

GOLF TUTORING ADVANCES

By LES BOLSTAD

THE teaching of golf, remunerative or not, remains as the golf professionals' one exclusive item.

Recently in *Golfdom*, William Fitzjohn wrote a thought-producing article constructively criticizing the young golf pros as being more interested in playing tournaments than in teaching golf. His critique was done so smoothly as to hardly be argumentative. No specific mention was made as to what these so-called young pros taught that was so particularly bad, nor was it made clear what they might have omitted in their golf lessons. It was inferred their advice centered around that pithy aphorism which comprised the entire text of Walter Hagen's mythical golf book, namely, "hit the ball." It was hinted that interest was veering away from the teaching of golf and that the thoughts and efforts directed toward swing technique and teaching methods were shallow and disinterested. Dire predictions were made for the future of golf pros unless interest in the teaching of golf was revived. Some barbs were aimed at the playing pros (with which I heartily disagree). And a well aimed criticism was directed toward the P.G.A. for its failure to sponsor an organized teaching program.

As I look around me from my limited perch in Minnesota, the youngest pros I see in the game are in their thirties. From that I can only take it Fitzjohn means all of us when he wags a meaningful finger and says golf instruction isn't what it used to be.

My feeling has been just the opposite. For the past ten years or more I have felt that golf instruction has taken gigantic strides. The high speed camera took the cloak of mystery off the swing and enabled us to speak factually. The continuous run of money tournaments have proved a laboratory for golf ideas where the substance is thrown into the melting pot of competition and the dross falls away to reveal the truth about the swing and how to get around a golf course in the fewest strokes.

The written word as in such widely read publications as *GOLFING* and *GOLFDOM* has done much to make for a wider spread of knowledge. Golf clinics, group lessons, et al, add up to progress. In fact golf has been given such a thorough going over that much of it isn't new any more and doesn't make conversation as it once used to do.

It would have been a static quality indeed had golf pros and their teaching skill

not improved and changed with the times. Every golf pro I run into seems to know more about golf than I do. This is an age of science and the scientific method and it isn't like a pro to be behind the times. As a result of pro groundwork I wouldn't be surprised after the war to see the spectacle of fine young golfers springing up as though out of the ground from all parts of the country.

The golf pros who have come within my narrow range of observation know their stuff. It would be a privilege to take lessons from the likes of "Chuck" Congdon in Seattle, or George Schneider in Salt Lake, or Leland Gibson in Kansas City, or Henry Picard in Oklahoma City, or Sam Parks in Pittsburgh, or Ted Luther in Ohio. The list could be yards long if one got around to know the good boys in the game.

And they are all products of big league competition the best training school we have had up to date.

Golf pros and the way they teach are not above criticism any more than is Mountbatten's conduct of the Burma-Malayan Campaign (which could shake loose some rubber). Let us look them over.

The teaching qualities most pros acquire come through trial and error experience without any formal schooling on the subject. That accounts partly for the rise of standout "individual instructors" whose views might not exactly coincide with those held by others.

Pros are long on analytical ability. They can pick out swing faults at the drop of a hat. Some have "camera eyes" which enable them to remember swings even though years may intervene.

They possess golf wisdom, a wisdom which could only be acquired from giving hundreds and hundreds of lessons. That adroitness has grown from having to provide an immediate answer to countless hooks and slices, tops and shanks, awkward movements and swing quirks. They are meeting a more critical clientele than ever before and must perforce know their stuff.

Patience has become their middle name. You have to be tough to take it out there on the lesson tee especially when some subject doesn't respond and you know you are missing a sale in the shop.

Your golf pro of today is a hard-headed tough customer who has been through the mill. He takes what is good from any given source and discards the rest.

For example: Except for use on the

drive for some pupils he has almost universally rejected Tommy Armour's closed stance. Yet he regards Armour as an adroit psychologist, an artful convincing man.

Your American pro has extolled Alec Morrison's footwork formula and has used his "one smooth motion" definition as one of his oft repeated quotes. He recognizes Morrison's contributions to swing analysis and goes all the way with Morrison on his left side and left hand leadership. In the same breath you will find your pro laughing at Morrison's screwy grip and at his distorted position at address.

But he would like to extend his horizons to better put his subject across. He would be interested in extending his knowledge of how people learn, how much can they absorb at any given time, at what rate do people learn. This wider outlook would include a study of individual differences as they pertain to golf. An introduction of advanced teaching methods would be of consuming interest. A study of data on how other pros teach and a pooling of information would help.

Up to the present the emphasis has been more on what to drill into your pupil than on how to best impart it. A dip into the field of educational psychology would be as refreshing as three birdies in a row. Pros would see themselves and their multi-fold experiences mirrored on page after page of what every school teacher has to know.

For instance it has been proved by scientific fact that people learn in three different stages:

1. The awkward stage of the beginner.
2. The alternate stage where you get it and lose it.
3. The smooth running stage of the expert.

This knowledge would help any pro to direct his pupils and smooth over the inevitable rough spots.

My idea of how the P.G.A. could be of great service after the war would be to select an educational expert who also knew golf to spearhead their program. After the manner of golf course councilors such as the late Tillinghast, and Montieth, this expert could go out to pros and gather data.

His main aim would be to observe how pros at work impart their knowledge of golf to their pupils. He could talk with the pros, watch them teach. Questionnaires drawn up with the aid of a pro committee would help fill up his kit.

From these facts reports could be made and conclusions drawn.

The only way we pros can find out how we are progressing collectively and individually is for someone to gather facts and from these facts deduce certain truths.

Many questions suggest themselves. Do you have a definite planned approach for your tee session? Do you start your students with the big swing, or with the short service, or with the putt? Do you teach older men differently than you would teach a youth? Do you teach the same swing to all or do you vary your approach? How much do you try to teach your subject in any one given lesson?

We golf pros are on the threshold. Group instruction has only begun. Camera technique especially with the still camera is a field in itself.

Two experiences I have had recently have helped me in my humble effort to assist others with their golf.

Many is the time I had heard the laughs directed at the pro who hit the balls while giving the lesson. Remembering these jibes I discontinued the practice of hitting an occasional ball during a lesson. Recently I read an educational psychologist's note to the effect that the first step in good teaching practice was to give the example and the fourth step is to repeat that example. With one eye cocked to watch the result I resumed the occasional hitting of balls. The pupils uniformly responded as though some electrical quality had been put into their swings. Actions spoke louder than words.

Then, I asked a medical student at the University of Minnesota how young doctors were taught to operate. He said, "The instructor takes hold of your hand and directs your hand."

This was very reassuring because it was an affirmation of a teaching method I had accidentally fallen into. It's no trick to direct a person's hands in teaching putting. Hand action can be taught the same way. It gives you confidence to know you are up-to-date and using the approved methods.

Speaking from the standpoint of athletic coordination there is a physical education man down in Tulsa named "Doc" Miller who could contribute a world of information to golf pros. His idea of coordination in any sport is to make the movements so that all the power flows along a line (that should have a familiar ring to golfers). His basic idea seems to be that coordination is made possible by relaxing in the joints. Around his idea he has built a series of joint-relaxing exercises. One statement he makes sticks with me, "Show me an athlete who is stiff in the joints and you show me a mediocre performer."

Certainly every pro who aims to enlarge the scope of his teaching should look into that which has made "Doc" Miller nationally famous.

Maybe it takes a few Fitzjohns to awaken us. At best, in golf instruction as in golf itself, you don't stand still; you either improve or get worse.