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My Story

A Legacy Worth Celebrating

By Todd O'Neal, PGA

My journey in golf began at the age of 11 when my parents decided to join one of the local country clubs. Our PGA Professional, Tim Zwettler, was vivacious, genuine and kind. He was also a great player, whom we all admired for his playing ability and his ability to connect with seemingly every member.

Our family later joined the elite club in town and this is where I met PGA Professional Al Mundle. Like Tim, Al had boundless energy, especially when his "club kids" were around. I found myself following him around just to hear one of the nuggets he would share about golf, life or – better yet – my game. I remember Al spending many hours on the lesson tee – with players of any ability – with the same authenticity I'd seen in Tim.

One of my fondest memories was successfully being able to hit shots on command as Al called them out randomly to test my shot-making skills. These days, every time I hit one of those special shots Al taught me, by using my own creativity and feel, I'm actually celebrating the investment Al made in me. In my own teaching, I try to emulate him, hoping that Al's influence on me can somehow transfer to my students.

After college, with Al's encouragement, I tried to play the mini-tours, but fell short on funding. Instead, I found an opportunity to work as the sixth assistant (that's right, sixth) for Jerry Mowlds, the PGA Professional at a club known for its long list of low-digit handicappers.

Working for Jerry, primarily as bag room manager, I found myself admiring him for the very same reasons as with Tim and Al. His influence as a leader in mentoring and educating younger professionals within The PGA, coupled with his abilities as a player and teacher, was very inspirational to me.

While still working in the bag room, I asked Jerry if I could start teaching. He replied yes, but said that if I wanted to teach, I would need to submit my "teaching outline" to him for review. "Teaching outline," I thought, "Who asks for that kind of stuff?" Having been to several PGA schools and seminars on teaching, I thought I had a good handle on the mechanics of the swing and was a pretty good teacher. Reflecting back on Tim and Al, I knew they would also support Jerry's request, so I sat down to type out my outline. I put everything down I could think of that a teacher may do, and as I turned my beautiful piece of work in, I was confident Jerry would be impressed with my knowledge. (Knowing more now, I am certain he was impressed more with my effort than with my knowledge.)

After getting my report back from Jerry, he gave me one significant comment, a word of advice that grounds me to this day. He said (paraphrased: "It'll take about 1,000 lessons before you'll really be worth the amount you want to charge for lessons...a great instructor is one who can communicate the same message 100 different ways, and you can't get there without experience and time." For a split second, I held my breath, thinking I wasn't going to be able to teach under Jerry. I must have made an audible exhale when he gave me approval to start teaching. To have someone of Jerry's stature approve of me to teach, and do something I had a real passion for, was special for me.

THE PROBLEM

Telling these stories about Tim, Al and Jerry isn't just an act of reminiscing for me. I truly feel our profession has lost touch with its roots ... with its purpose or its "why." These golf professionals were about inspiring customers through personal contact on the course, in events and on the lesson tee. They worked hard to help all players, of all skill levels, feel welcome and included in the community. I dare say the golf experience was less about the golf course and more about the golf community and the professional who made it all work.

PGA Professionals are recently becoming better known for administration and education rather than Playing, Promoting, and Teaching (the big three, as I like to call them). Our ranks are becoming filled with professionals who have a hard time breaking 80 in tournaments, are stuck behind the counter, don't play with their members/customers, and see teaching as a thing they really don't have time for. Is anybody awake? Can't we see that we are killing our own game with our own general apathy? In the late '90s and early '00s, The PGA of America emphasized business education and the goal that becoming a general manager or director of golf was what every PGA member should strive for. Maybe this made sense when we had 30 million golfers, most of whom had plenty of disposable income. In the process, we strayed far, far away from what matters in the game for our customers, members and loyalists. We stopped teaching ourselves how to promote what worked so well for so many years.

THE SOLUTION

There are certainly still some great professionals who carry on the legacy of Tim, Al and Jerry, but there seem to be many more who see it as a job, instead of a profession or a passion. Furthermore, they've lost sight of their "why" for being a golf professional in the first place. I realize this is partially due to the business climate, but it's also because of the overriding emphasis nearly all golf management companies, and many PGA general managers, place on the business structure, to the detriment of what really makes the biggest difference for customers and members, which are:

- Improving their games: by helping them play better (less bad shots, more good shots) and possibly lowering their score
- Increasing their desire to play: by helping them find friends, playing partners and building lasting relationships that improve their lives
- Inspiring their desire to participate: by helping them see how they fit into the "golf community" and be part of the community as a participant
- Including them in our business: by helping them see their role, their significance in the success of the facility, our operation...basically their value as a customer and eventually a loyal partner

I truly believe that being a golf professional is not for the faint of heart. It's not just a job – and it never was for Tim, Al and Jerry. It was a craft, a specialized skill fueled by their desire to make a difference in the lives of others. TODAY IS NO DIFFERENT. In fact, I believe we need more Tims, Als and Jerrys as golf professionals than ever!

As I look at 2013 and beyond, I want to challenge myself, and my fellow professionals reading this, to be a true "golf professional." Yes, we need business skills and acumen, but our core should be about being able to represent the "big three goals" at an admirable level.

Let's all strive to be a PGA golf professional who helps customers improve, increases their play and participation and works to inspire them and help them feel included in a significant way.

I welcome any feedback or thoughts you may have.

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