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THE PLAYER

PSYCHOLOGIST RELATIONSHIP: WORKING WITH PRACTITIONERS AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL

European Tour Professional, Seve Benson, and sports psychologist, Dr. Brian Hemmings, have established a successful professional relationship that has lasted well over a decade.

IGPN spoke to Brian and Seve to find out more about how they work together and what lessons can be learned about creating a successful, effective team of practitioners around an elite performer.



Becoming an Effective Part
of a Player's Team

HOW DID YOUR WORKING RELATIONSHIP COME ABOUT?

SEVE: Our relationship began when I was a young lad playing for England. Brian was the England squad psychologist when I was about 17.

BRIAN: I remember seeing his name and like many people I thought it was misspelt. So that was noticeable at first in terms of his name but I remember meeting him as a what was really a young boy of 15 and of course now he's in his late 20s.

WHAT SORT OF WORK DID YOU DO AT FIRST?

BRIAN: It would of been a typical session with a young junior golfer on the fringe of England recognition with 'boys' – what you're trying to do is get to know somebody and how they approach the game because we're all different. Then largely it's individually based – so for some people it might be very much on putting work and with others it might be their approach off the course.

But for a lot of young golfers, there are their own expectations of how far they want to go in the game and it's very competitive in the game from a very early age. What I probably recall from Seve... would be something about expectations of yourself, and of trying to forge a career in the game.

WHAT HAS YOUR WORKING RELATIONSHIP ENTAILED?

BRIAN: Seve's always been a quiet individual, keeping himself to himself... I think sometimes with players, when they're quiet they can be deemed to be unconfident but I would say Seve had quite a quiet assurance about him, which he's always had.

SEVE: Working with Brian for this length of time has been a real joy. He has always kept me focused on the process of what I am doing. After working together for a long time he has become a great friend. We meet on pretty much an ad-hoc basis from time-to-time and after seeing Brian I'm always left with a sense of calmness, which I love.

BRIAN: The beauty of working with somebody over that extended period of time is that you see him or her through so many psychological transitions – not just in terms of their game, but also as a person going from a young boy into a young adult. Then they're developing long-term relationships off the course in terms of their partner, along with other transitions such as buying houses... and all the things that we probably don't think much about when we look at sportspeople play golf.

At the same time you're cautious about the fact that you're not their friend. When you've known somebody for 14 years you get to know them very well but it's a professional relationship, it's not a personal friendship relationship. Therefore we're both quite disciplined in that way that it retains a professional sense whilst it is in a friendly way.

HOW DO YOU MANAGE THESE INFLUENTIAL FACTORS WITH PLAYERS LIKE SEVE?

BRIAN: Work with any player is very individually-based if it's going to be the most effective because you're trying to establish a very unique relationship – what makes a player unique, what's their way of thinking about the game, and how can you remind them of those things when there might be a sense to search for something that's going to be more effective?

So we retain contact only maybe by text before and after a tournament and when he's home for a reasonable stretch of time. We try and meet up either at Wentworth where he's based or more locally to me.

Then it's very much in the moment about what's on his mind – is it a performance issue or is it somewhere else in terms of lifestyle or his approach that he's maybe lost his focus – it really comes from him.

SEVE: Since a young age, Brian has helped me to become very strong mentally and cope with any situation that may arise on the golf course. I think that as time has gone on our relationship has improved and Brian knows how I tick so when something comes up in my game we can deal with it really effectively.



BRIAN, YOU'VE SEEN SEVE THROUGH ALL OF THESE VARIOUS STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT – IS THAT A CHALLENGE TO GET BACKGROUND AND RELATIONSHIP BOND WITH PLAYERS WHEN YOU FIRST BEGIN WORKING WITH THEM?

BRIAN: Yes, in new relationships getting to know one another, getting to know how someone thinks about their game, their particular issues or the demands/pressures at that point, gets easier as you get to know people. But by and large, in sports psychology, they're actually more short term relationships – people come to you with a specific issue and that may last as little as one or two sessions, six sessions, or over six months, but is more fleeting. I think that this is where it is different from a PGA Professional because although

players do change coaches my experience is that they generally do have a bit more longevity than a sports psych.

[Sports psychologist] relationships are generally more fleeting and therefore there's more pressure on you to be effective over a short period of time, whereas with somebody such as Seve or a longer-term relationship, there's a sense that you can get into other areas that perhaps they wouldn't think are performance-related by getting to know the person better.



WHAT IS IT ABOUT SEVE AND OTHERS THAT SET THEM APART?

BRIAN: They're all very different in their approach... but my observations of working with the amateur-professional transition in the English game would be that they invest in themselves.

So at National coaching level there would be a number of technical coaches with specialist areas, a physio, strength and conditioning people, and one of the difficulties for players when they turn professional is that all of a sudden that team largely drops off because they're not at your beck and call as a national squad player.

So all of a sudden the support structure that you've experienced and the edges in performance through sports science or through certain technical coaching is no longer there.

I think that when you speak to people who have made ineffective transitions, you find that

their team completely dispersed and they really suffered as a result of that.

Whereas I think that with people like Seve, Danny [Willett], Chris [Wood], what they did very well was that they still invested in themselves. So at a time when perhaps money might have been at a bit more of a premium, they still tried to retain as many people of that core team as they could.

SEVE: I think my professionalism, relentless work ethic and commitment to the game are my strong points. But they all come from the fact that I've always focused on, and invested in, the mental side of my game and made sure I put the effort in to maintain what I'm doing.

Because I've known Brian for a while and specifically since I was young, he's helped me to mature as a person and become very professional in what I do. We also spent a lot of time in the past looking at goal setting so our work has helped me become very clear on how to achieve those goals.

BRIAN, HOW DO YOU FIT INTO SEVE'S COACHING TEAM?

BRIAN: I'm very rarely at tournaments, the European Tour is obviously a well-based tour now so there's the cost implications of [travelling to events]. And also I think Seve is low maintenance so I don't think there's a need for that a lot of the time.

Generally I'll try and see him play a couple of times a year – clearly the UK ones this year, Wentworth and Woburn, are the easiest, and that's more observationally. As I say to him, I'm not looking to intervene at that point; it's really an observational point to see how he operates because a large amount of his work is based on his reflections. Also of course there's a chance at that point to interact more with his team – he has a world-class coach in Pete Cowen, he works with Justin Buckthorp who works with Justin Rose and a number of other players in terms of his strength and conditioning, and I get a chance to meet with his caddie.

He works with Phil Kenyon on a week-to-week basis out on tour... so it gives me a great chance to catch up with their work and the putting work I am doing with him to make sure it's in accordance with them.

So to get the views of other people who are closely involved with him in terms of their observations on maybe his improvement or areas where there could be more improvement is very useful.

So that's how it works, but otherwise when Seve gets back after a series of tournaments we'll either catch up face-to-face or by Skype, FaceTime or phone, whatever's the most convenient to him.

HOW DO YOU MAKE YOURSELF AN EFFECTIVE PART OF SEVE'S TEAM AND MANAGE HIS EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT YOU HOPE TO DO?

BRIAN: There are many sports psychologists that would emphasise the content of interventions and 'this is what you do', and often there's a lot of 'yes, this technique will enable you to do x, y, and z'. I've always approached it from a slightly different way – I've always recognised that the relationship is of primary importance. So, as somebody begins to trust you and you build rapport with them, the relationship is in a sense also how you help people change their views or beliefs, or how they approach a certain situation.

So I always put great emphasis on the importance of the relationship with any player. As it is with Seve, that's easier to say as I've known him a long time.

The second part of it is that I try to be open to his needs at whatever point he is at. Sometimes players give you that themselves.

I would like to think that sometimes I challenge his way of thinking when I think it is unproductive to him, or I present a different story to him that could be equally valid based on his experiences.

Let's say in terms of expectations, in terms of your progress through the game, you could write a story where you say 'well Seve's never won on tour'. He's won as a professional, but like many people he hasn't won on tour yet. They'll be other people who will say 'well Seve should have won by now'. Now of course if that creeps in to your thinking that can put you under enormous pressure.

Where as an equally valid story is to say 'well actually year on year he's improving and whether he wins or not is not entirely down to him'. It's down to how in any given week, the rest of the field.

SEVE: It's really important to have a good team of people around you. I would say that the team would each need to be open-minded and have minimal egos – that way they can work effectively for the player.



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The course is full of practical activities and information on assessing mental skills, goals and motivation, attention control, confidence building, and anxiety reduction techniques for the PGA professional to guide players through improving their mental game. The course is endorsed by some of England's best coaches. You 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 discount code PGAE to reduce the price from £295 to £215.

With thanks to Brian Hemmings, Seve Benson (@SeveBenson) and Northampton Golf Club (www.northamptongolfclub.co.uk).