

By Hoyt Johnson

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For 20 years, I wanted to attend a golf school — and last August, I did. Now, I keep asking myself, “Why, oh why, did I wait so long?” Simply stated, this experience was fabulous; it was exciting and totally satisfying. I loved it — and I was surprised that this old dog still could learn new tricks!

Where did I go and what did I learn? Well, before I answer that, I have to pay homage to a couple of local pros. You see, John Benzel, director of golf at Sedona Golf Resort, not only is my “official” mentor, he also is my unyielding tormentor. And Gary Pearce, head professional at Oakcreek Country Club and one of the nicest guys in the game, always is ready with a helpful tip. But I spontaneously decided to go away, and to go alone. I wanted to go where I could devote 100 percent

promotional material in the mail and signed up for a four-day school.

Now, I had to tell Marcia. And the next thing I knew, I was breezing along I-10 in my Mustang convertible, whipping through Palm Springs, and then heading south toward San Diego with my clubs in the trunk and a song in my heart!

Aviara Golf Academy offers students a beautiful practice area with fairway-quality, grass tees; tournament-quality range balls; pitching green with sand bunkers; putting green; and specially designed slopes for uphill, downhill and side-hill lies. The academy’s unique video systems at the on-course learning center and in the classroom/office complex in the Aviara clubhouse feature voice-over equipment used to enhance the production of individual take-home tapes. And students enjoy all the amenities of Aviara’s early California-style clubhouse, including complimentary shoe care, club storage and cleaning, showers and saunas, fine toiletries in a luxurious locker room, plus the special ambience of the club’s Argyle Restaurant.

All these perks are part of what makes Aviara Golf Academy an exceptional facility. What sets Aviara Golf Academy’s acclaimed learning experience apart, however, is Kip Puterbaugh. This modest, soft-spoken gentleman, who teaches golf pros like Scott Simpson, celebrities like Bill Murray and businessmen like Charles Schwab, was named one of America’s “Top 50” golf instructors by *Golf Magazine*. He also has been published in *Golf Digest* — in fact, featured in a cover story — and has appeared with Peter Kessler on The Golf Channel.

Kip started playing golf at age 9, and when he was 12 years old he began formal instruction with legendary Paul Runyon. And isn’t it an interesting coincidence that Benzel, my local guru, uses “the drag” —

which helps make the clubhead the last thing up, and subsequently, the last thing down — that Kip teaches. You see, Benzel used to play with a good friend named — yes, Paul Runyon.

If you attend Aviara Golf Academy, the first thing you will learn is that it is all right to move your head a little — “turn your head off the ball,” says Kip — and that you don’t have to (shouldn’t!) stare at the ball to play good golf. During a classroom session on opening day, Kip and his talented instructors — including “my guy,” Bruce Nakamura, a three-time All-American at the University of California-San Diego, and veterans Ken Green and Wayne Searle, both graduates of San Diego State — demonstrate via TV tapes that the best players in the world move their heads and take their eyes off the ball, though they have written numerous articles and issued a collection of statements to the contrary. Learning that this is so is like having straps removed, like recovering from a paralysis. Indeed, it suggests shouting, “I’m free!”

With regard to moving the head a little, Kip elaborated in *Golf Digest* — actually, he referred to moving the spine, which necessitates moving the head — when he

## DEAR READERS



of my time and attention to learning about golf. I didn’t want anyone to know I went to school, either, because I knew what I would hear on the first tee when I got home.

I’m a bit impetuous, I guess, and when I momentarily decided to satisfy my 20-year desire, I remembered being impressed with the look of Kip Puterbaugh’s golf school when I played Aviara Golf Club in Carlsbad, California, a few years ago. This Arnold Palmer-designed course, recognized by both *Golf Digest* and *Golf Magazine*, is spectacular — but what really caught my eye was Kip’s school, beautifully situated high above Batiquitos Lagoon and only a strong heaven-wood from the Pacific Ocean. I envied the golfers who obviously were getting VIP treatment at Kip’s state-of-the-art learning center while I more or less dubbed my way around Aviara Golf Club, using mostly my arms and wrists instead of shoulders.

At first, I didn’t tell my wife what I had in mind, but she was planning her annual trip to Canyon Ranch in Tucson, so I rationalized that it was OK for me to go to Carlsbad. I called Aviara Golf Academy, not knowing what to expect. Briefly, I talked to very personable people who were extremely accommodating, received

wrote: "It seems to me that golf teachers are divided into two camps — those who state you must shift your weight to get behind the ball and those who advocate swinging around a fixed spine, but neither is correct." He stated that if a golfer wants to hit powerful shots, he/she must rotate the torso and move the spine — without letting the hips slide laterally to the right.

Kip added that in order to get into the correct position at the top of the backswing, golfers must create a "V" formed by drawing a vertical line from the left hip at address and an angled line to the head after rotating the torso and moving the spine — after turning the head "off the ball." With photographs of Ernie Els; Greg Norman, John Daly, Tiger Woods and Laura Davies, Kip showed that the longest hitters on the PGA Tour form the biggest "V"s.

At the academy, Kip also cites instructors who tell students they are "using too much right hand"; who teach that backswings should be initiated from the left side; and who stress that golfers should "keep a straight left arm." He states: "It seems to me that if all this is true, we might as well play one-armed — with just the left arm. I have always taught my students that the golf swing is bilateral."

One of the principal characteristics of Kip's teaching style is his passion for dispelling longtime, well-established myths. In a story to be published in an upcoming edition of *Golf Digest*, Kip details what he teaches at the academy about "the myth behind topped shots." Briefly, Kip reported he never has seen an amateur golfer look up. "It isn't the head that comes up — the arms do, and the first words of advice for these amateurs is, 'You didn't keep your head down,'" he stated.

According to Kip, the cause of missed hits is a motion of the hands and arms that is too quick during the backswing and forward swing, thus not allowing the body to transfer weight and rotate ahead of the clubhead. Consequently, the arms are forced to pull up into the chest through impact, a position called "the chicken wing" because the left arm is bent. And when the arms are pulled up, the arc of the swing gets shorter, leading to topped shots.

Does what I learned at Aviara Golf Academy work? Well, when I got home, I didn't want to play with Benzel and "the guys" in our regular game at Sedona Golf Resort right away because it's difficult to take a new grip, improved shoulder turn, etc. onto the golf course, regardless of how these things worked on the practice tee. I played with my sons, who said I looked like a very different golfer (were they being solicitous?). When I finally played in "the game," some of the guys said things like, "Hey, did you visit a vortex?" and "He's a machine!" And when I hit drives approximately 30 yards farther than before (even 40 yards!), one of them asked, "Wow, are you taking new vitamins?" One day

when I played with Duane Miller, Ralph Roney and John Lightfoot at Oakcreek Country Club, I shot 37 on the front — and I posted a 79 for 18 holes!

I have to admit, however, that as much fun as these experiences were, I have not played good all the time. Recently, playing with Benzel in a pro-am tournament, I struck the ball from tee to green very well, but I putted like a dog. On the other hand, a few days ago I beat John in a Nassau — we play from the championship tees and there is no such thing as a mulligan — but I must admit, I got 10 strokes from him.

Perhaps statistics are the best measure of my improved game and added excitement. In August, when I left for Aviara Golf Academy, my USGA HCP INDEX was 12.5; the 20 scores used to determine this index included six in the 90s and 14 in the 80s; and the average of the 10 best scores was 85.2. In September, my index was 11.7; my 20 scores included 5 in the 90s and 15 in the 80s; and the

10-best average of these scores was 84.3. On my most recent handicap card, my index was 10.5; my 20 scores included 4 in the 90s, 14 in the 80s and two in the 70s; and the 10-best average of these scores was 82.4.

Still, as satisfying as this statistical improvement is, it is not being afraid of blue tees, hitting a five-iron "on a line" from the fairway to the green, dropping a seven-iron by the pin on a par-three and feeling confident with a sand shot that is thrilling.

Hey, this Kip Puterbaugh "thing" isn't magic. It takes hard work and intense concentration to apply what he teaches, and because changes generally are uncomfortable, it takes a great deal of perseverance to keep from reverting to the "old way."

Occasionally, there are embarrassments associated with trying too hard, and there are challenges posed by "the guys," who sometimes utter reproving statements like, "I thought you were supposed to be playing a lot better since you were in Carlsbad."

But I'm going to keep trying hard, and I'm going back to Aviara again because what Kip offers isn't a temporary, quick fix — it's a highly professional approach to learning how to play better golf, forever. Besides, it's great fun — and personally, I get excited about spending an afternoon hitting more than 100 tee shots in the direction of Batiquitos Lagoon!

P.S. The weekend after writing this column, I shot 43/36 (79) and 44/38 (82) from the championship tees at Sedona Golf Resort. Please don't think of me as a braggart, however — my sincere intent is to show that good, professional teachers even can help an old duffer like me. Thanks Kip, Bruce and Ken — and thanks to John and Gary, too!

Name: JOHNSON HOYT		GHIN#	
Golf Handicap and Information Network®			
Club	SEDONA GOLF RESORT	Dist #	813-275
Club #	29-601-1	USGA	PREV
Effective Date	10/11/96	HCP INDEX	
Score Posted	36		
SCORE HISTORY — MOST RECENT FIRST #P USED		10.5	11.7
1	89 79* 84* 85* 85*		
6	79* 82* 83* 82* 84*		
11	91 90 81* 88 86		
16	88 89 85 91 92		

Name: JOHNSON HOYT		GHIN#	
Golf Handicap and Information Network®			
Club	SEDONA GOLF RESORT	Dist #	813-275
Club #	29-601-1	USGA	PREV
Effective Date	08/16/96	HCP INDEX	
Score Posted	24		
SCORE HISTORY — MOST RECENT FIRST #P USED		12.5	12.7
1	81* 88* 86* 88 89		
6	85* 91 92 85* 87*		
11	82* 88 89 84* 92		
16	87* 87* 90 94 91		