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MOST INNOVATIVE PEOPLE IN GOLF

Years ago, the words “golf” and “innovation” rarely appeared in the same sentence. Today, an industry that’s long been locked into tamper-resistant habits and suffocating traditions is finally warming up to innovations that are stimulating change.

It’s about time. As the industry continues to lose customers, its future depends on the success of innovators who are re-energizing the sport and the business.

“We should challenge ourselves to be more innovative,” said Arccos Golf’s Sal Syed, one of 2019’s top innovators. “In the same way that real-time data has revolutionized transportation, leading to the creation of companies like Uber, golf can

Golf is being energized by original thinkers who are moving the industry forward. We profile the individuals who are at the forefront of change and excitement.

BY ROBERT J. VASILAK

transform itself. It can be more efficient and more fun.”

Many of these innovators, such as Brett Darrow, Ken Morton Sr., Forrest Richardson, Nick Sherburne, Doug Sutter and the team of Tom Pashley and Bob Dedman Jr., have well-established roots in the golf business. Others, however, came to golf from elsewhere. Syed was a software engineer, Hunki Yun a journalist, Scott Campbell a veterinarian.

But all have much in common. They saw connections that the rest of us didn’t. They trusted their instincts. Instead of doing things the way they’d always been done, they rolled the dice on something new.

change as it relates to technology and the marketing of golf.”



Nick Sherburne
Club Champion
Willowbrook, Ill.

The key to Club Champion’s success is a trait commonly associated with innovators: the ability to recognize the potential of an emerging technology and then adapt that technology for another use.

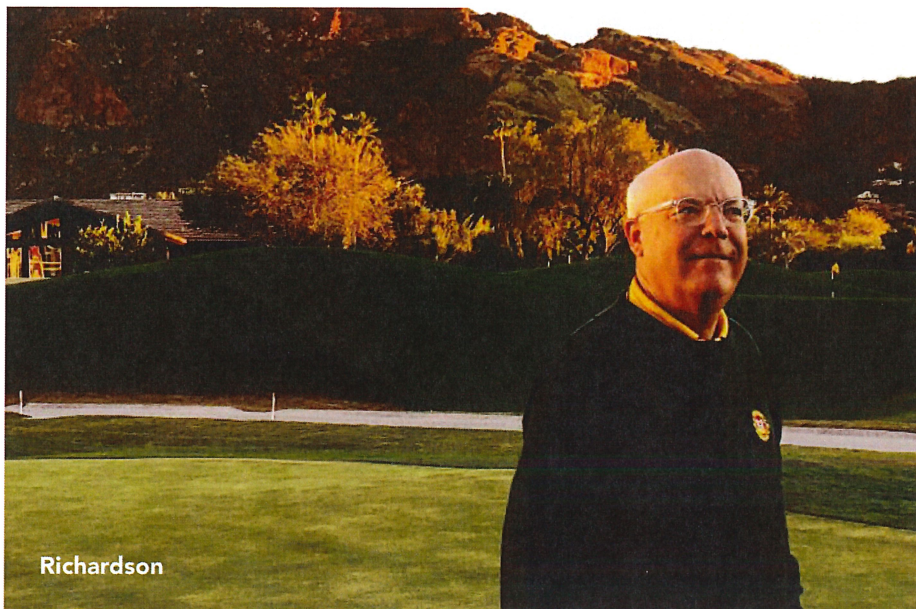
For Sherburne, the technology was the TrackMan Launch Monitor. From the age of 16, he’d been custom-fitting clubs the old-fashioned way, by feel and instinct. But TrackMan, which provides a wealth of unbiased, data-driven insight about a player’s swing, enabled him to see how expertly tailored clubs could generate longer, more accurate shots.

The result: As most retailers continue to sell golf clubs, Club Champion sells optimal performance and, most importantly, lower scores.

“We’ve fought an uphill battle,” Sherburne said. “Twenty years ago, people felt that they weren’t good enough for personalized club fitting, or that it was too expensive. But we’ve educated consumers and the industry. Your equipment changes how you swing a club.”

Today, Club Champion is one of the golf industry’s premier retailers. It had 42 stores heading into 2019, all of them company owned, and it expects to have 75 by year’s end. Last year, it generated \$51 million in revenues, up from \$7.5 million in 2013.

The stores offer what’s said to be “a Tour-quality fitting with a first-class experience.” Each customer’s shots are ana-



Richardson

lyzed by a TrackMan and a SAM PuttLab, and the data is evaluated by club fitters who’ve completed Sherburne’s training program. The clubs are built by combining heads and shafts from all the best-known manufacturers, creating 35,000 options in all.

Because innovation is integral to Club Champion’s DNA, the 9-year-old company is certain to evolve as new technologies are created and customers’ needs change.

“I’ve always tried to figure out why something is what it is,” Sherburne said. “I’m not complacent. I ask questions. As a company, we asked how we could make things better. We want to push boundaries.”

Thanks to Sherburne’s foresight and his partners’ business acumen, custom club fitting is no longer a niche business. An entire industry is following Club Champion’s lead.



Forrest Richardson
Forrest Richardson
& Associates
Phoenix, Ariz.

Richardson has a prediction about what’s on the horizon for golf.

“The course of the future,” he wrote in an e-mail, “may look like what we think of golf today, but it will be far more entertaining and connected.”

It’s a future that Richardson welcomes. From one perspective, his career has followed a predictable architectural arc: He carved out backyard courses as a boy, stud-

ied the masters in Scotland and served an apprenticeship with an established designer. But since he set out on his own in 1988, he’s challenged the conventional wisdom, evangelizing for values — affordability, playability, sustainability and especially enjoyability — that the industry has only recently welcomed.

“I’ve always been willing to go in different directions,” he said, “and I look at things from different angles.”

Talk about different angles: Richardson floated the idea of a par-2 hole nearly two decades ago and then created one at his Short Course at Mountain Shadows. Years ago, he published a little book, “Course Brains,” to help owners accurately evaluate their properties and maximize their resources. Today he’s advocating a new way of measuring success in golf operations, with metrics such as cost per yard and revenue per yard that put courses of all types on an equal footing.

“You’d be surprised at how the numbers turn out,” he said.

We’d also be surprised if we had to wait long for Richardson’s next idea that golf isn’t ready to accept.



Scott Campbell
The Retreat, Links
& Spa at Silvie
Valley Ranch
Seneca, Ore.

Outsiders see things differently. That’s part of the reason why Campbell, a retired veterinarian and a complete golf neophyte, was willing to risk part of his fortune on