

ACADEMY MAGIC

The relationship between coach and student is special in any sport, but in golf it's doubly important. Toss in a well-honed plan, a collegial atmosphere, cutting edge technology and a beautiful setting, and you've arrived at the golf school of your dreams. *GolfTips* takes you to some of America's best.



FLYING HIGH

Bird Golf: Under the radar, right on target



Stockton Seaview Golf Club near Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Ever heard of Bird Golf Academy?

No?

Well, you're not alone, and that's just fine with PGA Professional Jay Ewing, an Australian native who had some success on the Australian and Asian Tours in the 1980s and won the World Pro-Am at Pebble Beach in 1998. He and his 19 cohorts—women like 1963 U.S. Women's Open champion Mary Mills and 1975 champion Sandra Palmer, and men like award-winning Minnesotan Craig Waryan—teach across the country, to students of every age and background, under the Bird Golf method of ... no set method at all. Which makes them just as accessible for any level golfer as they are relatively unknown. Until someone shows up for a clinic, that is, then turns around and tells everyone they know how they, too, will get the most personalized experience possible.

"We just don't think group instruction is the most effective way to learn," said Ewing from his home base in Colorado. "We teach one or two students to one professional. That separates us from most golf schools, but more importantly is who teaches someone. Included in our number are two different U.S. Open championships. Mary Mills won three majors. She's been teaching for 23 years. Six are members of two more halls of fame. We have a national teacher of the year, PGA Master professional and so on. So the quality of instruction is second to none. I have a great deal of respect for golf schools like John Jacobs, but they teach one method. All of our teachers are versed in several methods and styles and can teach the right person accordingly."

Who came up with this approach of fitting style to student? None other than Carey Mumford, the Tennessean with a gift for sizing people's needs up quickly, testing them to see how they operated in

life, then coming up with a teaching plan to guarantee success. He passed away in October 2013 at age 85.

"Carey Mumford was an amazing man. He was the first sports psychologist back in the 1970s. He was unique," Ewing said. "He trained us with *Clear Key* and the *Double Connection*, which were two books he wrote. I met him in the 1980s. His methodology is teaching people not to think."

Say again?

"We do what people would call a personality profile. Each person is unique. Carey did 86,000 of these profiles in his lifetime, and no two people answered all questions the same way. How is information best received by them—visually, verbally, kinesthetically? How do they learn best? That combination of things separates them."

Hence the ability to match teacher and student to a tee. "Everything we do is customized for the student. They pick the time they want to come, the areas of their games they want to work on. It's very much their golf schools."

And where do these students go to get this personalized deal?

"We have 20 amazing locations around the country. Our flagship is at Sheraton Wildhorse Pass in Chandler, Ariz. It's a spectacular spot. The Whirlwind courses there have twice been course of the year for Troon. Our driving range there is private, not even the guests can go there. They have Kai, the only five-star, five-diamond restaurant in Arizona, one of only 13 in the whole country."

Other top-drawer Bird Golf partners include Seaview in New Jersey, where the LPGA's Shoprite Classic plays out every year; Alisal in Santa Barbara, California, a secluded and bucolic choice for folks looking for a quiet learning environment; Paiute Golf Resort north of Las Vegas, a

tribe-owned facility with three outstanding Pete Dye tracks and a special "hidden" practice area; and Pala Mesa in Fallbrook, California, located right off I-15.

At these and every venue, Bird Golf students get some form of Mumford's "Clear Key" philosophy in the course of their stay—a non-systematic system that he developed after picking up a few ideas from a certain Canadian legend some 35 years ago.

"Carey was friends with Moe Norman," Ewing said. "They met in the early 1980s. 'Clear Key' is actually teaching people what Moe did, which is to shut down the mind and say something that's completely estranged from golf, and say it four times. You act on rote, or instinct. So Moe had read Carey's stuff. He approached Carey at a PGA Canadian Tour event. They became friends."

These days, a lot of golfers know Norman via the "Natural Golf" method shown on so many TV ads through the years. He was the guy with the baseball grip, the one-plane swing, the hands held really high. It all worked for him, though Ewing says Norman would be the last guy to recommend it to everybody.

"Nicklaus called him the greatest ballstriker who ever lived. And with all due respect to Natural Golf, he didn't think that's what he really did. He said he did it for short, fat people like him. He had short, stubby fingers and he taught himself to play. The overlapping or interlocking grip? He would recommend that to taller, more slender people."

That leads Ewing to another thought about Nicklaus and one of the players who made no secret of emulating him—Greg Norman, who, like Jack, shaped his game to peak for the majors. One problem in emulating The Bear, however: Norman (Greg, not Moe) didn't play the way Ewing says he was born to play: Quickly. Instead

he tried to play Nicklaus' slow, calculating game. "He's a driver-persuader, a very fast-paced guy," Ewing said, invoking one of Mumford's "personality types." "If you look at his Masters meltdown in 1996, he was taking 40 to 45 seconds to hit a shot. He was out of whack—at his best he was taking 10 or 12 seconds. That's what we teach people, to play in their style."

That's a wake-up call for mere mortals who like to play a bit faster yet regularly deal with five-hour rounds on the crowded munis of America.

"The trick for faster players playing behind a slow group is to take more time between shots, but pull the trigger quickly over the ball."

And, in the Bird Golf way, keep in mind

where you're going every step of the way. "Cary would tell you the ball is the true target. 'Well, yeah, but I want to hit it there.' 'Yeah, but that's in the future.' He was a magical guy, and he left us with the ability to teach Clear Key, which is very cool."

So now you know.

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Jay Ewing gets it done with a golf school student.

