

Teaching Pros Swing from the Mental Side

"I think we are now using smarter methods in getting our ideas across," is the way Emery Thomas of Forest Hills Field Club, Bloomfield, N. J., contrasts present day golf instruction with that of only a decade ago. "Back around 1950," Thomas continues, "most of us probably were mainly concerned with teaching the physical or mechanical side of the swing and didn't worry about getting the pupil in the proper frame of mind to do what we were trying to show him. I won't say we were completely unsuccessful as teachers, but I think most pros will agree that the person who was athletically inclined stood to get a great deal more out of our instruction than the pupil who wasn't endowed with athletic talents.

"Today," Thomas adds, "that isn't necessarily true. The athlete still outshines the unathletic as a pupil, but the gap is being closed. There's a reason for this. We've learned there's a lot more to teaching golf than just trying to drum fundamentals into a person's head. We first try to win the pupil's confidence, try to ease him into learning how to swing by showing him how to relax, and take more pains in explaining why all the parts of the swing should be executed in a certain way so that eventually they can be fitted into a smooth, overall pattern."

Results Are Good

The approach today, concludes the New Jersey pro, is basically mental or psychological. Teaching the mechanics of the swing comes, or should come, after the professional has mentally conditioned his pupils. Results apparently justify this method. The number of persons who play capable golf today is high even in proportion to the vast number of people who have taken up the game in the last 10 years.

The advance in pro teaching hasn't been an overnight development. In the last 10 years, professionals have banded more closely together in PGA sections and improved methods of teaching have been stressed by all these groups. Clinics, at which leading golf instructors and players have appeared, panel and round table discussions at which the best methods of

teaching have been examined, guest appearances by persons in the education field, and even by psychologists, all have had enlightening effects. Thomas' New Jersey section, incidentally, has long been a leader in educating its members. So, for that matter, has the national PGA, which always has put a great deal of emphasis on teaching clinics at its annual meetings.

Solution Not Patented

But with all the help and stimulation the pro gets from his sectional organization or the national PGA, and in spite of all the personal effort and thought he has put into the important teaching phase of his job, the fact that he first tries to mentally prepare his pupils isn't a patented solution. It may be as Bud Williamson of the CC of Lincoln, Neb., says: "With one fellow you may spend a lot of time just getting him to relax; then another comes along and you have just as much trouble keeping his mind on what he's doing."

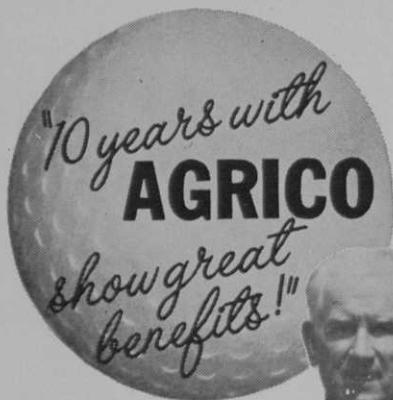
But, Williamson says, it is very few people that he hasn't enjoyed teaching. "Most persons," he adds, "are pretty well coordinated. If you can get them to stand comfortably in front of a ball, keep their balance and release the club with a relaxed feeling, then you have accomplished something. It may take several lessons to do this. I try to keep my golfers on an organized instruction schedule, especially when they are beginners, and discourage them from playing the course until I'm reasonably sure they are ready.

"One of the worse things a person can do," the Lincoln pro observes, "is to go out and play a round and come back thoroughly discouraged. It undoes everything you've taught him and can be a reflection on your teaching ability."

Prefers Playing Lessons

Hampton Auld, Cape Fear CC, Wilmington, N. C., feels that getting the golfer mentally tuned to hitting a ball shouldn't stop with the lesson tee but should be carried onto the course. "It would be wonderful," he says, "if after a pro has given a golfer a series of lessons on the practice tee he could play at least a couple rounds with the person. A little coaching under actual playing conditions helps to build confidence," Auld declares, "and it's also a good time for the player to learn something about strategy. It's bad we don't have more time for this because the student's biggest problem is applying what he has learned from his lessons to the course."

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... that's the experience of James J. Grady, Supt., Roselle Golf Club, Roselle, N. J.

Greens, tees and fairways at the Roselle Golf Club have been fed with Agrico fertilizers for more than ten years. Today the Roselle turf is outstanding in the excellent color of top-growth, vigorous root development, and freedom from weeds. Superintendent Grady attributes the fine condition of the Roselle course to a program of three fertilizations a year with Agrico and Agrinite.

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Swing from the Mental Side

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The Cape Fear pro has some good advice for instructors who have difficulty in getting their pupils to loosen up. If stopping to have a cigarette doesn't do the job, he says, get them to start talking about something at which they are proficient. One or the other will work about three times out of four. When Emery Thomas runs into this problem, he tries to get around it from another angle. He switches from having the player practice taking the club back, for example, to concentrating on leg action and then comes back to what he was originally trying to get the pupil to do.

Pupils Don't Practice Enough

Like so many pros, Ralph Kingsrud of Fargo (N. D.) CC bemoans the fact that many of his players don't practice between lessons. Too much can be undone in the week or two that intervenes between instruction sessions, Kingsrud declares, especially when the player doesn't swing at a ball or even pick up a club during the interval. When he comes back it is hard for him to pick up his concentration, and, at the same time, be free of tension because his muscles don't respond. "Few people realize it," the Fargo pro concludes, "but a person has to be in fairly good physical condition to get very much out of a golf lesson."

In the opinion of the four pros whose comments on teaching appear above, a person around 25 or 30 years of age, who is seriously interested in golf, makes the best pupil. Whether a professional or executive is better student than a person in a less exacting position is debatable. Thomas and Auld observe that the executive probably gets more out of a lesson series because he has more time to practice. This presupposes that he has the desire to learn, an ingredient in which the four pros put great store. At least two of them agree that older or more experienced golfers often turn out to be the poorest students because in too many cases they take lessons merely to effect some kind of a temporary cure.

None of the instructors say they use radically different methods in teaching men as compared to women or older persons as compared to younger ones. They use the same basic approach with all ages, sexes and types, varying their methods only after they have a pretty good idea of what kind of a person they are working with.