

Building coach-player relationships

Empathy between coach and pupil is an essential ingredient for success says Dr Brian Hemmings.

Through working in professional and international amateur golf for over 15 years I have been incredibly privileged to observe up close the characteristics of successful player-coach relationships.

I have often remarked to England national coaches that the best coaches seem to be more like 'mentors' to players in that they transcend the idea of being only a 'swing coach' to cover all aspects of the game.

This does not mean merely also covering putting and short game skills, but endeavouring to help a player manage themselves, help structure their practice, develop course management skills, and to pass knowledge in equipment matters, biomechanics, psychology and fitness.

The mentoring coach is not a 'font of all knowledge' and is happy to engage specialist advice for the player, or accompany the player to find the advice that is needed. Often this means coaches are still learning themselves and acts as a filter for information for the player. Mentoring players is time-consuming and cannot be available to every player, but is ultimately extremely rewarding.

A particularly difficult time for any coach is the beginning of a new relationship with a player and assessing their needs. Clearly PGA professionals are very skilled at observing, listening, demonstrating and looking at game related skills to engage a player and develop rapport, but the human element in forming player-coach relationship should also not be neglected.

In group coaching and when meeting new players in squad sessions (e.g. county training), the challenges for the coach in forming working relationships with players are particularly demanding. I believe the effectiveness of the coach in these situations is as much about their personal rapport building skills as it is about their technical knowledge.

At England national training over the years a regular difficulty for the coaches is gaining the trust of players who have their own personal coach and can often seem resistant to working with them. The work we have done in this area about player-coach relationships has relevance to all coaches because it gives an insight into the basics of human behaviour.

For example, to gain an appreciation of the player and coach roles and encourage two-way communication, players and coaches have sometimes been asked to 'put themselves in the other's shoes'; that is to consider what it would be like to be on the other side of the player-coach relationship.

This exercise takes no more than 10 minutes, helps to clarify the aspects of effective working relationships at an early stage and lays the foundation for successful technical skills coaching.

Knowing what players look for in coaches and vice-versa opens up communication channels and leads to clear expectations on both sides. Also because the players are empowered to give their views on effective coaching, it seems their commitment to being a 'coachable' player is enhanced.

At the most basic level, golf coaching is still about a human relationship between two people - the coach and player. The use of simple psychology by the coach can do much to adapt to each new relationship and the needs of the player.

Why not try the above exercise next time you encounter a 'squad' session? It can work with juniors, adults and both genders, and promises to make you're coaching sessions far more productive and enjoyable.



Good rapport: Pete Cowen (left) and Darren Clarke

Qualities of 'good coach' (National player responses)

- Enthusiastic
- Can trust
- Has an opinion
- Motivates
- Has knowledge of player
- Gives confidence
- Understands what you want
- Makes a judgement about importance of feel & technique
- Problem-solver
- Clear/transparent –gives good explanation
- Easy to get on with
- Good knowledge
- Open-minded
- Listens to work of personal coach

Qualities of 'coachable' player (National coaches' responses)

- Has knowledge of own game
- Open-minded/wants to learn
- Listener
- Has desire
- Good work ethic
- Builds relationships with coaches
- Gives feedback
- Prepares practice days
- Good lifestyle management
- Creative
- Not afraid to fail
- Shares knowledge with others
- Sets goals & targets
- Determined to achieve

■ Brian's online Golf Psychology Coaching Certificate course is approved by the PGA of GB&I (100 CPD points) and PGAs of Europe, and has been completed with great reviews by PGA professionals. Go to www.golfpsychologycoaching.com for full details. The course is full of information and practical activities for the PGA Professional to guide players through improving their mental game, and is endorsed by some of England's best coaches. Taking 25 hours to complete, coaches can complete the course at home so you will have no travel costs or time away from your work. All you need is a player to work with and the time to complete the course activities. For a price reduction type in the promotional code PGA to reduce the price from £295 to £215.



Dr. Brian Hemmings has been lead psychologist to England golf since 1998. During this time he has helped develop the mental skills of the best emerging English golfers including the likes of Ross Fisher, Richard Finch, Danny Willett, Tom Lewis, David Horsey and Chris Wood. Brian is author of the book 'Mental Toughness for Golf: The Minds of Winners' and is also a regular presenter on the PGA CPD programme.