

THE GOLF COACH

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Extract

THE
FIRST
LESSON

I remember my first golf lesson. I was around 10. I wish I could say that I look back at it fondly and that it was the catalyst for my life in golf...but it wasn't. In fact, I would go as far as saying that I got into golf in spite of my first lesson and unfortunately, I don't think I am alone in this sort of first experience. Here's how it went:

- The entire lesson was conducted in a driving range bay.
- The coach taught me the "correct" grip which felt really weird and gave me blisters.
- I was only allowed to take the club back halfway, focusing on opening the door (the clubface) on the way back and closing the door on the way down. The ball didn't go very far.
- I had to hold the finish until the ball stopped rolling. A bit embarrassing when nearly every shot was topped.

And that was it. Now, again, I must highlight that this was not necessarily the coach's fault. He was probably only doing what was either taught to him or re-enacting how he learned to play the game. If lessons are given with good intentions and the coach honestly believes that what they think they are doing is right then they shouldn't really be bashed for it. I sincerely believe that.

However, we can't escape the fact that this sort of first experience with golf is not uncommon nor is it particularly helpful in attracting players to the game. I really feel that we need to re-evaluate what we consider good practice when it comes to our player's first contact with golf and how more players can get hooked to this game.

A while back I listened to the renowned Junior coach Neil Plimmer (JOLF) on a podcast (The Participation Podcast) hosted by my good friend Wojciech Wasniewski (brilliant coach and mind) going through what he does on the first lesson with a new player:

- Walk onto the golf course and go straight to the 1st green, explaining the use of the putter on the green and how we want to get the ball in as few shots as possible.
- Walk down the fairway of the 2nd hole and drop a few balls near the green, encouraging the player to chip them onto the green and then putt them in.
- Do the same thing on the 3rd hole but this time stopping further back so the player performs a full swing and then again completes the hole.
- Repeat and each time stopping further back from the green.

Now, even though this relies heavily on the use of the golf course and this might not be possible for some of us, think how much more beneficial to the player this is compared to the lesson I described at the beginning.

In effect, the player has learned how to play golf here, not just how to hit a ball. I can't overstate how important this is: **we have a responsibility to our players to coach them how to play golf and not just how to hit the ball.**

In my own personal experience, I still come across players who have been receiving golf lessons for months and even sometimes more than a year without ever having stepped foot onto a golf course nor understanding how to actually play golf. We can't accept this. We really can't.

My own first lesson with players is similar to that of Neil's but I start with exploring a basic understanding of how to hit a ball and the differences between clubs.

The first session of 1 hour or 90 minutes normally goes like this:

- I give them a 9, 8 or 7 iron and ask them to hit after briefly (and I mean very briefly!) explaining that for a right handed player the right hand will be below the left, feet more or less shoulder width apart and the ball in the middle of the stance. I then ask them to hit. I jump in from time to time with very basic swing tips and ask them to change clubs asking them what they see or feel is different and exploring basic concepts of the differences between clubs.

I feel that this first part is important because most people will have an idea in their head that golf is about hitting shots and have been looking forward to doing so.

Similarly, as previously considered earlier on in the book, it is the sweetly struck, high flying shots that we all get hooked onto and are constantly in search for and the player is more likely to get that with the first 20-30 minutes hitting balls.

- Luckily, the 10th tee box of the South course is just outside the academy so I take them over to it, explaining the basics of where to tee up from, where to stand etc. as well as looking at the board and explaining the basic notions of score (pars, birdies, -1, +1 etc.).
- Straight to the putting green where I ask them to putt around for a few minutes, getting used to the feel of the putter and the speed of the green. Then we do a circuit of a few holes, trying to score them (using the information in Point 2) in relation to a par for the holes.
- Repeat Point 4 but this time I play, covering what to do/where to stand when playing with someone.
- Move further and further away from the hole

For me, this lesson covers the basics of learning how to hit the ball but also implementing this skill in a simplified version of the actual game. Of course I am not saying that you should copy this format, again, you must find ways that work for you but I will say that if your first lesson is: Grip, Aim, Stance, Posture and nothing else, perhaps an exploration of the concepts covered here might be something to consider.

We only have one chance to make a good first impression so for our own businesses as well as for us as ambassadors of the game, making the first lesson informative but also enjoyable is absolutely key if we are to bring people in.

I know it would have worked for me.



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