

THE VALUE OF A PLAYING LESSON

Seasoned and novice golfers alike can improve their games with personalized tutelage in the finer points of course management.

Todd Sones has the presence of a Top Gun instructor; he exudes the confidence of a man who has mastered his craft. On this windswept, sunny late August morning, he greets us with handshakes. One of the top 100 golf teachers in the country, Sones runs his own school, Impact Golf, at White Deer Run G.C. in Vernon Hills. We are on hand to observe Sones conduct a playing lesson. Today, Sones' pupil is the CDGA's Manager of Foundation Operations Todd Alfred. Sones quickly ascertains that Alfred is a 25-handicap who feels he has made some strides with his game over the summer.

"Most players unknowingly lose five-ten strokes just by incorrect club selection and poor decisions on the golf course," says Sones. "Helping a student on this part of his or her game is invaluable during a playing lesson."

Sones' approach works because he emphasizes a facet of the game that many amateurs underestimate: strategy. During a playing lesson, Sones coaches his students about mental approach, talking them through the finer points of course management. "The range is where you practice your fundamentals and trusting your fundamentals," says Sones. "On the course, it's about

trusting your swing and managing your game."

Seasoned and novice golfers alike can benefit from a playing lesson. "As long as you can hit the ball and move it forward, you're ready," Sones claims. "In fact, learning good habits earlier in your career is better."

Sones begins Alfred's lesson with a



"On the course, it's about trusting your swing and managing your game," says pro Todd Sones (left).

few open-ended questions. Of particular interest to Sones was Alfred's statement that he frequently plays from the back tees because he's hitting the ball pretty well and feels that this will spur his improvement.

"You've got to look at the total yardage of the course," Sones tells Alfred. "Hitting from the further tees is not necessarily going to make you a

better player. Now, breaking your comfort zone by shooting lower scores from more forward tees will. The point is, mix it up. Play some long courses if your game is ready for it, but also play short courses to learn to score low."

Sones advises Alfred to play from the tees that give him a 6,500-yard course, give or take a few hundred yards. On #11, a difficult 397-yard par 4 from the gold tees, Alfred tees off for the first time, launching the ball a good distance but out of bounds on the left. "It was my first shot of the day and I didn't feel confident," Alfred says when Sones asks him to assess the shot.

Sones' solution? "You need a pre-shot routine like all of the Tour players. Look at the hole and ask yourself, where on the fairway do I have the best access to the pin? Learn to play target golf. The biggest mistake amateurs make in alignment is not getting behind the golf ball and picking a target — a very specific target! In darts, you don't look at the wall when you're trying to hit the bulls-eye, do you? So choose your primary target, link it to an intermediate target, then set your club down and square off to it."

On the next hole, a par 3, Alfred's first shot is straight, but short of the green by about 10 yards. For his



During a playing lesson, Sones coaches his students about mental approach, talking them through the finer points of course management. Here, Sones (wearing red) works with the CDGA's Todd Alfred.

follow-up shot, he selects a pitching wedge and carries the ball beyond the pin. Sones steps to Alfred's side.

He would have selected an 8-iron here. Explains Sones, "Our job in the short game is to deliver the club to the ball. The less loft to get the job done, the better. When you use the 8-iron, you're not taking the club back as far. Remember, when you approach the green, be more focused on where you want to land the ball than where you want the ball to end up. After you've selected your landing site, that's your target, so choose your club accordingly."

Our final hole is a crooked par-5 dappled with bunkers that starts left, veers right, then hooks left again. Before Alfred tees off, Sones waxes philosophic. "On a difficult par-4 or 5, a 10-25 handicap golfer will think, 'I have to shoot par.' But that's not necessarily so. A golfer at this level can make all bogeys and still have a solid round. So let's approach this par 5 as a par 6. Instead of trying to take three shots to the green, we want to play the fairway."

Alfred hits his drive on line with the target but gets under the ball a bit. His second shot is likewise on line, but

lands in a trap still 160 yards from the green. Should Alfred try to reach the green with his third shot out of the sand?

"Sometimes in golf the straightest line is not always the best line," Sones says, "and closer isn't always better." If Alfred takes the more obvious, direct shot, he will probably wind up about 20 yards shy of the green on the left side, "penalized for a great shot with a brutal fourth shot into the hole." Instead, Sones suggests that Alfred try to hit the ball about 100 yards up on the right side – about 60 yards away from a wide open green.

Sones demonstrates the shot he has in mind, offering a few comments on technique even though form takes a back seat to strategy during a playing lesson. "In a fairway bunker, grip down on the club, center the ball in your stance, dig in your right instep," Sones says. "Keep your body quiet."

Alfred places his third shot handily, then takes the green on his fourth shot, winding up about 20 feet from the pin. Sones asks him where he anticipates a break and nods approvingly at Alfred's response. Alfred, who caddied for seven years at

the Merit Club before coming to the CDGA, has a good read.

"Amateurs often way underplay breaks and miss the break by 30 percent," notes Sones. "More accomplished players play more break and hit the ball softer."

Alfred's first putt is short. "Pick an intermediate target," Sones tells him, "and make your eyes move across the green at the speed the ball will roll." The next putt is much closer, and Alfred bogeys the hole.

"A playing lesson is all about assessing a player's skills and helping them determine how they should manage the golf course," says Sones as we head back to the clubhouse. "The feedback I gave Todd was appropriate to his level. After he progresses with his game, we might cover areas like how to adjust his shot to the wind direction and speed – the finer nuances of the game."

"Golf is like pool – you're always setting yourself up for your next shot," continues Sones. "Think about where you want to hit your next shot from. Most golfers pick the shot they'll make one of ten times versus six or seven times out of ten. That's where they pick up triple or quadruple bogeys. You want to pick the smartest, simplest shot. Play to your strengths, not your weaknesses."

For more information on Todd Sones' Impact Golf, call the school at 847-263-7007.