

David Gould | MONOLOGUE

# He Got Back 10 for 1

**R**ight hand gripping the shifter of a battered Jeep Willys, left hand tight on the wheel, young Dick Grout would criss-cross his father's range at La Gorce Country Club in Miami Beach aiming a makeshift scoop at Dad's black-striped range balls. Dust billowed behind the boy in summer and mud puddles hid his balata harvest after a rain.

When the balls were all picked they would be cleaned in an old clothes washer in back of the golf shop, which must have sounded thunderous in the spin cycle. "You had to throw rags in there to keep the balls from getting scraped up too bad," recalls Dick, now 51 and a golf professional at The Cliffs, near Greenville, S.C. He and I were warming up on an ultra-modern practice facility at the Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards, talking about driving-range innovations devised by his father, the distinguished pro and teacher Jack Grout. Most of these inventions dated to the 1950s and Scioto Country Club in Columbus, Ohio, where the elder Grout's lifelong mentorship of Jack Nicklaus had begun.

"You wouldn't think of a Jack Nicklaus starting out in junior golf and not having a place to hone his swing," reflects Dick, but in fact Nicklaus came along at a serendipitous time. Jack Grout was there just in time—part of a vanguard of teaching pros who helped upgrade the golf practice facility from a scruffy field where only a few members could hit balls and schoolboy shaggers had to chase down every shot. These days a clean, full-service place to practice is a refuge we take for granted. We ought to thank the dedicated teachers of the mid-20th century for hand-building the infrastructure that made real learning possible.

"You couldn't just order range balls back then, either," Dick remembers, "so Dad figured out a way to keep up his supply. He would trade the members one brand new ball for 10 of their used balls. Ten for one—and he was picky. He wouldn't take any ball that was too nicked up.

"And the members, who were generally wealthy individuals, they would jump at the chance to make this deal, which Dad always marveled at." Grout even had a homemade striping device in his back room, consisting of a tube that fed balls into a pincher, which in turn held each ball against a narrow applicator moistened with black paint. Scioto members paid 50 cents for a small bucket, \$1.25 for a large. "Before we striped them, Dad would say, 'Dickie boy, go back into my shag barrel and dig yourself out some real pearls.'"

The first driving range in the U.S. is credited to Pinehurst Resort and went by the name Maniac Hill. The term has always amused people but it's also mildly regrettable, somehow associating golf practice with a deluded desperation. I would rather think of the practice grounds as a place where the golfer can stand on one spot and take a journey at the same time—from one thought or idea about the golf swing to another, from this move or feeling to the next move or feeling.

We do need guides for this journey, and the Jack Grouts with their Yan-

kee ingenuity filled that role. One of these instructors must have shown up for work one day and hand-dug the first practice bunker. One thought to build covered hitting bays. Yet another devised the first range plan, letting members who lusted for improvement to pay up-front for a full season of ball-beating.



**The instructors who care about every student are the ones who find and train that one great champion.**

The motivation is always the same—to see flashes of excellence emerge from the devoted ground. The teacher starts out wanting to be a great player, then one day re-channels that ambition into teaching. Conscious or not, the search begins for a protégé, but it's the teachers who take no student for granted who, I believe, are most likely to come across that proverbial one great talent that gives their career distinction.

Jack Grout spent the 1950s at Scioto nurturing "Jackie Boy" Nicklaus (as the pro always called him) and waiting for his own son, Dick, who showed promise, to grow into some greatness of his own. Other than prodigious length off the tee, Dick never displayed the traits of anything but a decent tournament golfer. For that reason, he looks back now and savors the summer days spent in his father's world, listening to grownup conversation, trying this or that swing technique, scooping up 10-for-ones in the Jeep.

Meanwhile golf history had begun to unfold in the person of Nicklaus, who was a dozen years older than Dick Grout and already the golfer whose development under Jack Grout would define the pro's teaching career.

To think that the way things turned out cast no shadow across Dick's path would be naïve, and when his father lay dying, Dick drew up the strength to address it.

"I was holding his hand," Dick recalls, "and I said to him, 'Dad, we both worked so hard to bring out my best as a player, and it didn't work out the way we wanted. I just want to say I'm sorry I never became the player you wanted me to be.'"

"He looked at me and said, 'Dickie, it's OK. You were a good player, and you were a good boy, and that's just fine with me.'"

We were standing on a tee box on the back nine by now. It was Dick's turn to hit but his driver was still in the bag and his gaze was steady on a treeline above the fairway. "Whew, I'll tell you . . ." he said. "His words took the weight right off my shoulders. I told him, 'Thanks, Dad. Thank you for saying that.'"