

R&A THOUGHT LEADERSHIP



More than a sport

The piece you're about to read is my second attempt at what might, with some generosity, be called a "Thought Leadership" article. The first attempt faltered before the ink had dried on a single paragraph. In my eagerness, I had ignored my own guiding principle: write for the reader. Address their questions. Offer practical advice, forged in the furnace of experience. Share wisdom. And, above all, remind them that mistakes are not just inevitable but instructive.

Golf has been more than just a sport to me, it has been a teacher, a career, and a lifelong passion. From my earliest experiences on the course to my current role in looking to influence the industry, the game has offered invaluable lessons in discipline, resilience, and adaptability. This article is both a reflection on my journey and an exploration of how golf has evolved, the challenges it faces, and the opportunities that lie ahead.

My first memories of golf are of realising that I could not blame anyone else for my bad play - though I am sure I tried, whether with my golfing partner or my dad, who was also my coach. I could invest as much effort as I wanted in my attempts to improve, and nobody could control what I worked on or how I chose to do so. Although both of these memories remain vivid, another one I have returned to time and time again is the principle my parents instilled in me that I should leave the course better than I found it.

I have spent what was once called a typical career (45 years) in the somewhat narrow orbit of golf. It has been varied, and it has been fun. The traditional four stages of a career: establishment, advancement, maintenance, and withdrawal, are omnipresent, but in my opinion, they are not one-off events. They come and go and come again as I have navigated a career in which I have been a player, a club professional, a coach, a businessman, a mentor, an advisor to national federations, a director of education, and an advocate for a more inclusive sport. My career in golf has followed a dynamic path, and each phase has brought new lessons and challenges, reinforcing the importance of continuous learning and adaptability.

Every cycle has involved taking what I know and have learned, questioning it, and then applying parts of it in a new cycle. This approach, completely unintentional, has given me a deep understanding of the game and broad experience. I love learning, though I have always found organised education, at least in that formal sense from my school days, rather boring. Golf has never been dull to me. It has afforded me the opportunity to spend much of my life outdoors in often breathtaking settings: the early morning dew, the rising sun, and the birdsong. It has given me a way of life where, to a large extent, and to use the analogy of a ship, I am the captain, plotting my course and deciding where I would come to shore to rest or, more often, to explore.

Becoming a professional

In my early playing days, I was driven by a relentless passion for the game. Competing at various levels taught me about, determination, perseverance, and the mental fortitude required to excel. I came to understand the importance of leaving no stone unturned. Back in 1978, I experimented with self-hypnosis, something seen at the time as eccentric, bordering on the bizarre. These days, meditation, sports psychologists, and mental coaches are as much a part of the game as a freshly raked bunker.

I remember the day I decided to turn professional, perhaps against my dad's wishes. It is hard to imagine now, but in the mid-seventies, any connection with the professional game was considered objectionable to the amateur ruling bodies. My dad was a golf professional, and although I was still a schoolboy, I could feel it. I wanted to compete in a world where a 71 was better than a 72 - and was rewarded as such.

My time as a club professional at Leyland and Newark Golf Clubs was a great learning opportunity. I learned how to sell, not just products but myself. I learned what it meant to serve a community, to

become part of its fabric. Running a golf shop was, in essence, a high-risk venture. We staked everything, our money, our time, our energy, on our ability to create a thriving and profitable business. This wasn't just about our own future; it was about the livelihoods of those who worked with us. The irony of the club professional's position was hard to ignore. Of all the staff at a golf club, the professional carried the greatest financial risk, yet the business was never truly theirs. No matter how well we did, there was no asset to sell. Despite this, we built something that drew people from across the country. Our philosophy was simple: give our clients respect and the best possible service.

An expert coach to skilled players became a beginner coach to a team

Part of the club professional's role was to teach. Teaching not only refined my technical knowledge but also deepened my understanding of human psychology and motivation. In those days, many club members took a lesson only when all else had failed. It was rather like sticking a plaster on a wound. The idea of taking a course of lessons to develop one's game was a misnomer. When you found someone who genuinely wanted to work on their game, it was incredibly rewarding to be part of their progress, whether on the course, winning an event, or off the course, as their confidence improved. I started coaching some good players who enjoyed success, and it was these players who helped hone my skills in return.

By the time I became an expert coach for skilled players, I found myself a complete novice in another arena. When the Portuguese Golf Federation appointed me as their national coach, I had to learn, and quickly, how to coach a team, not just individuals. I spent hours with my father, then the national coach of Ireland, and consumed everything I could to get up to speed. It was then that I realised something crucial: teaching is not the same as coaching. There were plenty of good teachers in Portugal, but I needed them to become good coaches if we were going to improve the level of players heading towards the national team. Not for the first time, I was learning "just in time".

I realised I needed better-prepared young players coming through to the national team level. To achieve that, we needed stronger foundations at the grassroots. Writing a coach education programme for the PGA of Portugal was not only a labour of love, countless hours at the computer trying to distil my thoughts into a logical order, but a necessity. The three-year programme included coaching, business, equipment technology, and people skills. This work and its subsequent recognition brought me to the attention of the PGAs of Europe.

Coaching is undervalued, yet it is vital in so many walks of life. It is the art of helping people become what they are capable of becoming. We do it with children, with friends, with colleagues, and with those we serve. For me, the opportunity to put a structure in place that allowed players to reach their potential was transformative. The then-President of Portugal, Dr Jorge Sampaio, recognised the changes we were making and awarded me a Presidential medal. I was the one who received this in person, but it would have been impossible without my wife Sue's support, my son's patience, my mentors' advice, and, of course, my parents' grounding. In my heart, we all received the medal.

Learning on the job

Then came a return to business, but this time, it was different. The shift reinforced the importance of strategic thinking and long-term vision. This time, the business was ours, something we could sell or pass on when the time came. Expansion was easy; managing multiple sites was not. With multiple golf academies and a golf course, we found ourselves in that difficult middle ground, too big to handle everything ourselves, yet not quite big enough to justify a full management team. I now know that this is a common problem, but at the time, I had no idea. Another life lesson: in the pursuit of more, we often create problems for ourselves.

I was beginning to understand that I needed to clarify what I was truly seeking. It wasn't money, it wasn't recognition, and it definitely wasn't a bigger business. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what I wanted and, more importantly, why. At the same time as I was going through this internal introspection, we were still expanding. More coaches, more offers of venues. It was ironic, given my past comments about education, that I would soon become the Director of Education for the PGAs of Europe.

I have always loved to learn, and I still do. Curiosity drives learning, makes it interesting, makes it stick. But my curiosity had limits, or rather, it had direction. When at school I wasn't particularly interested in knowing the longest river in the world or the highest mountain. The ninth century held little appeal, and Shakespeare or Dickens, while undeniably important, were more passing acquaintances than enduring fascinations. That didn't mean I wasn't interested in history, geography or literature. Quite the opposite. I wanted to know my family's history, the places they had travelled, and what they had seen along the way, I wanted to visit many countries and even today I am a vociferous reader.

Perhaps you have heard of "just-in-time learning" before, but its counterpart "just-in- case learning", is less well known. The latter is what traditional schooling is built on: education delivered on the off chance that one day you might need it. But that wasn't how I learned best. I preferred to go deep, to immerse myself in subjects that fascinated me, to explore them on my own terms, when I needed them.

So, when I entered the world of coach education, I knew that if we wanted to help professionals succeed, we had to inspire them to follow their path. Yes, some of the basics I will come to are necessary, but a course of study can be self-guided rather than prescriptive. It should not be just-in-case learning but rather should traverse a path to what the learner wants to know. I understood that students should be given options, but their route through learning should facilitate change, curiosity, and exploration. I saw it not as a means of helping them pass an examination, but as a way for them to genuinely engage with what interested them.

My fundamental question was: how could we help professionals prepare for the work they wanted to do? What were the essential skills they needed? I believed every coach needed to understand not

just the mechanics of the golf swing but also communication skills, sales and marketing, coaching methodologies, and basic financial literacy. It was vital to equip young professionals with the tools to succeed in the careers they were setting out to build.

That belief eventually led me back to university, to study for a master's in philosophy, focusing on the career decisions of golf professionals. I wanted to understand the apprenticeship model, identify the common traits of successful professionals, and ultimately refine my own approach to education. No one can do it alone and so having the opportunity to guide others in their own careers was deeply rewarding.

Golf for the disabled

By 2007, I was already a Master PGA Professional, yet I had never encountered golf being played by people with disabilities. Curious as ever, I visited a tournament and saw golf played by individuals with one arm, on one leg, from a wheelchair, or with a visual impairment. It shattered my understanding of the game. I had always seen golf as a sport of balance, symmetry, and coordinated movement. But here were players with short arms, sensory impairments, and prosthetic limbs, hitting shots that defied everything I thought I knew about technique and biomechanics.

Later, I would come to understand that these players were simply self-organising to achieve the task in front of them. The brain prioritises function over form, getting the job done matters more than doing it in the so-called "right" way. This process is known as 'motor redundancy', where the body recruits alternative muscles and movement patterns to achieve the same goal. It's a fascinating concept, especially when we consider how it applies to other areas of life. A simple comparison would be a commuter finding an alternative route when their usual path is blocked. A more academic term for this phenomenon is 'ecological dynamics', where movement or behaviour emerges from the continuous interaction between an organism, its environment, and the task at hand. Many elements are at play, but three of the most powerful are, constraints, affordances, and self-organisation.

In 2013, I became a volunteer for EDGA. The European Disabled Golf Association was its full title, but we could not think just about Europe, nor could we call it Disabled Golf. EDGA had players from several continents, and we thought about the golfer first. I coined the phrase G4D (Golf for Disabled) and used 'Golfers First' as our strapline. G4D challenged me on so many levels, not just technically but philosophically. What did it truly mean to play golf? What defined a good swing, a sound technique, a repeatable motion? The game I had spent my life studying was suddenly far more complex, and far more inspiring than I had ever imagined.

A changing landscape

My journey in G4D has been one of discovery, revealing both the affordances to the game and the constraints that the golf industry, whether intentionally or inadvertently, has imposed. Consider the affordances: golfers play with a stationary ball. The task, using a club to hit a ball towards a target, can take place almost anywhere. In the very room where you may be reading this, you could roll a ball toward a target using a putter. You could play in a park or on a beach with a tennis-style ball. I often practise for a few minutes in my garage using an airstream ball. Golf can be played alone or with others. These affordances make the game accessible to almost anyone.

Conversely, the golf industry has created a series of accepted norms that constrain, or expand, the shape of the game: the number of clubs allowed, the number of holes played, par, rules, memberships, behaviours, even dress codes, all these influence people's access to the sport. What if the maximum number of clubs was, say, just seven? Would that lead to smaller golf bags, fewer motorised trolleys and buggies? It would certainly make the game less expensive from an equipment standpoint. What if four-hole rounds became the norm? Could they be played in under an hour, about the same time as a set of tennis and even less than a game of padel? I'm not suggesting the golf industry is at fault, only that it has the power to reshape the landscape.

Every day is a learning day. The cycle of learning never stops. As a sport, we face an 'awareness-action gap', we know the constraints limiting golf's development, and the affordances that will grow the game, but we must take meaningful action to address them.

Golf has undergone remarkable transformations, from equipment innovations to changes in course operations and player engagement. I started with wooden-headed drivers, steel shafts, a 1.62-inch ball, and course conditions that were worlds apart from today's meticulously maintained fairways and greens. A fast green back then might have measured six or seven feet on the Stimp meter, a device first introduced by the USGA in 1978. And don't get me started on the evolution of golf ball and club technology. Suffice to say that while the fundamental task remains unchanged, using a stick to propel a ball toward a target, the 'how' has shifted significantly.

Technology has revolutionised golf. Launch monitors, biomechanics analysis, and AI-powered training tools have reshaped player development. Players can now access more information about golf technique than they would have read in a year in the 1980s in the time it takes for a two-metre putt to roll into the hole. The problem isn't the information, but that there's far too much of it. The real challenge is understanding and applying that information effectively.

The ability to process and synthesise vast amounts of data is now the key differentiator, those who can bridge the gap between raw information and actionable knowledge will hold the advantage. This is the sweet spot for well-prepared professionals in any industry. At the current rate of change, anything beyond a five-year projection feels more like crystal-ball gazing. But we can identify macro trends. Technology and an ever-increasing play for the consumer's attention is not going away. It will accelerate further. We could say that the train is just pulling away from the station, so get on board or get left behind. The Chinese philosophical concept of Yin and Yang suggests that change is

natural, and that balance will ultimately be restored. Everything will pass. I value another Asian concept 'Wabi-Sabi' that emphasises that everything is, impermanent, incomplete, and imperfect. There is beauty in this philosophy and so the question is whether we are willing to stimulate change, embrace change or simply wait for change to happen to us.

The golf industry itself is evolving. Golf experienced a surge in participation following the COVID-19 pandemic, reversing a trend of declining engagement. Some clubs have embraced greater openness and inclusivity, yet others continue to uphold overt, covert, or unconscious practices that disadvantage underrepresented groups. Meanwhile, golf tourism and real estate interests now exert more influence over course design than ever before. A six-thousand-metre golf course layout, even when played as the architect intended, can often extend by 20% due to the considerable distances between greens and tees, which in turn slows the game down and makes walking the course particularly demanding.

Golfers are a hardy bunch. They complain when the greens are not up to scratch, when the cost of membership - and indeed coffee - rises, and grumble at the pace of play. Nevertheless, these golfers just want to play golf; they are consumers in pursuit of their next fix, and woe betide the greenskeepers who close the course even for a few hours. The language of addiction may seem at first misplaced, yet it fits. Regular golfers crave the feeling of club meeting ball, the challenge of navigating a course in the fewest strokes possible, the camaraderie of a shared pursuit. They need the exposure to the elements, the fresh air, the moments of peace. Golf must be fun. More than that, if the game is to flourish, it must reflect the communities in which it exists.

What's next?

While golf continues to thrive, challenges remain. Economic shifts, changing participation habits, and environmental sustainability are just some of the hurdles the industry must navigate. Making golf more affordable and accessible remains a critical issue. For the past 15 years, my focus has been on Golf for the Disabled (G4D), and it will come as no surprise that I believe the sport has been far too slow to acknowledge and address the exclusion of underrepresented groups. My PhD examined the lived experiences of golfers with disabilities and concluded that golf must be better equipped to welcome all players, providing genuine opportunities for full and meaningful participation. This means inclusive services, thoughtfully designed programmes, accessible environments, and staff who not only possess the right mindset but also the necessary training to ensure every participant feels genuinely welcome.

Three key themes shape the journey into golf: antecedents to participation, the initial experience, and long-term engagement. The narrative surrounding golf must change. Expectations matter. Will newcomers approach the game influenced by the outdated perception that it is elitist, expensive, slow, and inaccessible? Or will they see it as an engaging, dynamic, and social pursuit, challenging yet welcoming?

Will their first encounter be an enjoyable, low-pressure introduction, guided by an enthusiastic mentor who gets them playing within minutes? Or will it be a rigid, overly technical initiation, filled with drills, instructions, and barriers before they ever set foot on a course?

The experience of golf must be more inviting. Can newcomers play with their friends? Can they begin without the burden of judgment, on their attire, their equipment, or their ability? Golf's future is about people. The people who supply and the people who consume. Those who supply must have the skills, knowledge, and attitude to ensure that those who consume do so in a way that makes them want to come back and bring their friends.

In a world where attention is captured by the screens in our hands, the sports that succeed will be those that offer an in-person experience compelling enough to pull people away from their devices. Golf can be that sport, not by relying on outdated rules and restrictions, but by capturing players' attention and fostering a shared sense of connection. A few holes played in nature, with good company, can offer something no screen ever will.

The golf industry must continue adapting to new economic and social realities. Strong leadership, innovative thinking and, above all, collaboration will be essential. Today's golf is all about power, in different ways. We see Tour players routinely flying drives 300+ yards. This power is exciting, entertaining and although it influences the game we play, it is nowhere near as significant for the future as what happens in board rooms and at negotiating tables far from the course. Power dynamics will always exist in every walk of life, yet if we can recognise that together, we achieve more, we will move the game forward.

It is difficult to reflect on a journey and career when it is still in progress. Perhaps when I sign my scorecard at the end of my career round and make my way toward the clubhouse, I will finally have the clarity to assess what I have achieved. There will have been mistakes, of course, poor strategy, a few penalty shots. But there will also be great recoveries, the occasional eagle or birdie, and on every shot, I will have done my best. I will have made my marks on the course but repaired my divots and smoothed the sand. And, with any luck, I will have left the game a little better than I found it.

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