lead psychologist to England Golf for 16 years (1997-2013). Brian has written three books and is a regular presenter on golf coach education around the UK and Europe. In 2012 Brian released the online Golf Psychology Coaching Certificate, an approved education programme of the PGAs of GB&I, Switzerland, New Zealand and the PGAs of Europe, which is now translated in German, Spanish and South Korean. As well as hosting three successful UK golf psychology conferences, Brian regularly runs Masterclasses in Golf Psychology for psychologists and golf coaches.

