

Professors of the green

Nine of the best teachers, complete with crib notes

Teachers are listmakers, and I'm not talking about a grocery list. There are a multitude of top 10, 20, 50 or 100 lists in golf, ranking everything from courses, practice ranges, retail shops and halfway houses to touring pros, club pros, superintendents and instructors.

In the spirit of listmaking, here are the nine best teachers who ever ate a vegetarian lunch at my kitchen table, listed alphabetically. I guess I'm still waiting for No. 10. I have summarized their views with my own words, not theirs.

I should add that I am drawn to iconoclastic instructors who sometimes view things a little differently. Please forgive me in those cases where I have oversimplified a complex idea, but I am exploring just one aspect of the philosophy of each of my favorite teachers.

1. Mike Austin, Woodland Hills, Calif.: Go ahead, you wimp, get aggressive and throw the club at the ball with your right hand.

Austin, 92, has a doctorate in kinesiology and a mind like a steel trap. Known for many years as the longest hitter in the world, Austin earned a spot in the Guinness record book for a 515-yard downwind tee shot he launched in the 1974 National Seniors Open, a predecessor to the U.S. Senior Open. He was 64 at the time.



James Achenbach's
Golf Universe

Forget about trying to create "lag" on the downswing, he said. Austin believes the right hand is unfairly maligned by too

many instructors. Don't worry about "hitting from the top," he said. If your body is in the proper position – if your hips and torso don't collapse – you can hit as fast and hard as you want with the right side without risking a duck hook.

2. Brian Calhoun, The Palms Golf Club, La Quinta, Calif.: Hey, baby, don't baby those delicate shots with a lob wedge.

Calhoun is a big man with a wonderful touch. A former instructor at the Dave Pelz Academy in La Quinta, he asks a straightforward question: A soft shot should be hit softly, right?

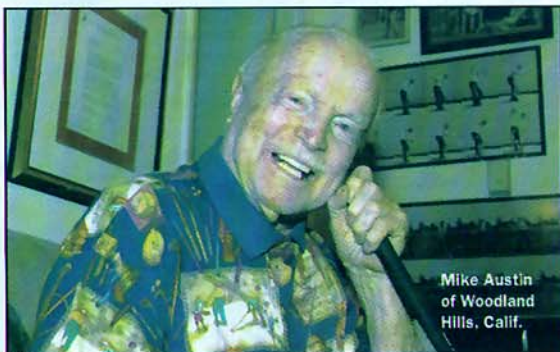
Wrong. The correct answer is that a soft shot should be hit with clubhead speed. The faster the clubhead goes past the ball, the faster the ball will run up the clubface and create spin.

Change the ratio of your backswing and forward swing. Your backswing needs to be short enough to allow you to release the clubhead freely. A shorter backswing to a larger follow-through will result in an accelerating clubhead at impact. This, according to Calhoun, is the secret of soft.

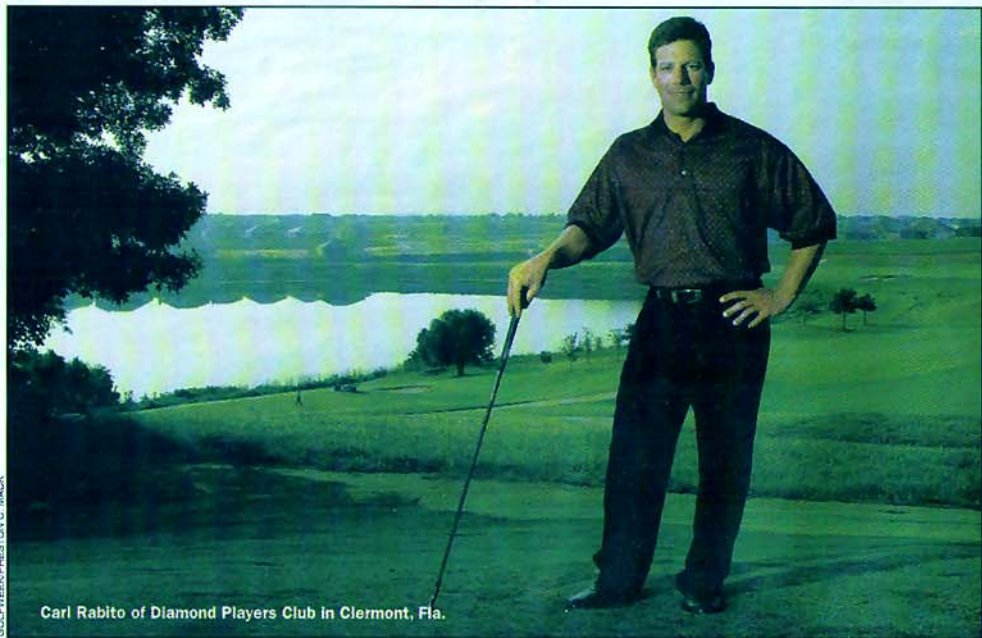
3. Tim Londrigan, Illini Country Club, Springfield, Ill.: Forget those old bromides.

Keep your eye on the ball. Keep your head still. Keep your left arm straight. Such advice should be thrown out the window, says Londrigan. Concentrate instead on making an athletic motion, which gets more difficult as we get older.

Londrigan is special because he is a gentleman. He is a throwback to club professionals of an earlier era, who always seemed genuinely interested in ordinary golfers.



Mike Austin
of Woodland
Hills, Calif.



Carl Rabito of Diamond Players Club in Clermont, Fla.

At Londrigan's club, the Central Illinois Seniors Invitational is going strong after 34 years. Age groups increase in five-year increments up to 75 and over. Two golfers, 90-year-old Jim McBride of Mattoon, Ill., and 81-year-old Lloyd Brown of Champaign, Ill., shot their ages in this year's event.

4. Kathy Murphy, Karsten Golf Course, Arizona State University, Tempe, Ariz.: Enough already with that practice swing.

Murphy teaches a constant variety of students – men, women, seniors, juniors. One of her messages applies to all these students: A golfer shouldn't take a full-blown practice swing, especially if it is viewed as a dress rehearsal for the real swing.

"It's a myth that you're going to repeat your practice swing," she says. "Your chances are slim and none. When you hit a real shot, your whole intention changes.

"If you try to move immediately from the unreal to the real, it doesn't work very well."

5. Nancy Quarcelino, Legends Club, Franklin, Tenn.: No schizophrenics allowed; don't try to change your personality when you take a golf lesson.

Quarcelino was a cerebral, intellectual teacher long before it was fashionable. She teaches all her students differently because they have different personalities and different natures. Students normally respond well to one of three different types of teaching – visual (seeing), kinesthetic (feeling) or auditory (hearing).

"Auditory people pick your brain," she says. "They are talkers. Visual people will say, 'Show me that again.' Kinesthetic people love training aids."

In the golf world according to Quarcelino, an instructor has to know the difference.

6. Carl Rabito, Diamond Players Club, Clermont, Fla.: Get to your left side at impact, or I'll cut your ear off.

Just kidding about the ear. The assertive Rabito can take a joke. Of all the instructors I know, Rabito is the most passionate. He is indefatigable. While most teachers give 30- or 60-minute lessons, many of Rabito's lessons literally last an entire day.

On tee shots, many golfers focus on hanging back and hitting the ball on the upswing. Rabito is like the anti-Christ to this movement. The wrath of Rabito will come down on any golfer who hangs back without properly getting to the left side at impact.

Of course, I am exaggerating. Rabito is an extremely patient man.

7. Bruce Stephen, Schenley Park Golf Course, Pittsburgh: Only a fool would try to swing like Tiger Woods.

"The vast majority of instruction causes golfers to try to execute motions that do not fit their physical abilities or body type," Stephen says. "What Tiger Woods, Charles Howell or Fred Couples do with their swings has no relevance to the average player."

"My approach to teaching starts with an analysis. With video, biomechanical data, physical testing and observation, I create a profile of what the player is currently doing, and I project what he or she is capable of.

"The end product is a plan to get players from where they are now to maximum improvement."

8. Don Trahan, Embassy Suites Golf Resort, Verdae Greens Golf Club, Greenville, S.C.: Get rid of that big shoulder turn (and get rid of back injury as well).

Trahan, father of amateur star D.J. Trahan, is a rebel with a cause. He has been ridiculed for dismissing the importance of the shoulder turn, but he has built a strong case for a swing that stresses an up-and-down motion rather than an around-the-body swing.

"Some golfers try to turn so much that they actually lose sight of the ball," Trahan says. "They move completely off the ball, and at the same time, they put a lot of stress on their backs."

Trahan emphasizes stability. He believes in a shorter swing, raising the arms and hands on the backswing without disturbing the balance and equilibrium of the body.

9. Wayne Warm's, Due Process Stable, Colt's Neck, N.J.: Learn the fundamentals, or I won't let you out of prison.

Kids flock to Warm's for lessons, and he has established something for them called "Wayne's House of Pain." To get out of this house, junior golfers must first demonstrate an understanding of rules and etiquette, plus the fundamentals of the golf swing.

"There's a room at the club, and I have a big mirror in there," Warm's says. "I have a video, too, but mostly I use the mirror. My underlying philosophy of teaching golf is that people don't really know what they're doing. If they had an understanding of what they were trying to do before they hit a golf ball, they'd improve a lot quicker."

"To do this, you have to be in a classroom situation. My students are constantly being tested. I'm pretty tough on them. They complain like crazy. They have notebooks, and they have to do homework assignments. I give each of them a graduation T-shirt that says, 'I survived Wayne's House of Pain.'"

"Once they get outside, they know exactly what they're going to do. It's so much better to do it that way rather than going out and flailing away at golf balls, not having any clue what you're supposed to be doing."

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