



TOP TEACHERS TALK

An Interview with Fred Shoemaker

Fred Shoemaker is a golf teacher of a rather different stripe. He isn't so much into instructing on the mechanics of the swing, although that is certainly included in his schools, but in his students learning how to connect with their golfing soul, so to speak. Shoemaker's method has a Socratic turn to it. He believes there must be a dialogue between the student and the coach, a term he prefers over teacher. He doesn't want his students to simply listen and do as told, but to ask questions, question the answers, and in the final analysis become self-taught golfers who learn through their own experience, their own sense of self, and become their own best teacher. The concept has a celestial thrust, but on a practical level is a worthy goal if only because golfers must recognize when their swing or concentration is not going well and then have the wherewithal to correct the problems in the midst of a round.

In this interview we discover how Fred came to this method of instruction, but perhaps more importantly, why he embraces it.

J How did you get involved in golf?

S I'm from a military family, and my Dad moved around a lot. Much of my youth was spent in Guam, Taiwan, and the Philippines. I played my first golf in Guam. The Naval base had an 18 hole course, and a short nine. I started when I was six, going around that short nine over and over again. Why golf? My father played, but he didn't push it on me. Sometimes you get into something that you know is the right thing for you. I fell in love with the game. It was the whole ambiance. I found it all fascinating. And still do.

J Were you a good player from the start?

S Pretty much. I played in something like 250 amateur tournaments before I was 21 years old. Mostly in California, where my father retired, but I also played in national events—the United States Amateur, the Trans-Miss, and the Canadian Amateur.

J How did you do?

S I won some matches and some smaller tournaments, but eventually competitive golf got to be only about who is the best, and if you played well you were somehow a better person than when you played poorly. It got to be about rating your character based on your golf score.

I couldn't get a good conversation going with other golfers about doubt, fear, lack of trust, how you really learn, how to overcome obstacles, things like that. What would be uncommon would be a conversation with someone who was looking for something other than a golf swing how-to.

J Did you ever get involved in technique? Or were you just a naturally good player?

S I think everybody is natural. You lose that naturalness in the first year of your play, because you think someone else has an answer for you. Generally, we look outside ourselves for answers. It's not any different from the rest of our lives. I've given 50,000 individual lessons, more or less, since 1973 and I've never had one person come back to me and say, "I have everything I need. I have a great golf swing inside me." Instead, I hear people saying that there's something wrong with their swing and they're asking to have it changed, to get it fixed.

J Can it be they simply don't have a lot of, or little, athletic ability?

S I think that people simply lack awareness and a safe environment in which to learn. It's like the analogy of the acorn and the oak tree. All it takes is a little water, some sunshine and the right environment to make the acorn grow into an oak tree. Teaching golf is the same thing. The students, like acorns, have everything they need, and in the right environment they flourish.

J When did you begin to evolve this method of instruction or coaching, and why?

S When I was 22 years old I took a golf lesson during which a particular thing happened to me. For years the two middle fingers of my right hand would come off the club at the top of my backswing. In resetting the fingers the angle of the clubface would often shift. It's hard to control the flight of the ball when you do that, so I took a lesson from Tim Gallwey, who was famous for his book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*. He didn't teach golf at the time [Gallwey would eventually produce *The Inner Game of Golf*], but I had been to enough golf pros and I wanted to go to someone who was different. The first thing he said to me was, "What do you really want?" I told him that once and for all I wanted to stop letting go of the club. Then he asked me how I knew I was doing it. That's when I came to realize that anything ineffective that persists in a golf swing, such as your fingers coming off the handle, is something you don't experience. We see it on video, friends tell us about it, we see the results in our shots, but we don't experience the moment when it happens. It was embarrassing for me,

after 22 years of golf and hitting thousands and thousands of balls, that I had never experienced my fingers on the club.

J In all that time you never once thought about why you were letting go of the club?

S You have to be careful how you take that, and the language you use.

Asking why doesn't get you the experience.

You want to get people crazy, ask them why. Want to get them sane, ask them what. What happened versus why it happened. Gallwey was saying to simply let it do it, don't try to stop it. He made it so it wasn't a bad thing. Now I could be curious about it, and after ten minutes of hitting balls I actually, for the first time, felt my fingers move. I laughed. Then I decided to consciously hold the fingers on, but Gallwey said no, just let it go. The fingers started to move and I felt the face change at the top of the swing. It was incredible. I could really see the correlation between the change in the clubface and the flight of the shots. But after awhile, 25 minutes or so, I noticed my fingers began to get calmer on the club. And after 45 minutes my fingers stopped moving, and they have never moved since. After 22 years of doing something, in 45 minutes it no longer happened because of my own awareness of it. It was like a thunderbolt hit me.

I grew up in everything traditional about golf. I knew all the theories, and here is this guy, Gallwey, who doesn't know anything about golf technique, doesn't know if the fingers coming off is a bad or good thing, telling me to simply trust my own awareness in a non-evaluative environment. And from experiencing the problem it disappeared.

J Is this episode to say that golf is played more by feel than a conscious system?

S You call it feel; I call it being present, which is the entire sensory experience. Feel is a part of it. You can have a sense of all sorts of things. But I would simply say the best golf is played in the present.

J How does what or how you teach differ from that of a sports psychologist, a Bob Rotella or Dick Coop?

I have no interest in psychology. Psychology is the study of the mind. My

S interest is in the study of being with a capital B. Being. There are three basic modes of teaching golf that have developed over the past 200 years or so.

One is, 'Do Something.' You get on the range and what you see is someone standing behind someone else telling that person what to do. That's maybe 99 percent of teaching, and is accepted by everyone as the way the game is supposed to be taught. I think it's a very limited form of instruction, and as we know the average handicap among average golfers hasn't changed much since they began keeping it.

A second way that has been heavily pioneered in the last 30 years could be called Awareness Instruction.

'Pay attention and experience what you're doing.'

It's very powerful. As your awareness of the physical reality of your swing increases, your golf scores go down. It's a perfect inverse ratio.

A third kind of instruction could be called Being Instruction or an awareness of who you're being during the activity.

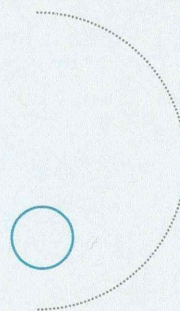
Are you being free?

Are you being present? Are you being a person who trusts himself? To be aware of who you're being and shifting it could be the most powerful golf instruction of all.

By the way, if you asked golfers if they trust themselves, most would say they don't, and it shows in their constant attempt to fix their swings. You don't have to fix something you trust.

J Doesn't mistrust arise because they have hit a lot of poor shots?

S No, I think it's because they're not confident out of a lack of awareness. When a person shanks a ball, he doesn't know what happened. The ball went sideways but he didn't experience what happened. Or how it happened. So the fear is that it will happen again. That's what makes him afraid.



It's like this. Suppose you are walking to your car and you end up on the pavement, you fell and hurt yourself. You don't know how you got there, why you fell, which makes you afraid. But if you can actually experience the falling down, or in our context the shank, then you will know what to do and there's no fear.

- J What if a person doesn't have good hand-eye coordination or other natural athletic gifts? Can a klutz who wants to play well, play well?
- S I've never met a 'klutz.' I've met people who interfere with their ability more than others. People who, from the time they were young, built up a self-image that they were no good at ball sports and then fulfilled that self-image when they started to play golf. They don't see a golf ball or a golf course. They see threats and respond with fear and over-tightening. Part of coaching golf is to assist people to let go of limiting self-images and to experience the genius of their body. People are absolutely amazing but rarely do they see it.

Every person brings some gifts to the game. Most teachers of golf look at students for their hand-eye coordination or physical prowess. But they may have the gift of concentration, which to me is far more important than any physical asset. Concentration allows them to learn, and learning how to learn may be more important than what you learn. They may have a gift for commitment, so they aren't shaken by first failure. I would like a person to have that more than what they consider natural power.

- J When did you become a professional?
- S I turned professional when I was 26, right after I saw Tim Gallwey. There is definitely a relationship between the two events. I realized what I wanted to do, to assist people through golf discover their own extraordinary nature. Golf can be a vehicle for so much more than getting a single-digit handicap.
- J But before that there was a sojourn in Africa.
- S Yes. This was after my meeting with Gallwey. I was now a golf professional, but I didn't see anything in the game that would open up the future in the game for me. It was the same old stuff, and conversations about the golf swing put me to sleep. So I took some time off and joined the Peace Corps and worked for a time in Ghana. After the first year I was asked to run a

training program for incoming volunteers and Ghanaian staff. At first I said I couldn't do that. Heck, I couldn't manage my own life. But the director of the project saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. It was the most inspiring time of my life. I worked 12 hours a day, and when it was over I was fully clear in my mind that coaching and teaching golf could be an experience that could make a difference in people. Before, I couldn't see myself dedicating my life standing on a tee talking about backswings and downswings. I thought that was a moronic way to spend a life. But after Ghana I realized that it isn't what you do but who you bring to whatever it is you do. My life changed just like that. One of the things about coaching golf is you see things in or about people that they don't see in themselves.

- J Do you still play well?
- S I do, real well, and I keep score. It's still golf, putting the ball in the hole in as few strokes as possible. If our golf schools didn't develop people in their golf technique and scoring ability we wouldn't have a 94 percent attendance rate for 16 straight years, and all by word of mouth. It's a question of finding out what people want, and fulfilling it that makes our golf program work. People don't want just information. They want peace of mind, self-coaching and to learn how to get out of their own way. That's what they tell me.



Most people play golf with a lot of doubt. It's the number one source of technical error, of poor swings. Doubt comes before fear. If you didn't doubt you wouldn't fear. Doubt by the very nature of the word has a physical component, which is over-tightening of the muscles. Now the club can no longer drop into the slot from the top of the backswing, for one thing. The club comes over the top and the person thinks the problem

is technique. That's insanity. **How about dealing with the doubt that created the poor technique, rather**

than the technique itself? Very few people ever admit interfering in this way, and it is prevalent everywhere in golf. But no one ever says, 'I just interfered.' If they told the truth about it then they could begin to work with doubt itself. Doubt is an internal conversation accompanied by bodily sensations.

When a person becomes effective in letting go of doubt, then feel arises. They can now feel their body more. They can sense their relationship to the target. Or, they can choose to feel the clubhead throughout the arc of their swing.

- J Ernest Jones, the legendary English golf teacher, taught golfers to just swing the clubhead. He didn't get into any other mechanics, just that. It sounds like that is what or how you teach.
- S I don't have a method. A person's self-awareness develops a method that becomes their own. The clubhead is one place to which you may choose to direct your attention. Golf, at its basic level, involves a body, a club, a ball and a target. It's about increasing your awareness of the relationship of these four things. It's like a dance. And if you're having problems in the game, it's a pretty sure bet that one of these four is a blind spot for you.
- J Can't the coach, who has had a lot of golf experience, sense or understand what the student is feeling?
- S No, that's collapsing understanding and sensing into the same language. They are completely different.

J What comes first?

S Look at it this way. Do you know you have a hand or do you understand you have a hand? In golf, understanding something—without the direct experience of it—is the booby prize. I know the basic thing is that if you understand something you can do it. But understanding, by the very nature of the concept, means going into the past to gather information and make sense of it. It means I can't experience what's here and now.

J How is knowing transmitted to understanding?

S Understanding comes afterward, through the medium of experience.

J Is feel a part of that?

S Yes, feel is experience. But it is not understanding. It could lead to understanding. I know you're supposed to understand your swing, understand the concept of it. But do you understand how you walk? Do you know how to walk?

J Sure.

S Tell me how, by what manner or means?

J You raise one leg and put it forward, it stays in place as you raise the other leg and put it forward, and so on.

S But how do you raise your leg? Do you have any real experience of that? There is a mystery to how we walk. Hundreds of muscle contractions, hundreds of electrical impulses. No one, not even the experts in the field, knows "how" we walk. Nor does anyone know how to swing a golf club. The complexity of the muscular contractions and expansion is astounding. My answer to the question, 'How do you start a downswing?' is, I don't know. Nor does anyone, really.

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"I don't know," then the student and I are free to explore, to share our experiences and notice subtle changes that affect the outcome of the shot.

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