

Golf Column

by Rick Woelfel

TAKING UP GOLF CAN SEEM LIKE BEING CAST ADRIFT IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY, WHERE EVERYONE SPEAKS THE LANGUAGE EXCEPT YOU. But with some advance planning and perhaps some assistance from a professional, a new golfer can enjoy the game in relatively short order. The key for a new golfer is to keep expectations realistic.

“Trying anything new can be intimidating,” says teaching professional Jennifer Barnsley. “People can be intimidated just by walking on the driving range and whiffing (missing) the ball. They think everyone’s watching them, which is usually not the case. But when you’re first beginning, you don’t know that. You feel like all eyes are on you.”

Often new golfers are introduced to the sport through friends or relatives. It’s not uncommon for a child to be introduced to the game by walking or riding along with his or her parents on the golf course and taking a few swings. Many players, good ones included, started the game without the benefit of formal instruction.

But taking lessons from a teaching professional can make it much easier to get started. Members of the PGA of America and the LPGA Teaching and Club Professional Division earn their living by teaching people to play the game and also by helping them learn the rules, strategy and traditions of the sport. For any new golfer, or an experienced one for that matter, a teaching professional is a walking encyclopedia on all matters pertaining to the game of golf.

Barnsley is a member of both the PGA of America and the LPGA. She grew up in Philadelphia and played on the LPGA Tour for a year before becoming a teaching pro.

She spent more than a decade in Dallas, working for legendary teaching professional Hank Haney, whose most famous pupil is a fellow named Tiger Woods, before returning to the Philadelphia area early in 2005. Today, Barnsley gives lessons at Cedarbrook Country Club in Blue



JENNIFER BARNSLEY

Bell. Her husband, Paul Barnsley, an outstanding instructor himself, is the head professional at the Militia Hills Course at Philadelphia Cricket Club.

If she’s working with a new student Barnsley, like most instructors, will start out by showing them a proper grip and stance. From there her goals for the lesson will vary, depending on the student’s age and experience level. Often, she’ll simply have the student focus on making contact with the golf ball.

“I have a goal that I’m going to get that beginner to make contact with the ball pretty much every time they hit it,” she says. “It might not be up in the air. It might be dribbling along the ground but they’re going to make contact with the golf ball.”

“If I can show them a good grip and a good stance and some kind of motion to hit the ball out on the range that’s a realistic goal.”

On occasion, Barnsley won’t even have a student swing at a ball. Instead, they’ll swing at a tee in the ground. The idea is to focus on swinging correctly, without the added distraction of worrying about where the ball ends up.

To help groove the student’s swing, Barnsley will often take a hands-on approach by actually moving the student’s arms, shoulders or hips into the correct position to give them a sense of what a proper golf swing feels like. “Not all people are responsive to that,” she says, “but beginners are very responsive to that.”

After a new student spends a few lessons getting comfortable swinging a club on the range, Barnsley will take them out on the golf course, a setting that can be unsettling to say the least for a novice. To ease a new player’s anxieties,

Barnsley might have them play a “short course” and have them hit their tee shot from 150 yards out or so instead of from the regular tee. This method allows a new player to get used to on-course situations (trees don’t grow in the middle of the range) without being overwhelmed by the length of the course.

Whatever their ability level, Barnsley works to boost her students’ confidence. Her enthusiasm for the game and for life in general is contagious. “You have to make them relax, and show them that you care about them and that you want them to improve,” she says.

Not everyone who takes up golf will stay with it of course. But it doesn’t take a single-digit handicap to enjoy the game and develop a passion for it.

“The good thing about golf is you can play with someone who’s better than you,” Barnsley says. “I’m a pro, I can play with someone who is a beginner and we can both enjoy ourselves.”

To find a PGA of America or LPGA professional in your area, call the Philadelphia Section PGA office at (215) 886-7742, or e-mail the office at phillypga@pgahq.com.



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