

# tee for two

The most important lesson in golf? How to play with your mate

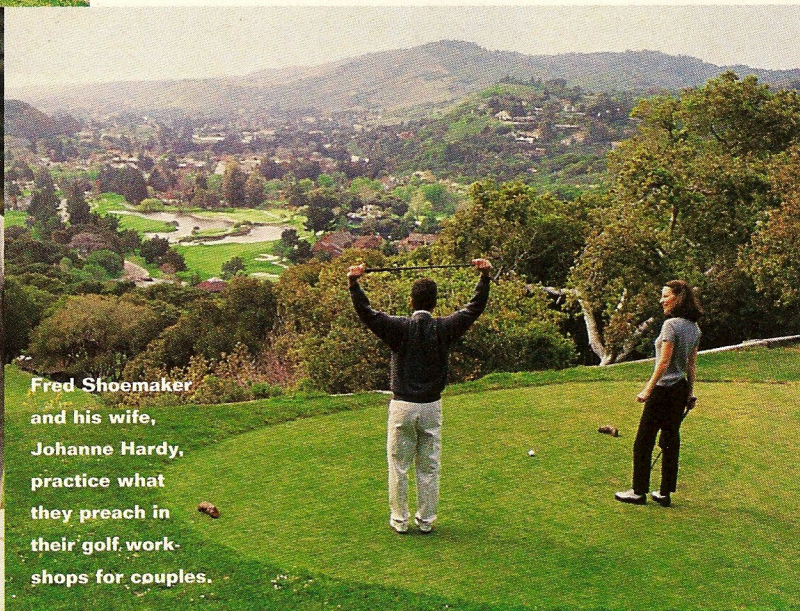
By Fred Shoemaker

I was driving away from the course after a day of coaching a few years ago, when I saw my friend John walking along the road in his golf shoes, carrying his clubs. I asked him if he needed a ride. He nodded and got in. "Car trouble?" I asked. He shook his head. "Wife trouble."

John told me how he'd been "helping" his wife on her swing and things had not gone well. She walked off, took the car and left him there. "I really want to help," he explained, "but most of the time we get upset with each other. I know I should stop giving her tips, but I keep thinking, 'This is the one that will work.'"

What is it with us guys? Why do we almost always take the role of coach? Does it come from a desire to help? Wanting to seem strong and look good? Wanting to be right? Maybe it's all of the above.

I've given about 40,000 golf lessons over 25 years of coaching and at my school, Extraordinary Golf, and I've learned firsthand that golf can't be taught by dispensing tips and information, as John was doing with his wife. It can only be discovered. It's like learning to ride a bicycle. I can help a person get on the bike, but learning occurs because the rider experiences and distinguishes balance. It's the same thing in golf. Swing plane, clubface position, timing, alignment and solid contact can all be discovered by the student. He or she already has the resources; all the person needs is the right learning environment. The role of a coach is to provide feedback to help ►



Fred Shoemaker and his wife, Johanne Hardy, practice what they preach in their golf workshops for couples.



a player achieve that awareness in a situation where it's OK to make mistakes. One of the most difficult things for many couples is creating this safe zone out on the golf course.

### Can this relationship be saved?

After the incident with John, I began observing and listening to couples on the range, on the course and in our school. The typical scenario goes like this: The couple start playing golf together because it's something fun they can share (often he already plays). Somewhere along the way, the guy becomes the coach and the woman is the student.

In the early, "honeymoon" phase of the relationship, the roles seem to work. He offers tips. She accepts them. Some ideas work and some don't, but in the beginning that's OK. Sooner or later, however, she realizes his "expertise" isn't helping, and she becomes less trusting of his advice. He gets frustrated because his coaching isn't working. He adds another tip; now she's so busy, even stressed, trying to do all the things he tells her, she can't feel or distinguish a single thing. She walks away feeling that she has no chance at this sport, and



“Once a person trusts her own instincts...miracles happen”

the on-course situation becomes emotionally charged. They find they're both a lot freer and happier when they play with other partners and not with each other.

Can this golfing relationship be saved? Yes. And it can become effective and harmonious, too. But both partners need to create an environment free of expectations and judgment. That's when real learning can take place.

### Setting guidelines

In our golf workshops for couples, my wife, Johanne, and I share the following ideas on how to establish a positive coaching relationship. Much of our advice is based on our own success coaching each other. It doesn't matter whether the better or more experienced player is the coach. These guidelines allow novices to coach more advanced players, and even children to coach their parents.

■ The coach coaches only when asked. This is the big one. Since all of us learn best when we're ready and receptive, coaching must be initiated by the student. When you're ready, simply say to your partner, "I'd like to be coached." The request must be specific, simple and agreed upon

before you play. For example, if you top the ball and shout, "Why did I do that?" that's an exclamation, not an invitation for coaching. As the student, you need to be aware of what you are doing, not what you are doing wrong. The coach does not have to come to the rescue.

■ The student sets the agenda. We're used to the model in which the coach "knows" and the student doesn't, and the notion that the student should set the agenda may seem radical. But I've been coaching golf for 25 years, and I've seen that once a student begins to trust her own instincts, intuition and feel, miracles happen.

Here's how it should work: Let's say you ask for feedback on the length of your backswing. Your husband's only role is to help confirm the reality of what is happening. You take your swing and say, "I felt that it went all the way to parallel at the top of the swing" (the student always speaks first). He then responds, "It was a foot short of parallel." That's good coaching. One person says what she was aware of, the other states what he saw. However, if on the next swing



he says, "It went to parallel, and you shifted your weight well, too," he has stepped out of bounds. Weight shift is outside the student's request. The coach has no interpretive powers and is only a mirror to reflect reality. The student takes an action and says what she experienced, and the coach tells what he saw. That's all. When people make judgments and suggestions, things start to fall apart.

There comes a point, of course, when you should drop the coach/student roles and resume being a couple who just play golf together. My wife and I have become each other's favorite playing partner. We've seen that by our willingness to explore coaching each other, our lives have changed, along with our golf games.

*Fred Shoemaker is the author of Extraordinary Golf: The Art of the Possible (G.P. Putnam's Sons; 1996). His Extraordinary Golf school is based in Carmel, California.*