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GOLF JOURNAL By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



A Lesson About Golf Instructors

Big-name teachers aren't just pricey, they're often rigid. Instead, try the old pro at the local range September 16, 2006; Page P3

Unless you subscribe to Golf Range Magazine, you probably missed the release of its new Top 50 Golf Instructors list. Normally I would have skipped over it, too, but I'd been thinking recently about the disastrous lesson a friend of mine took several years ago, which I overheard word for word while hitting balls a few feet away.

My friend, a midcareer manager who felt he needed to take up golf because so many of his colleagues played, is a smart, perceptive guy, but he was no match for this instructor. The first thing they worked on, after establishing the grip, was wrist pronation. The instructor actually used that word repeatedly: "pronation." Now, I'm an experienced, single-digit handicapper, and I only sort of know what wrist pronation is. My friend had no clue, and several attempts by the teacher to explain left him knowing even less. They then sailed through 15 or 20 other vital concepts of the swing, and before you knew it the half hour was up. Needless to say, my friend never took up golf, although -- having prepaid for a series of lessons -- he did show up for two more sessions.

There really are some dreadful teachers working out there, but there are also some good ones -- and, as the Golf Range Magazine list shows, you don't always find them in the obvious places. Golf and Golf Digest magazines also publish top teacher lists, but

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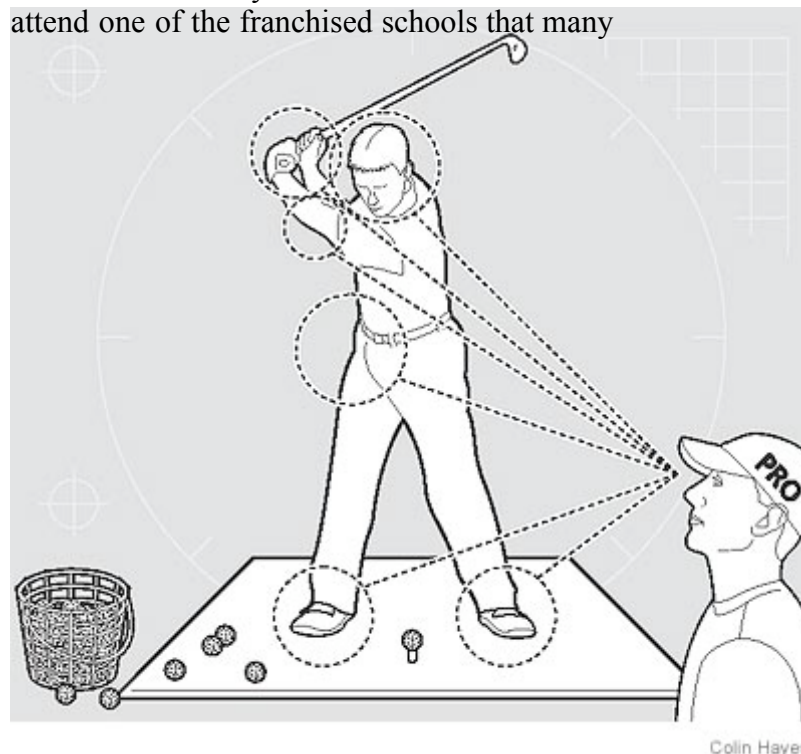
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they are top heavy with the famous instructors who teach Tour pros. You could try to schedule a lesson with Tiger Woods's coach (Hank Haney, No. 4 on the Golf Digest top 50 list) or with one of Phil Mickelson's two coaches (No. 5 Rick Smith or No. 8 Dave Pelz), but even if you managed to get a time you'd pay through the nose. The closest teacher on either list to where I live is Mitchell Spearman at the Manhattan Woods Golf Club in West Nyack, N.Y. His entry-level fee is \$1,500 for a three-hour lesson. (Note: That's definitely at the high end, even for this bunch.)

Another way to avail yourself of these famous instructors is to buy their books and videos or attend one of the franchised schools that many



instructors who teach at driving ranges or learning centers; they've all been in the business for years, and some are also standout players. I called a few of them this week to learn their secrets.

At the top of the list, if only because it's presented alphabetically, is Liza Abood, of the Olney Golf Park in Olney, Md. "I just got in from the best lesson, a total beginner," she told me, still a bit out of breath. "It was really fun." The student, in her mid-50s, was learning golf so she could play with her husband, and had been thrilled just a few minutes earlier to hit several long balls in a row that went high in the air. "Perfect shots!" Ms. Abood called them. "I finally got her to relax her left arm and the swing really smoothed out. She was so happy."

**Picking a Teacher** | Ms. Abood,

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of them have set up. But this approach often means buying into a quasi-theological teaching "system" that you may or may not respond to. Mr. Pelz, for example, teaches a straight-back, straight-through putting stroke, whereas most instructors advise opening the putterface slightly on the backswing and closing it after impact.

In any case, unless you happen to live near one of these schools, you won't get the sustained personal attention you'll get by taking lessons from your crusty old local pro. Golf Range Magazine's list includes only

## Picking a teacher

What you get for your money at several price points

LEVEL	WHAT YOU GET	WHAT IT COSTS	COMMENT
<b>Local teacher</b>	Convenient lessons any time you need them	From \$50 to \$200 or more per lesson, with discounts for taking a series	You can see him whenever you need him, and because he is familiar with your game, he can guide your progress.
<b>Basic golf school</b>	Three to four days of intense instruction	\$600 to \$1,500 or more, including lodging	Comprehensiveness makes it good for beginners or pre-season tuneups—but watch out for blisters.
<b>High-end instruction</b>	The latest thing: hours of scheduled and on-call instruction each month, including on-course lessons	A monthly retainer of \$800 to \$1,200 or more	Almost <i>guarantees</i> improvement, but will seriously impact your wallet and calendar.
<b>Extravaganza</b>	Four nights in Vegas and three days of group instruction with Butch Harmon himself	\$5,900	Price even includes lunch! Tiger Woods's former coach is also a great raconteur.

48 years old, said the bulk of her clients (equal parts men and women, of all ages, at \$80 for 45 minutes) have handicaps of 20 to 30 -- meaning, they usually can't break 100 for 18 holes when they start with her.

Despite being an excellent tournament player herself (in 2003 she finished fifth in the LPGA club professional championship) she said she enjoys teaching high handicappers every bit as much, if not more, than teaching better players. Her primary goal, she said, is to help clients "love golf as much as I do and to want to continue playing after our lessons are over."

The core skill of the teaching job seems to be communication. First, a good teacher has to learn to keep things simple. "One or two points per lesson is all most people can take in," Ms. Abood said. But getting those few points across isn't always easy -- sometimes it means repeating them many times, using different images or twists until it finally registers. "If the concept you are trying to teach is blue, you might have to explain it to one student as green, and then to the next person as orange," said Danny Elkins, a teacher at the Georgia Golf Center in Roswell, Ga., near Atlanta. "Everybody learns differently."

Most of the teachers I talked with didn't have many gripes about their jobs, except the long hours. Mr. Elkins, 50, taught 12 to 14 half-hour lessons a day, six days a week, for 15 years, but recently has scaled back to 10 lessons a day (at \$85 each). But the instructors were unanimous in their frustration at having a student abandon a change they are trying to implement in favor of some random tip picked up from a golf magazine. A good teacher's value is largely in knowing the sequence in which a person needs to learn new things; advice from outside sources can spoil the party. "Sometimes," said Roy Pace, 65, who charges \$75 an hour for lessons at the Alpine Target Golf Center in Longview, Texas, which he owns, "you just have to start all over again."

Remember also to be wary if any piece of outside advice includes the word "pronation."

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