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Tales from the tee: narrative accounts of being coached in golf

David Grecic and Clive Palmer
(University of Central Lancashire)

Abstract

This paper consists of four short stories about being coached in golf by elite/professional golf coaches. The stories are first-person narrative accounts of experiencing, in action, different coaches' personal attitudes and beliefs about how golfers in their charge might learn best. The accounts demonstrate that the beliefs held and corrective actions implemented by successive coaches differed dramatically, but all directed at the same player (David Grecic) who presented them with the same stroke characteristics and frailties in personal technique. Written in an auto-ethnographic style, David's experiences richly disclose for the reader the varying philosophies towards coaching practice and eliciting improved performance in a competition environment. The stories also reveal dimensions of social positioning, perceived status and identity construction in golf that others may relate to. Above all they show what it feels like to be on the receiving end of such varied but well-intentioned reasoning in sports coaching, however effective it might have been. The paper closes with a reflection on how this method of getting close to the data, has invigorated the researcher's curiosity about a problem which he had become accustomed to seeing through relatively standard, if not limiting lenses of data collection.

Introduction

The stories are presented in the order they were experienced and written up as soon as possible after the event. There was no overlap between writing up one lesson and embarking upon another so that recall on each event was fresh and uncluttered by the new experiences.

1. Kevin - golf coach to the stars... *me and Kev*
2. The 'Reverend' Jimmy Smith... *confessions*
3. Farmer Parker... *a cultivator of talent*
4. The lesson with Professor McVai... *an appointment with genius*

On a selfish note and as a golfing nut I found the interaction with some of the country's and world's greatest and most recognised coaches of huge personal value. My research for a while, became a personal sporting indulgence. Through this

experience I was able to gain an insight into the professional game and of their practice regimes that a few years ago I could only have dreamed about. From my point of view this interaction was very satisfying as a golfer, but also invaluable as a researcher of golf and coach education. My tactics to become coached by these professionals brought me closer than ever before to the subject of my research. In essence, I became the data. Instead of asking coaches what they thought their best intentions were as a coach to others, what some may call a coaching philosophy (Hughes and Palmer, 2010; Wilkinson and Palmer, 2010; Procter and Palmer, 2010), I endeavoured to experience first-hand what their coaching felt like on the receiving end, as a golfer, and thereby to some degree assess whether they actually did what they claimed they did in earlier research interviews (Grecic and Collins, 2012, 2013; Grecic, MacNamara and Collins, 2013).

Golf did not 'get simpler' as was suggested by one coach, what it did however, was get a whole lot clearer! The coaches' input; questioning, prompting, challenging, and probing my deep held beliefs about golf finally helped me practice what I preach, create my own knowledge about my own golfing game. Some of the sessions really did feel like 'eureka' moments as a golfer and yet should have been predicted and even expected as a researcher. As a golfer I am playing much better than I ever have. I have more confidence, I am making better decisions, being more positive, more controlled, more skilful than before, and ultimately as a golf nut who can't get away from golf's culture of measurement, I am shooting low, very low. Reflecting on this whole experience as the golfer I would happily go back to 3 out of the 4 coaches I met and I would have paid handsomely for the experiences I have had. For the other coach however, I may never speak to him again, but you are invited to make your own judgements about that one.

1. Kevin - golf coach to the stars

Kevin and me, a match made in heaven...

It all started like this: I walked into the Professional's shop with a feeling of nervous excitement and expectation. Although this is a data collection exercise I still have this deep down feeling of wanting to impress, to have compliments bestowed on me due to my golfing prowess, and to have my self-impression of competence and a wasted talent reinforced by someone of such great standing in the game. In fact I want to be told that 'I could have made it', that I have just as much ability as the other Tour players that Kevin coaches, that it's not too late to give up my job and make a name for myself in the game I love.

I report for my lesson at the counter. Kevin's assistant, a voluptuous blond in a figure hugging red dress smiles and tells me Kevin is with another customer and will only be a few minutes. She invites me to browse the shop and to take a look at the latest models and modifications to the golf equipment presented on pedestals positioned strategically around the room. The shop is immaculate, all white walls, modern lighting, and technology everywhere, the latest gizmos for this and that and everything a wealthy, self-conscious, image-driven amateur golfer could wish for. I am forced to weave this way and that, my attention surreptitiously directed towards mannequins dressed head to foot in designer clothing, and more obviously pushed towards the Zing promotional video relentlessly promoting the virtues of its aerodynamic golf balls and ergonomic efficient putters.

Kevin walks in. He is wearing all the latest gear. A snug-fitting white Gortex jacket (probably a size too small for him to accentuate his figure), tight black pin-striped trousers with a large jewel encrusted belt buckle and shiny white shoes to compliment the outfit. His hair is grey, shoulder length and slicked back off his forehead, his grey goatee beard well-trimmed and groomed. His hands sparkle as the lights bounce off his golden signet rings and bracelets that dangle below his cuffs. I spot him and start to walk over, outstretch a hand to introduce myself but... he blanks me! 'I'll be with you in a second'. He turns his back. He is talking to his last customer, an old gentleman, no doubt bent and broken after years of manual labour. He tells him that he has done great today, made real progress, 'See you next week. Don't forget to book a time with Beverley at the desk'.

Then he turns to me, puts on a glorious white-teeth smile and shakes my hand vigorously, 'great to see you he says with real meaning. Have you got your gear with you?' 'Yes'. 'Well I've just got a few things to do so here's the key to my studio. Go across there and hit some balls and I'll be over soon'. I take the key, exit the shop, pick up my clubs and spot the giant sign on the wall opposite.

***The Kevin Dexter Golf Academy
Professional Golf Expert Practitioner
Golf Coach to the Stars***

I turn the handle and open the door to Kevin's show room. Inside there are video screens everywhere with images of the gentleman I have just seen in the shop in various freeze-frame golf poses. Beneath the screens are computer keyboards, monitors, tablets and golf GPS devices. Next to them sit a plethora of weird and wonderful swing aids and technical gimmicks, modified clubs, balance boards, grips, tennis rackets, hammers, rubber axes, alignment tools, posture jackets, and every shape and size of golf ball imaginable.

I look to my left and see three comfy leather couches in what must be a plush relaxation area. In front of me is the hitting area, a state of the art virtual golf course projected onto a large screen that doubles for the golf net to collect my shots, on the floor are numerous coloured markings on a green artificial grass floor and silhouetted footprints embedded into a biomechanics force plate. With wall mounted cameras tracking this hitting zone from every angle and a launch monitor positioned behind to capture every incomprehensible piece of data, what more could a coach need?

Finally I turned to my right, this must be Kevin's 'wall of honour' for here the wall was covered with photos of Kevin wrapped around various famous golfers and celebrities, pointing them at the camera. Interspersed within this beaming collage were professional images of Kevin hitting golf shots at various stages of his career framed in the shot by beautiful landscapes from all around the world. There were certificates also, testimonials and of course a special place for him to display his array of medals and trophies amassed during his glittering playing career.

Surprisingly below this homage to Kevin were two bookshelves or his 'library' as he later called it, crammed with every golf instruction text published in the last 20 years. On the top, almost staged, was a crisp copy of *Golf Heroes, Top 10 Golf Coaches Ever*, with Kevin starring out from the front cover, his smile transfixed and his eyes glinting from the assumed adoration.

I start to hit shots into the screen taking brand new golf balls from a pyramid stack positioned next to the force plate. Where is he, am I paying for this time? I hit a few more but can't really concentrate, where have I come, how does he work with all those players (looking at the wall of honour)? What made me select Kevin as part of my study?

That needs a little explanation. Well one of the reasons is that Kevin is a 'golf coach to the stars'. He has, and continues to work with some of the most renowned names in golf. But what really interested me in Kevin was an interview I had read where he described his coaching philosophy. It was all about respecting the individual, looking at their needs and then developing a plan together that reflected the player's personal learning style. He said he was player led but coach guided. This ideology resonated with me and my attempts to be a better coach and teacher, and as a scratch golfer myself this tugged at my subconscious saying that with Kevin's help I could still forge a career in golf and make my fortune.

Kevin entered the room and told me to hit some more shots so he could see my technique. As I did so he fiddled with the computer and my image replaced the older gentlemen on the screens around the room. After a few more shots Kevin stopped

me and pointed upwards. 'See that' he said, 'that is what you are doing wrong. You are not getting your weight through, you are creating an inverted C, you have no separation, and you are very closed on the way back, look'. He directed my attention to a series of still frames being progressed through one at a time. With each one Kevin pointed at a different point of my body to emphasise where I was not doing it *right*. 'We need to change you, it will be a long process, but we need to get you to here'. He pushed a button and the screens projecting my image now had Tiger Woods superimposed on top of me. 'Look at his set up compared to yours; now look at his take away and look where yours is underneath. See his coil, loading, hip drive, extension, follow through' – his words all seemed to blur into one as my golfing self esteem seeped from my body.

This was not what I was expecting. Where were the questions about me, about my background as a player, my aspirations, commitment, how I was playing, areas that I wanted to work on, how I like to learn? Where was the individualised approach? If Kevin had asked he would have known that I like to focus on the ball flight, on the outcome, and for that reason I detest the use of indoor nets and swing analysis. I like to understand, to work things out and experiment under minimal guidance. I like to be treated as an individual to have time and interest invested in me. I am not the next Tiger Woods, I cannot swing the golf club like Tiger Woods and with a body like mine I never will be able to.

I guess I wasn't really listening now. The disappointment with the coaching process had left me detached from the lesson and everything that Kevin was saying as though I was outside of my body looking in on an episode of 'How Not To Coach Golf, with Kevin Dexter'. This was everything I tell my students not to do.

To be fair to Kevin he picked up on my body language quickly and decided to take action. He walked over to me with a confident swagger and told me to cross my arms across my chest, spread my legs and bend my knees. This made me feel instantly uncomfortable. What followed next just exaggerated this unpleasant feeling. Kevin proceeded to bend down between my legs, place the palms of his hands on the inside of my knees and then slide his hands slowly up my thighs pushing outwards all the time. 'This is how you need to be, like this'. My personal space now violated Kevin went on to manipulate my spine, shoulders, elbows, wrists and head position, all the time with me reluctantly compliant despite the discomfort and embarrassment. I am not a tactile person and Kevin would have known this had he asked.

He then made me hit more balls like this whilst my agony and humiliation was displayed on 10 foot screens around the room. The swing felt terrible. My body contorted against its natural blueprint. I hurt all over. I had so many thoughts

flashing through my head, knees flexed and pushed apart, weight on outside of feet, transfer weight, don't rotate wrist, fire shoulder under etc. etc. that I could hardly take the club back let alone send it on its way to hit the ball. When I did actually memorise and repeat the task as dictated, my club did make contact with the ball, but in sporadic fashion, feeling 'thin' then 'fat', forcing it into the net in front of me but with no clue as to the ball flight, direction or distance achieved. All the time Kevin offered encouragement and highlighted how my various body segments may or may not be in-line with Tiger's on the overhead screens.

Finally it was over. Kevin told me to stop hitting and come to sit next to him on his leather couch. Again there was this awkward closeness about his manner. His proximity now so uncomfortable that it made me sweat and blush as he placed his arm around my shoulder in a pose not dissimilar to those in photos looking down on us. Then he clicked his remote control. In an instant Tiger disappeared from suffocating my natural appearance and instead the screen split in two. There I now stood on either side of the divide, a before and after comparison. Then Tiger reappeared on top of me. There it was, the moment Kevin had dreamt of, 'the money shot', my body and his in perfect unison. Kevin sat back with a smug expression replacing his painted on smile. He sat quietly simply reflecting in the afterglow of his conquest. My feelings in comparison could not have been more different. For me the lesson had been disaster. I had arrived an innocent, a great pretender, full of expectation, self-worth and excitement. Now I was broken. I was damaged goods. I felt couldn't hit a golf ball ever again, but I did look like a star and I've got the photo to prove it!

My back, hips, thighs and wrists ached from hitting balls in such an unnatural position, trying to turn myself in directions my body was not programmed to move. Now I was bent over and in agony. I followed Kevin into the shop, shook his hand and was directed over to the buxom Beverly who beckoned me to book my next lesson with Kevin, Golf Coach to the Stars.

2. The 'Reverend' Jimmy Smith

Golf confessions to the 'Reverend' Jimmy Smith

I walked through the shop foyer straight up to the desk directly in front of me where a mature lady smartly dressed welcomed me. Good morning, David isn't it? Smithy's so looking forward to meeting you. You are a little early; he's still outside with a South African young man. Would you like a tea or coffee and some biscuits? We have some magazines and comfy seats over in the bar if you would like to wait there and I will come and get you when Smithy comes in.

I quickly glanced around the shop. There were no screens or mannequins here, only functional equipment rowed up against the shop walls. A whole range of brands that I didn't recognise arranged in men's, women's and children's sections. I said I would love a cup of tea and wandered over to the bar.

Smithy strolled into the bar and came straight over. He was a tall, elderly, but handsome man, well groomed and tanned, dressed head to toe in plain, black golf clothing. 'Hello David, sorry I'm a little late' (he wasn't). 'Have you had a tea, coffee, something to eat? Good, well let's go back over and we'll get started'.

'Do I need my clubs' I asked hopefully? 'No, not yet, let's get to know one another first'. We went back through the shop into Smithy's teaching room at the back. No signs or neon lights lit the path. Once there, we sat down and were again offered the ubiquitous tea /coffee and biscuits by the pleasant lady in the smart suit.

As I looked around what struck me straight away was the austere nature of the room. There were no photos here, no pictures of the 12 players that Smithy assists on Tour. The walls were painted an off cream to yellowish colour and only had a couple of landscape paintings to cover the signs of wear and tear that belied the 35 years of coaching that had taken place here. Two chairs were pushed against the wall and in the corner I could see an old monitor on a computer desk. The only golf equipment visible was a worn golf net and hitting mat with a huge white 'T' painted on the floor. Opposite the net a Latin motto was inscribed, faded, but still visible to anyone hitting from the T (tee). *Seritum Veniti Endatim Matem* (I later discovered its meaning, 'Come, learn, but never lose yourself').

'Right, tell me about yourself David, what do you like to do and what would you like from today?' His manner was so calm and supportive. He sat there almost in a quiet reverence, leaning forwards but conscious not to be over bearing. He was listening, nodding, prompting every now and again as I opened my heart to him. In the space of 10 minutes we went through everything from the state of my health, work and family to my golfing hopes and fears. He never directed the attention back to him. It was always about me, everything was about me, and it felt good. His interest in my golfing achievements and my personal circumstances seemed genuine. I had known the guy for 15 minutes and he already felt like a long lost friend and confidant.

Finally Smithy interjected. 'So how do you prefer to learn?' 'I like to hit balls and see the flight' I replied. 'I like to find out why and understand'. 'Great, go and get your clubs from the car and let's go down to the range and hit some balls then'.

We spent about 20 minutes there in the sunshine. Smithy requested me to hit a variety of shots with different clubs to different targets. He stood quietly with an

almost devoted expression on his face. At first there was no feedback from him at all, just another request, another target. Later Smithy would ask how this or that felt. What did I think of the outcome? How did the strike feel etc. etc. Then finally these questions were separated by calming platitudes, great swing, good transfer, great hands.

‘Ok’ said Smithy, ‘do you want to hit some more because I need to show you something really but we need to go back inside if you're fine with that?’

To be honest it was quite a relief. Even though physically I had only swung a club about 50 times the mental effort invested had left me feeling tired and wanting a break. Reflecting on this part of the lesson later, what surprised me most was my own lack of input. It seemed as though my natural inquisitiveness had been subsumed in some sort of protective bubble in which Smithy and I stood. Me hitting shots, totally engrossed in the task, oblivious to any of my technical misgivings, Smithy, standing relaxed but focussed, simply observing and supporting my efforts.

Back in the shop Smithy asked me to stand on the T. I don't like to use video (this was music to my ears) but I need you to see something. He lined me up with two cameras and got me to hit three shots into the net. Please take a look at this, he pointed to his old computer hidden in the corner. I recognised the V1 logo on the screen from one of my first equipment purchases in a previous golf role some 12 years ago. ‘Please just look at your head, nothing else. I hate video for this. We want to focus on one thing and we get to see everything else at the same time which is damaging’. I looked hard at my head, not knowing what I was looking at. Out of the corner of my eye I did however spy my inverted C, collapsing knee, reverse pivot, and a double crossover. ‘What do you see?’ Smithy asked. ‘It's nice and still’ I said. ‘That's the problem!’

Then we were back sat on the chairs talking. We discussed the shots on the range, my feelings and my understanding. We delved into why some shots had veered off to the right, or shot hard left. I presented what I thought was a solid argument listing the variety of 'mistakes' with my technique that had been pointed out to me by dozens of golf coaches all around the world. Smithy explained that these were all merely the symptoms. It was the cause that he was interested in and then how to help me manage the cause and effect in my golf game.

‘Remember when you told me about all the sports you played as a child and what you coach. Which one of them tells you to keep your head still? Hit me a tennis shot (I pretend, my head moves from forward, right to left). Good, now a hockey shot (right to left). Good, now a cricket shot, a forward drive (it moves forward right to left!) So why do you want to keep your head still in your golf?’

'I think, because all the magazines and Pros say keep it still. But I guess that is what is keeping me behind the ball and carving it sometimes'. 'That is the great mistake,' says Smithy, 'so let's get it sorted'. He picks up a golf ball and tells me to walk back to the T. 'Right I'll roll this to you, you play a forward defensive with your club'. He rolls the ball and I block it, pushing forward, getting my head over my left leg without thinking. Good he says, 'now exaggerate the action'. I oblige again and again. 'Now try to hit it back right at the bowlers feet'. I hit a great off drive. 'Superb shot. Now again'. Smithy takes a run up, bowls... I lean into the shot and smash it through the covers, missing the net, into the wall and around the teaching room. Fantastic!'

I'm having a great time. I'm loving it...back to my youth, opening the batting for Darwen, the bowler steaming in, firing it down and me dispatching the ball with an array of well-timed off and on drives around the ground. I'm absorbed in the task, in the moment. Smithy is guiding me of course. Asking how this feels, how that felt etc. I am learning by doing. I understand the root of all my problems and I am doing something about it. Playing cricket is definitely not what I thought I was turning up for but it was fun, it was exciting, it was very effective. In my mind everything a golf lesson should be.

Finally Smithy says he wants to show me something again. He puts another ball on the T and asks me to hit it with a golf swing but to keep the feeling I had when hitting the cricket shots. I swing, I hit, the ball flies like a rocket towards the net. 'And another' solicits Smithy. Again a great feeling, a torpedo, again and again.

Now I want you to see this. He directs me towards the V1 [camera/recorder] in the corner. First look at your head. He moves my image on frame by frame. My head rocks slightly to the right on take-away and then drives to the left as I make contact with the ball. I acknowledge the improvement not really knowing how it has occurred. Then Smithy freezes the shot at the exact point of contact. 'Now look at your impact position. Look how perfect it is'. I look on astounded. No inverted C here, no reverse pivot with the associated loss of power and direction, just a strong, balanced, powerful position. One that I have been seeking on my golfing pilgrimage for many a year.

'Just keep that feeling', says Smithy. 'Don't listen to what the other Pros say just do what is right for you. It's all about the cause and effect. Your still head was causing all the problems and now you've got a new feeling. Just keep trusting in yourself and you'll be fine'.

I left Smithy with my swing not merely 'fixed' but feeling healed somehow, cleansed of my previous golf coaching experiences. I walked tall and proud to the

car, glowing, finally understanding my own golf swing and with a weight removed from my soul.

3. Farmer Parker – a cultivator of talent

As subtle as a bull in a china shop; my meeting with Samuel Parker

This lesson was not planned nor premeditated as the others were. It came about whilst I was delivering a course to the England coaches at the National Golfing HQ. I had met Samuel many times before and had interviewed him for various research studies. I had also watched him work with his Tour players on the practice grounds of numerous golf courses around the world. The Farmer came with a huge reputation for success and an ego to match. His track record of producing players that had gained their Tour Card and gone on to win on Tour was not in doubt, nor was his unwavering belief in his methods and ability. The Farmer knows what he wants, and how to get it. He doesn't suffer fools lightly and has what some might call a confrontational style. He has an unwavering belief in his way of coaching elite players and its supremacy over all of the other pretenders. Many of my colleagues found the Farmer a little brisk, perhaps arrogant and on one occasion even rude. My dealings with Samuel had however, always been positive. Yes we had had discussions and debates about how players should best be nurtured but even when we had disagreed he had been incredibly polite and behaved like a perfect gentleman.

The lesson

I wander over to the range where the Farmer is setting up his equipment. He left the last session over an hour ago to prepare and he is still out there, the boot of his blacked out Land Rover Vogue open with clubs, mats, markers and poles protruding, all sporting the Farmer brand and logo.

The Farmer strolls over, his body language relaxed and confident, content that his preparation is complete. The Farmer is an extremely large, rotund fellow. He has jet black hair and a weathered complexion from his years standing by his players on the practice fields. He is wearing a pressed, green V-neck jumper, crisp white polo shirt, beige chino trousers with sharp creases down the front, and highly polished brown brogue golf shoes.

‘Hello David, what are you doing?’ I’m caught a little off guard, what does he mean? Are his methods now secret? Am I not allowed to watch?

‘There's no standing around here. You either get your clubs or you can **** off!’ I am shocked, but despite his words I don't hear any malice in them. ‘I've got

some in the car if you need any. I'm going to sort your short game today'. I thank Samuel for his kind offer and mentally brace myself for what undoubtedly is to come.

I'm standing on the practice tee bed with the other lambs for the slaughter. The farmer explains how he is going to improve our distance control today and ushers us to our individual bay. First he gets us to warm up hitting balls placed on top of 6x4 inch planks of wood, painted white and with an arrow head cut at one end arranged to point out of the bay towards three flags for each of us, set at 40m, 60m and 80m away.

'Just nip it from the top without taking the paint of the plank' he directs. I take a number of practice swings focussing on whipping the club through at the bottom of its arc so that the club face just skims the plank. Confident that I could complete the task I carefully placed a ball on top as the Farmer approached. I hit what I considered to be a great shot, the ball soared into the air and landed by the flag. The plank just vibrated on impact and a tiny scuff mark was the only evidence that a shot had taken place. I hit another, then another, with the Farmer watching, all great shots. I was very pleased with myself, until...

'Come on David, do it properly. If not there's no point doing it. Look at your marks. Nip it off the top!'... He took my club, ushered me to the side, hit a perfect shot, and then moved on to the next bay and his next victim.

'Right, I'll show him', I thought and concentrated hard on the task until I could nip the ball and watch it soar to the target without the plank moving or even making a scratch.

What followed was various other tasks and demonstrations by the Farmer on all aspects of the short game such as alignment, feel, contact, spin and distance control, amongst many others. Then it was time for the testing phase of our session. The Farmer had set out 10 greens and flags at a range of distances from 10m to 100m away. Each had concentric circles painted on the floor at 30cm, 60cm and 90cm diameters, like a target. These circles related to the number of points awarded for accuracy, (3, 2 and 1 depending on the closeness to the flag).

'Right, now we're going to test how good you are. You need a partner to make sure you don't cheat and to make sure we get accurate results. This test will show you what you need to work on. It will give you an appraisal of where you are. Then it is up to you'.

He explained the task, the rules and the organisation. 'There is a maximum of 30 points on offer. My players score 20, 25. Steve (Team Manager) thinks he's a player. He thought it was easy but he didn't score a single point, muppet!'

My partner was a tall, handsome man in his early 20s who had been with the Farmer for a few years now and had aspirations to play on the professional Tour. His focus was relentless as he went about the task meticulously which he had obviously taken many times before. I stood by each target green in turn and shouted back his score which he immediately marked off on the score-card given to us by the Farmer. Later I asked him what he had felt during the task. 'Nothing really, I just switched on and was in my zone'. When pressed further he explained that he felt that his work with the Farmer over the years had ingrained a competitiveness into his practice regimes and had bred an intense passion for winning into his game making him 'a much better player'. He had however, just scored an amazing 26 points, a training-career high.

Then it was my turn, '26 to beat'. I made a valiant effort with my partner shouting back the scores and encouragement at every *hole*. I too felt like I was *in the zone*. My attention honed into the flag in front of me, instinctively I now encapsulated all the characteristics of the Farmer's stable. I felt the competitiveness build inside me. The willingness to try and capitalise on everything the Farmer had taught me earlier, alignment, feel, distance control, contact, into every single shot, with the single outcome of beating my opponent's score. My mental effort was immense but to no avail. A credible 18 points, but I was left feeling empty and upset at my performance.

The Farmer rounded us all up and then asked each of us our score. My partner's effort was greeted by a 'well done, you are making good progress, 27 next time'. My '18' just elicited a grunt, a pause and then, 'well now you know what to work on'.

We worked through a range of other tests and challenges all of which we recorded in The Farmer's Skill Challenge Booklet. My performances ebbed and flowed but overall I was pleased with my scores and I did not feel out of place within the group. My confidence was growing. I felt more in tune with my body's movements and my clubs' operation.

Then came the final on course test. This comprised of a round on a par 3 course where each flag had had a tape measure attached to the hole. We were to play each hole and measure the distance to the hole in inches providing a cumulative score at the end of 9 holes. The nature of the course was such that all the holes were arranged to form a large circle with a raised viewing area in the middle where the Farmer stood surveying his flock as we went about our task.

Our 'standard' we were told was 200' and the target on the Farmer's leader board was standing at 130'. An amazing total averaging just over a foot [of inaccuracy] per hole. I took my place on the first tee with my partner ensuring that the Farmer was never sold short as players vied to impress him. I started well, a great shot 6 feet (72 inches), from the pin. The second, an even better shot, this time only 4 feet (48 inches) from the flag. I was in the zone, totally focussed on the task, at one with my club and body, just feeling the rhythm, visualising the ball's flight as it zoomed off to its target. No real thoughts apart from the calculations fizzing around my head (72+48+27+68+23) then, from the middle of the course the Farmer bellowed. 'Right, all stop....OK... Come on David, let's all see what you've got'.

PANIC! what did he mean, my clubs, my score.... quickly I calculated my total. Surely he would be happy with this score from a non-Professional golfer. I shouted out my score to him, pleased and relieved at the same time. 'No' shouted back the Farmer, 'Let's all watch what you can do!'

Suddenly I was conscious of everyone's eyes focussing on me and my target flag in the distance. Not just the players interspersed around the other 8 holes but more worrying than that, I was unaware, whilst we had been engrossed in our challenge, the Farmer had invited a number of his fellow coaches who he had been meeting earlier to join him for this assessment. Paul, David, Simon, Nigel, and Alan, all whom I had interviewed and even lectured to previously about talent development, and Talent Identification in golf in particular.

I felt an instant chill. My arms felt like they had turned to jelly as I selected my club and teed up my ball. As I bent down to align its marker arrow towards the desired direction I over balanced knocking the ball off its tee. I grasped at the ball which slipped through my fingers like a bar of soap and sped off the end of the tee bed. Now even more self-conscious I darted down the slope, retrieved my ball and teed it up again, disregarding my alignment pre-shot routine that had served me so well. I glanced up. The six friends were staring over now. From their body language I could see they were starting to get impatient. I took my practice swing. What on the previous 5 holes had felt a natural, rhythmic movement which had all the Farmer's tenets of short game success embedded subconsciously, now felt disjointed and mechanical. As I swung I felt my attention shift inwards, weight on the outsides of my feet, straight left arm take-away, perpendicular wrist cock, weight over right hip, head still, focus on ball, focus on ball, don't miss it.

My mental rehearsal had switched from seeing the ball fly unerringly from tee to green, landing within inches of the flag before it rolled carelessly into the hole, to me visualising a horrendous 'shank' (the worst type of golf shot imaginable where the player almost misses the ball with the club, makes contact only with the leading

shaft edge, and the ball inexplicably shoots off at right angles to the golfer's intended line, usually lost forever).

‘Come on, come on, focus!’ I took myself back to the Farmer's session earlier, alignment, distance control, contact, feeling, feeling, feeling...

I took a second practice swing, much better, I could see the shot again, feel the shot again, my attention moving outside of my body onto the ball and the target. ‘Please don't shank, please don't shank, focus!’ My arms still weak I tried to copy the feel of my practice swing. I swung, made good contact, and the ball thankfully rose into the air, headed off on its target line, and nestled down next to the flag. Utter relief.

My eyes flicked from ball to flag to ball, trying to calculate the approximate distance. It looked close, very close. ‘Take that Farmer!’ I looked over to the herd of coaches huddled together. The Farmer shouted over, ‘Not bad, but remember its 130 to beat’. I was elated, ‘not bad, not bad’, that was a fantastic shot, and under that level of pressure too. I had shown them all that I can play and with that ‘not bad’ I had been accepted.

I went on to complete the task with a quiet competence, never quite frightening the Farmer's leader board but acquitting myself well, my confidence growing after every hole. Later I spoke to the Farmer about his views on Talent Development in more detail. He explained that he saw his role as simply ‘harvesting the talent’. This comment intrigued me.

The Farmer's track record is definitely impressive as is his self-belief in the methods he adopts and the crops of players he has cultivated. I couldn't help wondering though, about all the other coaches, and how they might tend to the needs of young players they are raising. Might the Farmers’ genetic code of coaching be so engrained in them that they know no other way of doing things? This may be the danger of high intensity ‘farming’ however reliable it may appear in the short-term for this Farmer to mature his players into tomorrow's stars.

4. The lesson with Professor McVai

An appointment with genius, or was it in me anyway?

I drove an hour and a half to see the Professor at his golf club. In the car I thought about the Professor's life work, to change the way people play and think about the game of golf. I had seen him in action with his Instinctive Golf theory on many occasions but this was the first time that I was to be part of his experiment. I

thought of the times I had seen him in action with his bag of apparatus, lines on the floor, his lengthy scientific explanations and his reliance on the physics of the game. This had not seemed like instinctive golf to me, rather the opposite. Indeed reading the Professor's website in preparation for my lesson his tag line, 'golf just got simpler' had caught my eye and I now dwelled on its potential meaning, what its outcomes may be for me. As a golfing cynic this seemed the ideal hypothesis for me now to test.

The Professor walked into the clubhouse and strode up to me to shake my hand. Every time I saw him he seemed to look younger, more athletic, more tanned. He was now in his early 60s but didn't look a day over 30. What was his elixir of life? Was it his Instinctive Golf? He was dressed from head to toe in white. Only the silver logos of his Instinctive Golf badge broke the line of his clothes. We exchanged pleasantries and briefly caught up on how his players were performing in the major tournaments and then it was down to his laboratory.

As I took my clubs out of the car I felt a sense of excitement and expectation. This was going to be different, very different to the other golf lessons I had experienced and I was looking forward to the challenge. I think I understand the premise on which Instinctive Golf is based, that we learn skills naturally over time through trial and error, rather than the mechanistic, colour by numbers approach adopted by many coaches in the game of golf. The benefits of this *new* method are supposed to be a more robust swing under pressure and therefore a better golf game and improved score. From my teaching background this ground-breaking theory for golf seemed little more than a modification of task-based learning, Games Sense, and a little bit of Teaching Games for Understanding meshed together.

I had so many questions about the Professor's theory and method which previously I had not got the chance to ask. Even if he didn't improve my game I was finally going to get my answers. I hit some shots to warm up and then the Professor asked if I could play a high 5 yard fade off the 150m marker. No problem. And again, no problem. I felt very pleased with myself.

'Now, would you say you were aware of the club face when hitting that shot?'

'Yes definitely'.

'And are you that aware of the club face when you hit all your shots?'

'Well...err... no, not really'.

'That is what Instinctive Golf is all about... It is about being aware of the tool at your disposal and how you use that tool. It is a heightened state of awareness that

allows you to play the shots you want to play. How many times do we see someone with a rehearsal that then is nothing like the actual swing they make? They are not aware of what they are doing, so why even have a rehearsal?

It is a simple game, you tell the tool; the club, and the tool tells the ball what to do. You, tool, ball. The ball isn't bothered about how you hold the club or how you move your body; it is just interested in what the tool tells it to do'.

This makes a lot of sense and it is so obvious I wonder why all my other golf Pros seem to have ignored this concept. The Professor then gets me to put my club down and close my eyes. He takes my palm, faces it towards the hitting zone and then walks out to the area in front of me. He tells me to imagine I am hitting a ball towards him with the palm of my hand. I feel a little strange but close my eyes and make an imaginary swing towards him.

'Now, were you aware of your palm?'

'Yes'.

'Were you aware of your palm only at the imaginary point of contact?'

'Well no...'

'So when were you aware of your palm?'

'All the way through the shot...'

'Exactly! So now if I tell you that you hit that shot too high what will you do?'

'Hit it lower...'

'Go on then, show me that shot, here, this is now your target'. He makes a bowl with his hands at about his waist height much like a baseball back-stop. I close my eyes and swing again. 'So how was that?'

'Much lower...'

'How do you know?'

'Because I felt the position of my palm at contact'.

'Exactly!' (Interesting but where is he going with this?)

'So it is simple isn't it?' At this point he got a number of alignment rods and a modified golf club which has its head replaced with that of a hammer out of his

apparatus bag, he places a rod on top of a golf ball which causes it to lie at an angle of about 5% down to the ground to the right, aiming out to the hitting zone. He then places another rod in front of my feet parallel to the first rod and then angles this so it slopes from left to right across my body.

‘Now if the task is to keep your feet aligned along the rod but to hit a shot that starts left of the 150 yard marker and fades right, how would you play it?’.

I think for a minute, this is nothing like a shot I would ever hit. I think and then move to my left so the relative ball position is further back in my stance.

‘Could you hit that? Remember it is all about the ball, tool , body. Do you think this is the most effective position in which to apply the tool to the ball, to make it fade given you have to stand like this?’ (I think so, this is my solution and I feel confident that I could hit the shot if tested).

Then he gives me the 'hammer'. ‘So if I make this a simple task of hitting a nail with a hammer (the rod resting on the ball) standing like that how would you position your body now?’

I take my stance again with the ball in this new position. I can hit the *nail* but it is a disjointed and ugly movement which feels like my body segments are fighting against each other trying to go in different directions.

‘Can you move into another position which feels more effective for the task?’

I slide myself to the right and back along the rod so the *nail* is now far forward in my stance. I have now created a powerful position where I feel confident in applying the tool and completing the task, wow!

‘So would you have come up with this solution to the task with your golf club?’

‘No definitely not’ I replied, but why not? My years of playing golf have built up a series of beliefs and rules that have stopped me looking outside this very narrow field of reference. These beliefs have been constantly reinforced by the professional practitioners, their governing body and the golfing media. I have been told, no, brainwashed, into thinking that there is only one way to learn a golf 'swing', instead of learning how to play a very simple game of hitting a ball with a stick towards a target.

The Professor continues, ‘that is why it is a simple game, the laws of physics don't lie. If you exert a force in a direction the ball will always obey. It is simply about understanding the task and then problem solving to come up with the best way to apply the tool for the desired outcome’.

‘But this isn't simple is it?’ I argue back, ‘I mean there is nothing instinctive about this. You don't just walk up to the ball and hit a perfect shot. It takes a lot of mental effort to work things out’.

‘Yes, and a lot of time to experiment. We have an amazing learning machine but we need to give it time to work things out and reprogramme itself. It is not a quick fix. Each of us needs to work out how to move our body most effectively. It is about problem solving and then raising the awareness of what we are doing so we can effectively apply the tool. Maybe my tag line should be, *golf made simple but not easy!*’

This all makes sense to me and puts a lot of my golfing experiences into context, leaked drives, miss-hit approach shots, weak putts etc. I was never really focussing on the real task of applying the tool. I wasn't aware. Instead I recollected swing thoughts that had been imprinted on my mind by golf Pros that sent my attention to various parts of my body, left wrist, inside right knee, left pectoral etc. that had taken my focus away from the real task of hitting the ball. It really did feel like a Eureka moment. If only I'd known this before. Why didn't I? Why had the golf Pros neglected this crucial part of the game, actually focusing on playing the game rather than simply striving to replicate a technical model?

Now my interest was captivated. I needed to know more. ‘So how do you relate this concept to coaching the different parts of the game, the drive, distance shots, short game, putting. If someone needs to hit the ball 20 yards further to allow their approach shots to be more accurate, what do you do?’

The Professor takes a moment and then reaches into his apparatus bag. ‘Well I'll talk to them about chopping down a tree. Then I give them a tool’. He hands me a rubber axe head on the end of a golf club, ‘and ask them to chop down this tree (a wooden post holding up the golf driving shelter) in as few strikes as possible. They seek out their most effective, powerful, body position to apply the tool. It is trial and error. They start like this, (he moves and makes a chopping action against the driving range wall) then “no”, then this, and then this, (he modifies his body position slightly each time) then eventually like this (closes stance slightly, opens hips slightly, braces left side, etc.). Then I ask them, is that the position their body has chosen? then I move the plane of the chopping action to the floor. So if the task was to hit the ball here (holding the axe head to the ground) wouldn't this be the most effective position your body would choose. Then it is just about them practicing hitting balls in those positions and seeing which is more effective for the new task. In fact, in physics the most dynamic position has been tested and is actually with hips and shoulders at 35 degrees open, feet closed 25 degrees, like Happy Gilmore.

Look on YouTube at Tour Pros hitting Happy Gilmore shots, it's amazing. Padraig hits it 330 yards like that. Go on, experiment!'

I take my driver and start to rehearse to find my most powerful position. I move my feet this way and that. It feels liberating to be searching for *my way*. I had listened and thought I'd understood other golf professionals when they had spoken about my personal blueprint, my golf swing DNA, but this had always been in the context of modifying my natural movements to their [conception of] *perfect* swing. This was different. There was no model, no rules, just experimentation to see what worked best for me and it felt good. I shifted this way and that, rocked here and there, held it like this and like that, until finally I really felt... well... strong. And then when I had rehearsed and rehearsed this feeling... when I felt confident and aware that I was moving the tool as I wished... when I experienced moving my body effectively as I desired to apply the *tool* in this new strong position.... when I felt I could finally get the tool to tell the ball where to go... BOOOOOOOMMMMMM. WOW!!!! What a feeling!

The ball soared and soared away from me. Past the 240 markers, 250, (my drives normally carry an average of 245 yds., 250 on a very good day) 260, 270, it's still rising, past the 280 marker and then landing, with one bounce hitting the net at the 300 yard marker. I stood there amazed, euphoric, basking in the afterglow of my golfing conquest. This simple concept, based on the laws of physics, on experimentation, feel, rehearsal, and ultimately on being aware of what your own body is doing had shown me the proverbial light. The Professor now seemed more like my own spiritual guide rather than golfing scientist. One who had brought clarity and enlightenment to my golfing mind. A person to whom I would always owe a huge sporting debt.

I turned back seeking to catch his eye, seeking his approval, his praise even. 'Now it is down to you' he said. My mind races to the other aspects of the game, the short game? putting? I almost plead for him to give me these secrets. 'It is all the same' he tells me. 'You tell the tool, and the tool will tell the ball to go in the hole. Just try things, experiment.... that is your journey now'.

Then he is gone, vanished, like some sort of enigma.

I am left on the range but not tired, lonely or confused as I have found myself many times at the end of a golfing lesson. Instead I feel enthused, energetic, and thirsty for more answers, for more work on *my game*. Now I have a path to follow, to explore. I have clarity of thought from the 'Master' and at last I have found a golfing inner peace. Thank you Professor McVai.

Reflections of a golf-mad researcher

Looking back at this process, of being coached and writing up my experiences from it, my overwhelming recollection is one of enjoyment. Being involved in the data production itself as the participant was a valuable experience allowing a much deeper description, and closer interpretation of the coaching act. By experiencing the coaches' decision making in action, I was able to more fully understand the impact of their philosophy and its direct impact on player cognition, emotion and performance. By portraying the coaching act through the lens of the player we uncover reveal a wider impact of the coaches beliefs and best intentions than might have been possible using more distant or removed methods on investigation, such as interviews after events or other measurements or game stats that might be tested.

In the stories we discover examples of how coaches' behaviour and coaching beliefs can have positive and negative affects on the player's perceived competence, control and relatedness thus impacting on intrinsic motivation (Mageau and Vallerand, 2003). In this respect the reader is invited to make their own interpretations and connections to relevant coaching practice, coach, player dyad, and coaching process theory.

By becoming engaged as recipient in various golf coaching processes, I have experienced first hand the issues of self-presentation and how coaches can model and align their behaviour to what they perceive the market expects of a qualified PGA Professional (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). For example, *Kevin Golf Coach to the Stars* compared to *The Reverend Jimmy Smith*. The data also explores how the player interprets this coaching role play and the power relationship it surreptitiously creates (Dennison, 2007; 2010). We also uncover the potentially negative impact of coach's beliefs and best intentions if they conflict with those of the player, creating cognitive dissonance (disenchantment through disagreement) social friction and possibly fostering ill-feeling through misplaced expectations of coaching outcomes.

Despite the value of this type of participant study future research is needed which more fully outlines the players' attitudes and beliefs from the start. This would allow the reader to more easily set the coaching act in context and draw clearer comparisons of coherence or lack of it, between the player and coach. This in turn may lead to connections with learning and teaching theories that could have great utility for not just coaches but for the wider physical education and teaching profession.

The implications of such a study would be fascinating. We may discover evidence to support Hoffer (2001), Hoffer and Pintrich (1997; 2002), Brownlee (2002), Bethleson et al., (2011), Kang (2008) and others who believe that alignment of knowledge and beliefs (in epistemology) fosters more effective learning.

Conversely we may identify that an ‘epistemological gap’ (Partington and Cushion, 2010) between a player and coach may actually have a more positive impact if linked to how cognitive dissonance (healthy differences of opinion) can kick-start the deep learning process of developing critical curiosity (Biggs & Tang, 2008; Lynch et al., 2012).

In golf, more than any other sport the players and coaches are judged against objective outcome measures such as raw scores (number of shots taken to complete a full round of golf, 18 holes), handicap (number of additional shots needed to complete the round to a professional standard, the Par score), victories achieved, money earned, and Tour rankings. These simplistic measures may not however, adequately illustrate the depth of thinking, problem solving, decision making and mental processes that elite golfers engage in every time they play, or indeed, many golf coaches, every time they coach. These appear to be some of the characteristics of golf that begin to be revealed through these stories which might now be analysed differently through an auto-ethnographic lens (Anderson, 2006; McAdams, 1993, Wacquant, 2006 and Sparkes, 2002).

A final area that my own future studies should address is the use, presentation and manipulation of the data itself. Although here I have attempted to present my findings in a more humanistic form as a researcher I have still shaped your interaction [as a reader] with the data to some extent. Although I revelled in writing in this fashion an evolution of my research journey would be to have the confidence to present raw data for consideration. In fact one could/should assume that data in its richest, most natural form would be able to stand alone telling its own story and really allow the reader to make their own interpretations. I need to test this theory following in the steps of some other researchers who have experimented with data concepts and content, such as papers without words [only photographs] or pure story telling, poetry or ethno-drama (Palmer and Rookwood and Palmer, 2009, 2009a; Price and Varrall, 2011; Price and Gilbourne, 2011; Palmer and Hughes, 2011, Sparkes poetic representation, ethnodrama ref).

The data has however, been very carefully presented to put you, the reader, who are now at the centre of the analysis. One intention behind the method has been for you to create your own knowledge, make your own connections and associations about the experiences they impart. As you read each story you were being invited to look into, or even participate in my experiences, which may allow more to be learned from the data because of it being presented in this accessible way.

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JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote

1. *Author's reflective comment:* My aim in this study is that you, the reader, will appreciate the contrast in data from my previous article and recognise the continuation of my research journey. Presenting data in this more humanistic form has proved to be an enlightening process on many levels and I am grateful to Clive Palmer for this opportunity to express my data in preparation of my viva examination. As the prime subject of the study I have finally 'felt' how the coaches' Epistemological Chain operates in practice. Additionally, and of equal value, has been my experience of engaging in these narrative methods. The writing process has proved to be extremely enjoyable, but more than that, by reflecting through this particular lens it has motivated me to analyse and assimilate the experience in much greater detail than I thought possible. I hope you find my recollections a valuable glimpse into coaches' professional practice and that this enables you to more fully scrutinise their coaching philosophy. Of course I also hope you find these stories as insightful and entertaining as I did writing them and I encourage you to experiment yet further with your presentation of qualitative data.

2. *Author profile:* David Grecic has a background in sports coaching and sports management, and has a Master's degree, MBA and PGCE. He is currently in the final year of his PhD in Elite Golf Coaching Philosophy. David is the Director of the International Institute for Golf Education and has undertaken a review of England Golf's Talent Pool as part of his related studies. He is currently using his research with the England and Scotland U16 junior squads where he is acting as a consultant to develop their talent pathways.
3. *Dear reader,* if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on: David Grecic DGrecic1@uclan.ac.uk and Clive Palmer capalmer@uclan.ac.uk.

Reviewer (1) comments:

Coaches now live in a world where athletes are looking to get better results with less effort. Three of the stories depict the 'less is more' approach for the more experienced athlete's. To be honest, Kevin - golf coach to the stars...The 'Reverend' Jimmy Smith... confessions and Farmer Parker... a cultivator of talent all seem to be continually thinking just how to get the best possible result with the least amount of work without considering developing some independence within their charges. This seemed a significant different journey which the golfing coach-come athlete had travelled. Professor McVai, thankfully highlighted the current 'real shift' that's starting to captivate coaching, coach's', athletes and all sports.

The Revenge of the Jedi Knights...

Professor McVai (The Master Jedi) offered the golfer a monastic, spiritual, and academic idealism of golfing techniques. He found himself in this fictional world he dreamed of as young player that inspired a type of religion in his real world. The Jedi Knight served the use of a mystical power called the Force (independence) in order to help the golfer improve. Within this approach and only when necessary, he taught the golfer how to use their formidable arts, skills, mind sets and wisdom to quickly end unrest or neutralize lapses to individuals or threats. Until this day the golfer didn't realise he was an apprentice Jedi that was all along governed by this most powerful "force-sensitive" members of the Jedi Order know as independent thinking.

The golfer now bound to a new code of ethics, morality, principles and justice. The New Jedi now trained on how to use the Force through passive meditation, practicing selflessness, and commitment to justice while at the same time rejecting emotions such as passion, fear, anger, policies and procedures. Their traditional weapon is the light-sabre (Golf Club) a device which emits a blade-like controlled plasma flow, the golfer now armed with a golf swing that has a Force to achieve his goal of ruling his new golfing Galaxy.

Dave had now reached the end of his coach-become and athlete-become coach journey, with a conclusion that 'if all you do is decrease the volume, and heighten the awareness of self-belief, confidence and independence, you're going to get the

results you want. But, there is also an opportunity for other coaches who want to change the way they coach, enhance the way they coach and coach far more effectively to get more from less. Take the challenge, experiment and...

may the force be with you.

Reviewer (2) comments:

The message from the outset of this collection of stories is one of ‘becoming the data’. This is an interesting premise and somewhat akin to Loic Wacquant’s ‘pugalist apprenticeship’ and his deployment of habitus as ‘tool and topic’. In essence, the first author seeks to carve out these stories and use them to strategically explore the notion of coaching philosophy whilst offering them as a tool for reflection and interpretation. Whether these ‘philosophies’ are philosophical or merely ‘ideology’ (page 144) is touched upon however seldom analysed in much detail. Perhaps I guess this is the job of the reader and this job whilst alluded to briefly at the end of the article could be clarified much earlier. In a similar vein, it is noted in the concluding sections that more context and clarity towards the players’ ‘attitudes and beliefs’ would be beneficial. This would certainly aid the structure and emergent nature of this piece.

To return to the notion of ‘becoming the data’, the ‘social positioning, perceived status and identity construction’ enmeshed within these stories, it would be useful to critically explore how golf in this case reflects social life and vice versa. It is however commendable that this article aims to consider the oft cited ‘complex nature’ of coaching yet maybe a more analytical perspective on the interplay between the senses, emotions and identity could be further added. Likewise, the phenomenological inter-subjectivity between coach and athlete could have been dissected with a sociological emphasis as the players’ body was manipulated with such emotive significance. This article is certainly a move towards an understanding of embodied coaching philosophies and a move that is welcomed in a field that appears to prioritise mind over body in general.

Wacquant also advocated reflexive researchers going native but returning sociologists. This article in my opinion is a very good example of stepping towards offering the body up to the complexities of coaching but it would be nice to show how the findings and interpretations move beyond sports coaching in isolation and reflect wider social structures.