

Evolution of a Teaching Concept

By Bob Denney

There were no notes taken in Socrates' "classroom." What survived of the ancient Greek philosopher's legacy was written by his students, led by Plato. We know that Socratic learning methods popularized in the centuries that followed apply to virtually all educational pursuits – yes, even the game of golf.

The Socratic methodology is a series of questions or debate that is really a discussion between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to illuminate ideas. From philosophers to the game of golf, the descendants of critical thinking and illumination thrive today, weaving their way into golf professional Ron Stockton's "classroom."

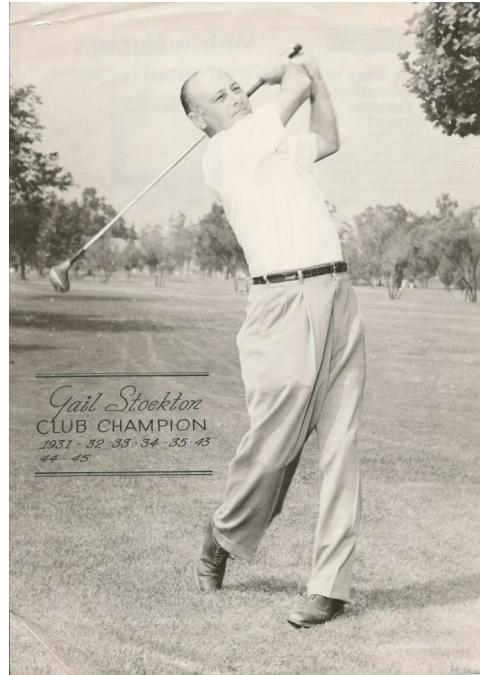
The Power of Observation

At age 13, Stockton was the note taker on the practice range as his father, Dave, a two-time PGA Champion progressed through his own hours of lessons. With the passing of Dave's lone golf instructor, his father Gail, young Ron inherited the role as observer.

"They weren't detailed notes – after all I was 13," says Stockton, "but they were notes based on basic concepts that we later would discuss in greater detail to decipher what was fact and what was theory."

My Dad would take 5 balls and make every one of them do something different. I found myself observing that if the ball did one thing his finish would look a certain way. And if he did something different on the next one his finish would look unique to that shot as well. From that, I learned the importance of how to shape shots. From a putting perspective, I learned that it wasn't about having "linear perfection" in a stroke. As a perfectionist at heart this was a hard lesson to learn."

By 1991, when Dave Stockton reached the Champions Tour, Ron had become a full-time coach for him and for other Tour professionals. As Ron said, "I wasn't making any money with the other guys but I was giving away good advice, and advancing my experience. It's fair to say that I hadn't figured out the importance of what was to become the Signature Approach.®



Above: Ron's grandfather, Gail Stockton was an accomplished Golf Pro, at Arrowhead Country Club in San Bernardino, California. Ron learned from him "that he catered instruction to the individual, rarely teaching the same thing to every player."

The power of observation can never be underestimated. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes popularized it in literature and later film, but we are talking about the game of golf and what observation can do to enhance one's lifetime enjoyment of the game.

Those notes helped form a teaching philosophy for Ron Stockton's more than 25 years as a golf instructor. During that period, he is credited with coaching his father to 14 victories on the Champions Tour. In addition, he has brought top PGA and LPGA TOUR

players to victory with his distinctive instruction.

Stockton developed his coaching by answering what he calls "a burning question."

Why were we so effective with players who had such a wide range of mechanical techniques?

Stockton's curiosity resulted in exploring the theory of "Process Coaching," which opened up studying the four stages of learning:

- 1) Unconscious incompetence**
- 2) Conscious incompetence**
- 3) Conscious competence**
- 4) Unconscious competence**

Most approaches to coaching, says Stockton, "only get you to stage 3. The player knows and understands how to do it, but often requires a conscious checklist to accomplish the task."

"The Light Bulb Moment"

"You've done it enough that it becomes second nature, i.e. unconscious. There is an element of complete trust that allows you to perform the tasks unconsciously." Stockton said this advancement to Step 4 enabled him to better understand why his father's technique was so effective.

"It had little or nothing to do with

mechanics. That was the huge breakthrough, the 'light bulb moment,' if you will. I had spent my whole playing career trying to emulate his mechanics, not understanding that the magic was all in the routine.

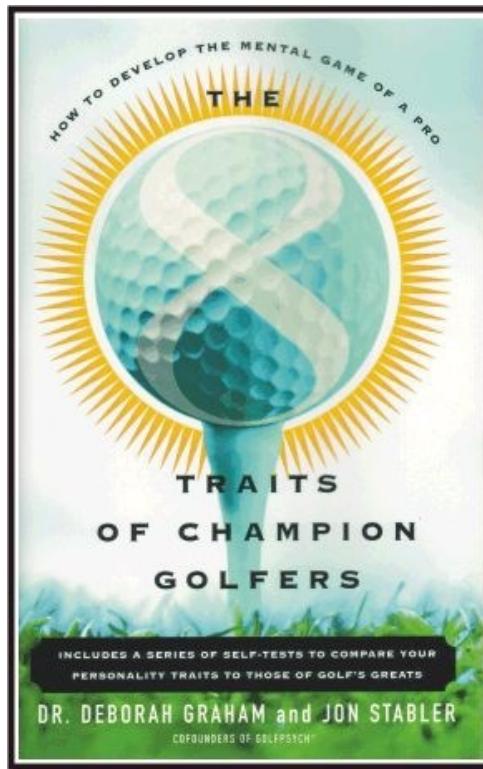
Working with sports psychologists Dr. Deborah Graham and Jon Stabler, founders of GolfPsych, helped advance Stockton to polish his skills.

"I was able to accomplish two things: (1) It reinforced my belief of what I had observed – that everyone is different; everyone's strengths are different; even how they learn is different. Teaching, therefore, should reflect that philosophy and thus instruction becomes highly individualized.

2) GolfPsych made it tangible – They conducted research that showed me how particular states of mind ("8 Traits of Champion Golfers") are optimal for success.

What wasn't different for each player was the inherent trust required in oneself for success to occur. Stockton found that GolfPsych's 8 Championship Traits provided a highway, a path, to success as a player.

"Ron is very intelligent, analytical and a student of the game," says sports psychologist Dr. Deborah Graham, who along with her husband Jon Stabler, founded GolfPsych in 1989. They have known the Stocktons since 1990, hosting schools for players and instructors.



"What they were teaching made sense to me," says Stockton, "because I observed that under pressure, I confirmed my belief that the mind controls the muscle."

So, what are those eight personality traits of a Champion Golfer?

Cool vs. Warm (focus trait)

Concrete Thinking vs. **Abstract Thinking**

Submissive vs. **Dominant**

Tender-minded vs. **Tough-minded**

Self-assured vs. Apprehensive

Group-oriented vs. **Self-sufficient**

Emotionally Reactive vs. **Emotional Stability**

Relaxed vs. **Tense**

GolfPsych has nearly 400 tour professional clients, including 21 that have won a combined 31 major championships while under their guidance. Ron Stockton spent time in developing a mental approach by working with Graham and Stabler.

"Ron has always been good at observation, and seeing more than the average person," says Graham. "Ron has the passion, talent and the skill. We felt that we helped him expand his skills."

In the end it all comes down to trust... getting clients to realize they have what they need to perform. If a player doesn't trust his swing or stroke, it's not happening.

Expanding upon the influence of Graham and Stabler, Ron Stockton carried on his own style of "Process Coaching," understanding the multi-faceted needs of the individual student golfer:

- Process vs. Outcome
- Average vs. Champion
- Ego vs. Soul
- Thinker vs. Athlete

The tools and techniques Stockton uses to get the player to "process" are not quick fixes – such as hypnosis – but always begin with personal insight and awareness of personal "blind spots," which Graham and Stabler says is found with personality testing and brain-typing. Once that is achieved, the cognitive and behavioral tools are inputted into the teaching.



The principles of Stockton Golf (from left to right), Dave Stockton Jr., Dave Stockton Sr., and Ron Stockton.

"What makes Ron successful is that he can adapt to the language of the player he's teaching," says Graham. "Harvey Penick had that remarkable skill. He could move from one student on the range with an entirely different style to another within moments. Ron can do the same by going immediately to the profile of that particular student."

"It comes down to trust," says Stockton, "getting clients to realize they have what they need to perform. If a player doesn't trust his or her swing or stroke, it's not happening."

With its simple and clear approach, Stockton Golf® hopes to re-ignite the world's passion for the game, drawing back those who have given up on golf; attracting new players; opening up avenues for players with disabilities; helping golfers surprise their competitors with a level of game previously unseen; and elevating play at the professional level.

The Beauty of the Signature Approach®

"I believe the message from instructor to student is simple," says Stockton. "That is the beauty of the Signature Approach that I trademarked for Stockton Golf."

Putting is the easiest thing you get to do on a golf course. But what most

people may not realize is that the Signature Approach® is designed to be effective in every aspect of the game.

On the flip side, my mechanical approach to the swing is quite simple: you can't control the ball until you can control yourself. I work a lot with players on balance and creating a consistent move, focusing on ball flight.

I want a player to feel free to let the ball do something versus trying to keep it from doing something. Obviously you have to cater to people's learning style but even that becomes less important if the message is simple."



Ron Stockton (center) explaining the Stockton Golf Signature Approach®

Stockton on Stockton

"I can't say that I was really ever more a player than an instructor," says Stockton. "I was always doing both at the same time and it was not a great mix. A perfectionist does not make for a great player. I would find myself playing golf with a busy mind. Not ideal."

For one, finish getting an education. So many turn professional before finishing college or even going to college for that matter. You're always one injury away from not having what you need



Stockton Golf booth at the 2012 PGA Show.

to play competitively.

For players who want to become instructors: I think the number one challenge in transitioning from being a player to an instructor is the ability to see things through another's eyes or another's perspective. It's not enough to tell someone how I would react to a situation. Rather those moments need to be looked at in context to their perspective. Not easy to do unless you've had some training.

To be a really successful Tour Professional is a very self-centered endeavor. To be a successful instructor requires the exact opposite.

A measure of success is having the ability to draw from those who are successful in common endeavors. For Ron Stockton, his grandfather, Gail, fit the mold. "He never believed you teach the same thing to everybody," says Stockton.

The list also includes Butch Harmon, who showed Stockton that mechanics come second to feel. And, there was Mac O'Grady – "showing the truly scientific and mechanical complexity that can exist in a golf swing . . . if you have enough time to think about it."