

MY GOLFING EDUCATION



A Member Not a Number

If anyone had told me when I first picked up a golf club with any real intent that I would still have more to learn fifty years later, I would probably have dropped the club down as if it were a hot potato.

I was twelve when I started to play golf seriously, and at the same time I was hating almost every minute of secondary school. At school I felt like a number. I was told what to learn, when to learn it and, to a large extent, how to learn it. Geography, history, science and everything was to be learned according to somebody else's timetable.

I would not have described the system as linear or cookie-cutter at twelve. I did not have the vocabulary or understanding to do so. On reflection, that is how it felt. There was a prescribed route and I was expected to follow it.

Golf felt completely different.

In my childlike mind, I might initially have assumed that learning golf and learning at school were much the same thing. They were not. Golf taught me bit by bit. The game presented a problem and I had to find a solution. There was rarely only one answer and almost never only one way of getting there.

At school I felt like a number. In golf I felt like, and was a member. I belonged to a community and, without really recognising it at the time, the game was giving me an education of its own. It was teaching me resilience, self-reliance, honesty and creativity. More importantly, it was teaching me that learning did not have to come from one place or one person.

Rather like the TV game show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?, there were several ways to find an answer. I could ask a friend, ask a coach, choose from a range of options or, in effect, ask the audience. In those days that audience might have been a golf magazine or a book. Today it would probably include social media.

There were many possible answers and many possible teachers. Fortunately, my first teacher understood that better than most.

Dad Was My Coach

My Dad, a Master PGA Professional, was what today I recognise as being my Head Coach. He did not teach me everything, but in many ways he shaped my learning environment without me ever really knowing it.

He went on to become a great coach and worked with several major champions. Perhaps more importantly for me, he was smart enough to understand that he did not know everything. If he wanted to give me a rounded golfing education, some of that education would have to come from other people.

We spent a lot of time together at the golf course, but rarely was there anything that looked like a formal lesson. We might play a few holes. He would watch me hit some balls now and then. I was part of the club's junior programme, where he passed on the foundations of the game to all of us, and I had a group of friends with whom I could play and compete.

Occasionally he would be teaching a good player or a professional and I would watch. Sometimes I might even play a few holes with them. Looking back, I suspect he orchestrated more of those opportunities than I realised at the time.

As I developed, he also understood the value of other people giving their opinions on my game. One of Dad's many contributions to my golfing education may have been recognising that he should not be my only teacher.

Same Words, Different Teachers

I vividly remember playing a few holes alongside a professional called Chris Tobin, who sadly died too young. He gave me some advice on controlling the spin on my approach play that I gladly took on board. I remember standing on the eighth green at Shaw Hill Golf Club when the penny dropped.

I probably thought, why hadn't Dad told me that before?

Of course, he probably had.

Today I understand that we can hear the same lesson several times without really learning it. Sometimes it is the person delivering it. Sometimes it is the timing. Sometimes we are simply more ready to listen. The words may be almost identical, but the lesson lands differently.

I had several experiences like that. Between the ages of around fourteen and sixteen, I also had the opportunity to spend time with what I thought of as proper golfers. My handicap was around three or four by the time I was fifteen, but these players had something I had yet to gain. Experience.

Many represented their counties and knew how to get a score out of a day when they were not playing particularly well. Keith Hornby was one such player. He played for the Lancashire county team and I caddied for him a few times. I was struck by how narrow the spread of his scores seemed to be. He was rarely more than a couple of shots either side of par.

These players seldom made big mistakes. They made it their business to understand the course they were playing and, above all, they were hardened competitors. They operated differently from the regular golf club member. They had a golfing maturity I had not seen before.

I was beginning to understand that being able to hit good golf shots and knowing how to construct a score were not quite the same thing.

Then there were the professionals.

Many were very good players who had tried tournament golf before becoming club professionals. Even when they were not playing particularly well, they still seemed capable of producing remarkably good scores. Looking back, perhaps my memory is more selective than it should be, but I remember how simple they made the game look.

Mostly there was very little fuss. They had consistent routines and a way of being on the golf course that I began to notice. I was learning from what they did as much as from anything they said.

Derrick Cooper was the first person I personally knew to have shot 59 in a tournament round. Admittedly it was in a Pro-Am, but that takes nothing away from the score. He later won the Madrid Open in 1988 and taught me something important about going low.

Derrick told me that when some players got a few shots under par, they would start trying to protect their score. For him, it was a green light to become more aggressive. After all, he said, if you are already three or four under, you can afford to drop a shot.

I used that advice when shooting my lowest round of 62 and on several occasions when setting course records. I learned that being in a good position is not necessarily a reason to become cautious. Sometimes it gives you permission to be bolder.

Ryder Cup players John Garner and Tommy Horton taught me other lessons about giving yourself chances and judging what really mattered.

John was, without question, a short-game wizard. He truly maximised his ability and won three times on the European Tour. I clearly remember him telling me that the hole will never come to the ball, so every shot should have enough intent to finish beyond it.

I still use that principle today. In practice, I penalise myself for a shot that finishes more than a grip length short, whereas I can be perfectly happy with one that finishes a metre or more past, depending on the length of the shot. The exact numbers are less important than the principle.

Give the ball a chance.

Tommy Horton brought me down to earth with a lesson delivered in just a few words.

We were walking from the tee towards our balls in the fairway and I was grumbling because I had hit mine down the wrong side. Tommy looked at me and said, "How big is the ball, Tony?"

"1.68 inches, Tommy, but you already know that."

He then asked me how wide the fairway was. Fairways seemed narrower in those days, although perhaps that is another trick of memory. I can't remember my exact answer, but I probably said around 25 or 30 yards.

He then said, "If we call the ball two inches wide and the fairway 25 yards wide, how many balls could you put side by side from one edge to the other?"

I cannot remember if I answered, and probably just said, "a lot".

The answer is around 450.

"Any two inches will do," he said, and walked off towards his ball.

Here I was beating myself up because I had not put my drive on the ideal side of the fairway. Tommy was looking at something much simpler. The ball was on short grass, I had a clear shot to the green and that was what mattered.

I was judging the shot against an unnecessarily precise idea of perfection. He was judging whether it had done its job.

There were many other lessons from good players along the way. Dennis Durnian helped me better understand distance control, while Mike Ingham showed me the importance of strength when playing from heavy rough. Others added smaller pieces, sometimes through a single comment and sometimes simply through watching how they played.

Not every lesson needs a story of its own, but together they added to the education that supported the work Dad and I were doing to make me a better player.

Learning From Golf's Greats

As my own golf developed, I was lucky enough to play with many very good players, including major champions such as Nick Faldo, Nick Price and Pádraig Harrington. I only played with Faldo and Price once or twice, Pádraig more often, but playing alongside golfers of that calibre taught me something else.

Major champions really are made of different stuff.

It was not simply that they hit the ball better. Plenty of very good golfers can hit extraordinary shots. With the very best there seemed to be something more. An intensity, a clarity about what they were trying to do and an ability to find another level when it mattered. They were not the same personalities and certainly did not play the game in the same way, but there was something different about them.

Another major champion I was fortunate enough to know was three-time Open Champion Sir Henry Cotton.

Mr Cotton was already an older man when I got to know him, probably not much older than the age I am now. That thought alone gives me some perspective. He had played with many of the greats of his era and was perfectly happy telling stories about Hogan, Hagen, Snead and even Bobby Jones. Being around him somehow connected me to another generation of the game.

But what fascinated me most was the way he taught.

Today, some of what Mr Cotton did might be described as constraints-led learning. At the time there was no need for a name. He simply created a problem and expected us to find a solution.

He might gather together a few of the players around him, including Ryder Cup players such as Ken Brown, Mark James and Howard Clark, and set us a task. On one occasion he

put a ball in a divot around 50 yards from the green and told us to work out how to get down in two.

There would always be a consequence attached.

Get down in two and you win the tournament. Take three and you are in a play-off. Four was simply not an option.

There was no lengthy technical explanation. No instruction about precisely how to do it. He gave us the situation, created the pressure and left us to work out the shot.

He would come back an hour or so later and ask us to show him what we had learned. Sometimes he would be content, set another task and walk away again. On other occasions he would drop a ball and show us what he would do. He wanted us to struggle, but if we were heading too far in the wrong direction, rather like riding a horse, he would pull gently on the reins and put us back on the right path.

Another of his games involved playing nine holes with a group of perhaps a dozen players. We would put something like the equivalent of a couple of Euro into the pot, and the winner would take all. Crucially he would have us play for the same amount for every time we made a single-putt. We would count the number of single-putts we had, and collect the amount from everybody else. You then paid them for theirs.

Mr Cotton would regularly have six, seven or even eight single-putts.

It took me a few games to understand what he was doing.

While the rest of us were trying to win the lowest score, he would sometimes deliberately take one club less. He would leave himself short of the green, play a straightforward chip close to the hole and tap in. He might lose the low round, but he would clean our plates and win most of the money.

Mr Cotton had understood that we were actually playing for single putts rather than a scoring game. He was solving the problem that had been set rather than the problem we assumed had been set.

He was the master of little lessons like that.

If you were first to play on a par three, he would tell you simply to hit the green because doing so made the green look smaller to the player following you. He did not like us sitting on the end of our golf bags between shots because he believed it affected the flow of blood and disturbed our rhythm. He was convinced that doing just that cost Tony Jacklin the 1972 Open Championship to Lee Trevino.

Some of Mr Cotton's ideas were practical, some psychological and some distinctly his own. But there was nearly always a reason behind them.

Perhaps what I appreciate most looking back is how little of this education took place on a practice tee. Mr Cotton created situations. He introduced consequences. He made us think.

Then he expected us to solve the problem.

I still have a short note from Mr Cotton to my Dad. It says, "Tony has a wonderful lag in his swing, essential for a tall player."

That was about the extent of his technical intervention. A word here and there, but essentially very little and very rarely.

Scoring Without Making It Look Difficult

Perhaps one of the finest lessons came from multiple Tour winner John Bland.

I played with John in the final round of what I think was the South African PGA Championship at The Wanderers Golf Club in Johannesburg. We were paired together a few matches from the sharp end of the field and both had the chance of a good finish.

I played reasonably well. Not great, but certainly not badly.

When we finished, I totalled John's card which came to something around 65. I did a double take and added the scores again. Somehow he had beaten me by six shots or more, yet it had never really felt that way.

There had been very little drama.

John simply kept hitting the ball towards big targets. When an opportunity presented itself, he took it. When he missed a green, he chipped or pitched the ball close and made the putt. He avoided unnecessary mistakes and kept moving forward.

I had spent several hours watching somebody construct a 65 without really noticing it.

That day reinforced something I had already started to understand. Good scoring was not necessarily about producing more brilliant shots. Often it was about wasting fewer ordinary ones.

Staying in My Own Bubble

Another lesson came during a final round at Welkom Golf Club in South Africa.

I had shot a seven-under-par 65 the previous day and found myself in the final pairing with Simon Hobday. By the time everyone else had left the tee, there were just the two of us on the practice putting green.

I was young and relatively green. Simon was a battle-hardened Tour professional who had already won more tournaments than I could ever imagine doing.

He ambled over and said a few words to me that I will not repeat here.

Whatever his intention, they got under my skin.

Guess who won the tournament.

It wasn't me.

I learned something important that day, although not quickly enough to help me at Welkom. Other players are entitled to do whatever they believe will help them compete. My responsibility was to stay in my own space, follow my routines and play my game.

Reputation, experience and personality all belonged to the other player. I did not need to carry any of them around the golf course for him.

It was another part of my golfing education. By then I understood that golf was not simply about where the clubface was pointing or how the ball was struck. It was also about judgement, emotion and the ability to remain yourself when competition became uncomfortable.

Golf Technique

None of this is to suggest that technique did not matter.

Over the years I have been fortunate to spend time with some great coaches. Much of that came after my serious playing days were over, but even as a player I enjoyed learning from people such as David Leadbetter and John Jacobs, both of whom challenged some of my thinking about the golf swing.

Later, Harold Swash helped me with my putting when getting the ball into the hole had become rather more difficult than I remembered it being.

What interested me about these coaches was not simply what they knew about technique. It was how they used that knowledge.

They helped the golfer standing in front of them.

David, for example, was sometimes characterised as a coach with a single method. That was never my experience of him. Nor was it what I saw from John Jacobs or Harold Swash. Each had strong ideas, but each also had the ability to adapt those ideas to the individual player.

They helped me understand an important distinction between teaching and coaching. A teacher can pass on information. A good coach has to decide what information this particular player needs, at this particular moment, and how best to help them use it.

Dad was one of the very best I ever saw at doing that.

Understanding What Dad Had Done

Only much later did I begin to appreciate how broad my golfing education had actually been.

Dad certainly helped me with technique, but he had also put me in environments where other people could add something he could not. Some taught me by explaining. Some through a single sentence. Some simply by allowing me to watch how they played.

Looking back, I can see that Dad had created something resembling a curriculum without ever calling it one.

There were lessons in technique, scoring, strategy, competition, judgement, psychology and problem-solving. Some were planned. Others arrived by accident. Quite a few probably had to be offered more than once before I was ready to learn them.

One of Dad's greatest contributions to my golfing education was not trying to provide every answer himself.

He helped create the environment in which I could find them.

Still Learning

Formal education can end. Learning does not have to

I left formal education at sixteen after my O-levels and did not return to it for more than twenty years. When I eventually did, in my forties, it was because there were things I genuinely wanted to understand. I subsequently enjoyed university study and gained qualifications along the way, although the qualifications themselves were never really the point.

My formal education may have been switched off for twenty-odd years, but my learning never stopped.

Today, that learning is certainly not confined to golf. There are probably more things I want to understand now than at almost any other time in my life. I wake up with ideas, questions and things I want to know more about.

But I suspect golf helped create that mindset. For more than fifty years the game has continually presented me with questions, encouraged me to search for answers and, from time to time, forced me to reconsider answers I had previously thought were right. That habit of learning has gradually bled into other parts of my life.

The game that became the bedrock of so much of my life has changed considerably. Courses are better prepared, equipment has improved and the supporting disciplines around the player have become increasingly sophisticated. Sports psychology, physical

preparation, equipment technology, course mapping and data can all contribute to answering what remains the central question of competitive golf:

How do I get the ball around this course in the fewest possible strokes?

How each player chooses to answer that question is where the art and craft of golf begins.

Perhaps, after all, golf is not completely different from the school education I remember.

At school we were given questions at the end of the year and expected to provide the correct answers. Golf gives us questions too. Usually eighteen of them.

The difference is that golf does not insist upon a single correct answer.

A par four might be answered with driver and wedge, three-wood and seven-iron, or perhaps a recovery from the trees followed by a good putt. Golf does not particularly care how you arrive at the answer. It simply records what happened.

Birdie. Par. Bogey.

Then you move to the next question.

At the end, you add them all up.

There is no final examination and no point at which you can say you have mastered the subject. However well you answer today's questions, tomorrow the course will ask you another eighteen.

At twelve, the thought that I might still be learning golf fifty years later would probably have made me put the club down.

Today, I think the fact that golf taught me to keep learning may be one of the best things the game has given me.

Tony Bennett

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