

Penick's Principles Live On Through Austin's **BARBARA PUETT**

by Doug Smith

Austin's Barbara Puett is one of the most respected golf teachers in Central Texas. In addition to her busy schedule of giving private lessons, she teaches the game to some 500-1000 people every year in her sessions with the University of Texas Informal Classes. A native of Austin and a University of Texas graduate, Puett has won the Austin Women's title five times and in 1963 she captured the Texas State Women's Amateur championship. In 1989 the Austin American-Statesman named

her Golf Teacher of the Year. She is a regular contributor to *Golf For Women* and was co-author of the book *Golf Etiquette*. Her husband, Roane, is one of the most accomplished golfers in Central Texas and has won numerous amateur titles.

Puett took time out recently for the following interview:

Your first experience in teaching golf came at Lamar Middle School, and you had some very impressive teams there. Tell us about some of them.

I had some wonderful teams at Lamar. And something that I think speaks well of golf is that I consider every one of those boys who played on those teams to be friends of mine today. We had some great teams, and you had to play very well just to make the team. We had Mike Allen, Randy and Jimmy Kirschner, Richard Buratti, Chuck Munson, Mike Moses, Bob Elliott and Bobby Mann. And, oh yeah, a guy named Tom Kite. Tom's parents moved to Austin just as he was entering junior high school. His



Austin-based golf instructor Barbara Puett.

parents called me to ask what junior high school had the best golf program. They bought a house in that district because of the team we had at Lamar.

How did you make the move from junior high school teacher and coach to full time golf teacher?

Actually there was a little gap there. I left Lamar to start raising my children. I had my first (of three) children when I was 29, and I was really not involved in golf there for a few years. About 11 or 12 years ago, Richard Buratti called me. He was teaching golf at the UT informal classes, but it was starting to take up too much of his time. He asked if I would be interested in taking over one of the classes. I had always loved teaching, and I decided to combine the two things I loved most – golf and teaching.

Was the transition to working as a full time golf teacher difficult?

No, it was very natural. Because of my teaching background and because of my longtime relationship with Harvey (Penick), I was able to step right in as an experienced teacher. Everywhere you look today, teaching pros are saying that they learned from Harvey. It's the popular thing to say. But I really had known him for years and years, and had been greatly influenced by him.

What would you say is your basic philosophy of teaching golf?

I would love to be able to go back to being a school teacher knowing now what my son with learning disabilities has taught me. I have two daughters who were national merit scholars. Of course I thought that was because of me. Then I had a son with learning disabilities. He has fine comprehension, but absolutely no math skills. What I learned through him, and that I use in teaching golf today, came from what an expert on teaching disabled kids told me back then. They said "If you are not tired at the end of the day from telling him what he has been doing right, you are not doing your job." With a child with a learning disability, you can spend

your entire day following him around, telling him what he's doing wrong. Instead, you have to train yourself to look for the qualities he does have, to look for what he is doing right.

That is when I discovered what Harvey's magic was, and it's the way I try to teach today. Golf students come to me today and want me to tell them what they are doing wrong in their golf swing. I'm not interested in that. I want to emphasize what they are doing well and work on that.

I remember that when I took a lesson from Harvey, he never knew what I was doing wrong and he never asked. It was my son who taught me, or reminded me, what Harvey had been teaching all along. A lot is just in the way you say something. Instead of saying "Your grip is all wrong," try saying "Maybe we can make that grip a little more comfortable." Harvey also was a master at teaching you how to think. Often he would just say "Go out and use your natural ability." It was subtle, but what he was telling you was that you HAD some natural ability.

Every golf teacher has a different style and approach. I don't care much for props and gimmicks. Your can't take those things to the course with you.

As you mentioned, you knew Harvey Penick for many, many years. Among longtime Austinites who knew him for a long time, was there a sense back then that this was a very special person?

Absolutely. We never thought of Harvey in global terms and never could have predicted his notoriety from the books. We just knew what a special teacher-student type of relationship he had with people. There was a lot of love, affection and loyalty between Harvey and his pupils. His pupils were always so anxious to call him when they had won a tournament or did something well. And they were always quick to say they couldn't have done it without Harvey. I don't think you see that kind of teacher-student relationship with anybody else.

Is there one lesson or teaching gem that you got from Harvey that stands out the most?

For me, the main thing is that through Harvey I developed a true love for the beginning golfer. And Harvey always preferred the term "newcomer" rather than "beginner." Beautiful. Besides the satisfaction of helping someone who is new to the game, the beginning golfer helps me with the better players as well. The faults you see in beginners will crop up later in players of all levels.

When you teach school, everybody wants to teach the honors classes. But anybody who has ever taught school knows that if you can teach the remedial classes and be a success there, you are a REAL teacher. It's like Harvey once said, "Anybody can teach a star. They are going to make it anyway. Many of them make it in spite of their teacher." I feel like if I

can take somebody with very little athletic ability and no experience in golf, and get that person leaving and saying to himself "Gee, I love this game." That just gives me a thrill.

Most of us only know of Penick's teachings through the books with Bud Shrake. In reading those, it seems that much of his wisdom was in finding a way to say things that made sense to his pupils. Is that correct?

Absolutely. There are so many elements to the golf swing, but it is so important to make it simple. We are always looking for an easier, more clear way to say something. That's where Harvey was great. He just knew how to express things better, and he set a standard there for all of us.

Every field has its own language, and people are intimidated by a language that is new to them. I am working with a man now who is a computer expert, and we're trading lessons with each other. He gets frustrated with me when I forget what that "Alt" button does, and then I remind him how often I have to tell him to strengthen that grip. But sometimes the students come up with a better way to say something. I was teaching a class about how to hit from uphill and downhill lies. I could see some of their eyes glaze over when I talked about hitting off the left foot for uphill and right foot for downhill. One student said "Why not just say hit off the higher foot?" Perfect.

The longer I teach, the more I always come back to Harvey's way and the more I see why it works.

A lot of golfers don't get to play as much or practice as much as they would like. As a teacher, how do you deal with somebody who plays only once a week and practices even less?

With the person who plays once a week, I am not able to throw a whole battery of things at them. I have to get them to realize what their expectations should be. That's how Harvey came up with his "just clip the grass" drill. He knew that for a player like that, that's all they could handle, and it would enable them to play at a decent level.

We (teachers) sometimes forget the time constraints of most people. Between their careers and home, there is not much time to dedicate to golf. But these same golfers, all golfers, are so hard on themselves. We need to get them to just enjoy the game. Accept the bad shots that are bound to come, and appreciate the good shots. A lot of people who are just taking up the game are professionals, and they are used to being very successful in their jobs. They want to be just as successful in golf, but with their time constraints, that's not likely. But if I can give them a good grip, a good stance and get them to "just clip the grass," they are going to be okay.

This may not be a fair question to ask a teaching pro. But, with all of

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the instructional material on the market – books, magazines and video tapes – can somebody teach himself to play better golf?

Again the answer is something Harvey once told me. I had already been teaching golf for awhile, but was having trouble with my own grip. I went to Harvey and said "How can I ever be a good teacher if I can't even fix my own grip?" He replied "If only we could see ourselves as others see us." Enough said.

Your name is familiar to many for the book on golf etiquette that you

co-authored with Jim Apfelbaum. How did that project come about?

It came out of my teaching in the UT informal classes. I wanted to teach them more than just the mechanics of the golf swing. I wanted them to leave my class with an understanding of the do's and don'ts at a golf course. My pupils are generally a lot of very bright people, and they don't want to go out and embarrass themselves because of some faux pas.

I started doing research, and the only thing in print I could find was a little booklet with Snoopy on the cover. And it just scratched the sur-



Teaching Pro Barbara Puett developed her game under the expert eye of Harvey Penick. She passes on much of Penick's wisdom to her students today.

face of etiquette. I began collecting my students' questions and eventually put them into book form. It's just like teaching the rest of the game. You don't just tell somebody "Don't stand there. Don't hit yet. Don't walk into the trap there." Instead, you explain why we do things a certain way. The book has done well and is now into the fourth printing.

Your relationship with Tom Kite goes back a long time. You were his junior high school coach. You saw him growing up around Austin Country Club. And today you work with him on his tournament on the American Junior Golf Association Tour. What most impresses you about Tom, or what is there about Tom that most of us don't know?

Of all his accomplishments, which are many, his victory at the U.S. Open at Pebble Beach to me was astounding. In those conditions, on that course, and under the U.S. Open pressure. To win like that was so impressive, and I don't think he's

ever really received quite enough credit for what he did there.

Also, I have always thought the public and the media have some incorrect impressions of Tom. He's always been labeled as a player who works very hard on his game and is so dedicated. That's true, but the impression is that he's a workaholic with his nose always to the grindstone. What most people don't realize is that he absolutely loved and still loves, all that practice time. It has never been work to him.

Tom also doesn't not get enough credit for what a great sense of humor he has. He is extremely personable and gracious.

This game of golf attracts so many people, and so many become addicted to it. What is it about golf that is different from other sports? What is it that makes it so special?

That's a tough one. There are so many things. It's such a great game for people of all ages and abilities. The integrity of the game – like keeping your own score and calling penalties on yourself – is special. If there is any one thing, though, I'd have to say it's the sense of self accomplishment it gives a person. I suppose that may also be the case with some other individual sports, but it is certainly true with golf.

On the other hand, do you have any complaint with the game?

I don't want to get up on a soapbox, but my only disappointment in the game is that there is still a lot of discrimination. There are still a lot of grill rooms that are closed to women, and a lot of courses still have restricted tee times when women are not allowed to play. This has always struck me as odd, because here is a game where men and women can play together on an equal basis, but at some places there are still these barriers.