

My Philosophies - Profile of a Professional

PROFILE OF A PROFESSIONAL - NEIL WILKINS

There is a definite air of confidence, when you talk with Neil Wilkins, Director of Instruction at Sienna Plantation Golf Club, just south of the city of Sugar Land. It's not a cocky attitude, just one that exudes the confidence that 'I can and will help you'. For anyone who has been to a teacher or doctor for some 'mysterious' malady, those can be comforting words.



It is easy to imagine why Neil has a following that is growing steadily since his departure from the exclusive Lakeside Country Club. "I have no restrictions here. I can teach anyone and everyone who needs help here at Sienna", boasts Wilkins. "I teach a great deal, but I absolutely love my job and can't wait to get to work every morning."

Obviously, Brooks Simmons and Sienna Plantation saw Neil's great potential as a nationally ranked teaching professional and did their level best to create a facility to accommodate him. His office and video equipment are housed in a 600 square foot building that provides two Astroturf mats from which golfers can hit shots and find protection from the elements. It allows Neil to teach in any kind of weather and control the climate if it is too hot or too cold. Naturally most players prefer grass, which is available as well. But for many days in Houston the weather presents a problem, and when it does, Neil has a comfortable contingency.

Neil Wilkins is blessed with a considerable talent for teaching. I should know, because I worked one-on-one with him in the fall of 1999, shortly before a neck injury sidelined me for almost a year. During a four-week period however, Neil had me swinging better, from a technical standpoint, than at any stage in my career. And Neil is not one to aspire to the old adage, 'You have to be willing to play worse before you get better' after a lesson. In his words, "If a pro can't help the student hit the ball better in a matter of ten balls, then he will probably lose interest and won't come back. My students continue to come back."

Wilkins has had some great tutelage in his golfing past. His main mentors are two of golf's most renowned teachers, Hank Haney and Jim Murphy. Haney and Murphy have taught a steadfast method that works for anyone, regardless of their history as a golfer. The principals revolve around the swing plane, keeping the club in front of you, and controlling the angle of attack. In simple terms, when the swing is off - the club is either too steep or too shallow as it approaches and strikes the ball. Neil's job, as a teacher, is to help you find the perfect swing plane.

Now, and probably most importantly for Neil, he has found a home that appreciates his talents and wants to help promote them. That is an uncommon quality in the golf industry, especially if you are an assistant golf professional like Neil was for 13 years. Wilkins, was very fortunate to teach as much as he did at Lakeside Country Club. Most facilities require their assistants to work in more ordinary servitude - manning the counter, selling golf apparel and equipment, and helping the members with tee times, golf games, and the like. Teaching is something done in the assistants 'free time', allowing the club's head professional the freedom to do his job, which often includes several hours each day on the practice tee - teaching. Using that comparison, Lakeside was an oasis in the golf business and provided Wilkins with an extraordinary amount of freedom to ply his trade. When it comes to learning to teach, there is only one way to learn your profession and that is by 'hands on' training.

But nothing stays the same in our world, and like everything else, Lakeside's priorities changed too. I can remember the day Neil told me of his dismissal. He was naturally disappointed to be leaving a club and membership that he had grown to love. But he looked at me with a sparkle in his eye and said with a confidence that almost blew me away, "As long as I can teach, Bill, I won't go hungry! I'll always be able to provide for my family." I knew then that Neil would be just fine.

And Neil has prospered since his departure. Not only does he continue to teach a growing contingent from Lakeside C.C., he is teaching some of the best juniors in our city. "I'm currently teaching the number one players at Elkins, Stratford, Memorial, and Cy-Falls High Schools, as well as an impressive number of high school, and middle school players. Among them, Eric Lodge, who he claims is the "best 11 year-old" in the city,

and Dwayne Morley, a former Texas Junior Boy's Champion. Additionally he has taught Trevor Sauntry, Jordan Brown, Tyler Garrett, Sam Morrow, and Amy Behrman, all first class junior players with eyes set on collegiate golfing careers.

Wilkins is also helping members of the University of Houston, Rice, and Texas A&M golf teams, and has helped propel the careers of some college grads, including Richard Barbles and Ryan Palmer, into the professional tour ranks. One of his most prideful successes has been Palmer, who was just a 'break' away from making the PGA Tour. Ryan finished bogey, double-bogey to miss the final qualifying stage by only one shot at Kingwood's Deerwood Golf Club.

"That was the hardest call I ever had to make", said Wilkins, who doesn't stop teaching when he leaves the golf course. I'm on the phone a lot with my players, and many of them I can fix over the phone with no difficulty."

"I told Ryan that he was just going to have to learn to hate to lose. He was going to have to take that misfortune and use it to his advantage in some way." It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that Neil truly cares about his students, and you could easily hear the empathy in his heart for Palmer.

To me, these are the qualities that set Neil Wilkins apart from the rest. Despite the responsibilities to Suzie, his wife of 18 years, and his two children, Penni and Trey, Neil makes time for both students/clients and family with equal devotion. If he were asked to speak honestly, he would confess that his favorite student is his son, Trey. "If I could just get him off the ice, I know he would be a great golfer", he says with some lament. But like most kids his age, they are often distracted by other sports until the golf bug finally bites them. Until that day arrives, Neil will be content teaching the masses from sun-up to sun-down.

For those of you interested in individual or group lessons, Neil is always available for the former, and will be promoting weekend group classes this spring for adults and juniors. You can call him at 713/305-0008 to make your reservation.

Neil has had considerable good fortune in that he was able to learn a lot about the golf business from the likes of Jerry Smith, Jim Murphy, and Bruce Kaiser. But Neil Wilkins has made his own luck, created his own opportunity, with an incredible ability to teach others the game of golf. "I can fix people!" he says with great pride. There is no doubt in my mind that he is a man who can walk the walk, not just talk the talk. If you are serious about improving your golf game, Neil is someone you should seek out this spring. By early summer, you may be playing the best golf of your life!

Bill Pelham