

Craig Dolch: College's students get into swing of things

By Craig Dolch

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PORT ST. LUCIE — Jason Gitel had spent the last three years as a bartender in St. Louis when the 24-year-old decided he would like to be hitting shots instead of serving them.

Fort Pierce resident Jesse Dake was approaching 60 when he decided to take a mulligan on his career in construction and concentrate on building the perfect golf club. Fortunately for Dake, he didn't have to travel far for his midlife career change when the Keiser University College of Golf opened about 20 miles away from his home in 2010.

"I always wanted to do something like this, but I didn't think it was possible until this school opened," Dake said this week. "I talked to them on Dec. 15, 2009, and was in the first class they ever had here in January of 2010."

Dake, among the first graduating class in mid-2011, now helps run the club-fitting and repair lab at Keiser's College of Golf, a daily reminder of how quickly graduates can get up to speed in the golf industry.

"This worked out great for me," Dake said. "Construction has always been boom or bust, and I couldn't have done this much longer. This is something I can do right up until the bitter end. I've always loved golf.

"And the air-conditioning isn't bad, either."

Gitel still hasn't decided what career he wants to pursue in golf. He just knew he was looking for a change when he had a heart-to-heart talk with one of his close friends in St. Louis last summer.

"My buddy was telling me, 'Look, I know you're not really happy with what you're doing, so why don't you look into doing something with golf?'" Gitel said

Gitel had the typical reaction: "What do you mean golf? I'm not going to be a PGA Tour player.

"My buddy said, 'Golf is a large industry. You could become a teaching pro, an architect, someone who manages golf courses or go into food and beverage. There's a lot of options.' "

Within a month, Gitel visited the College of Golf and signed up, starting in August. He's leaning toward becoming a teaching pro, but has another year left before graduation to decide.

"Who knows? Maybe I find course design is something I really like," Gitel said. "I think with this university, you have to go into it with an open mind."

Yes, things are changing in the golf business, almost as rapidly as they are in every other line of work these days.

No longer does someone have to spend years working in a pro shop or on the practice tee to become a teaching pro. Or a greenskeeper. Or a club-fitter. Or an equipment sales rep.

Students can earn a golf degree at Keiser's College of Golf in 16 months, much faster than someone can through the PGA of America's Golf Management University Program, which is available at 20 major universities.

While graduates from Keiser's College of Golf don't leave with full PGA membership status — they will have six credits toward earning their Class A membership — they can move quicker into their new jobs.

"They can still become PGA certified after they graduate, but it won't take them five years like it does through the PGA's program," said Dr. Eric Wilson, the school's executive director of golf operations. "Our students are just taking a different route to get there."

Keiser's College of Golf has several built-in advantages:

It's part of a regionally-accredited university that has been in business since 1977, when Arthur and Evelyn Keiser founded it in Fort Lauderdale.

Its location on the Treasure Coast — Wednesday's high temperature of 79 was about 40 degrees warmer than St. Louis, for instance.

Technology that includes a 20,000-square-foot practice facility, a 1,500-square-foot indoor putting green, a launch monitor, TaylorMade's MAT-T swing analysis system, an interactive golf simulator that allows students to play almost any course in the world and the club repair lab.

Each student also gets access to the PGA Learning and Training Center across I-95 at the PGA Golf Club, where they also get to play the three courses. This week, a student got to play a round using hickory clubs.

A faculty that includes top 100 teacher Dr. T.J. Tomasi, PGA Master Professionals such as Brian Hughes, David Wixson and Wilson, and three-time LPGA Tour winner Donna White.

"If you want to be immersed in golf, this is where you want to be," said John Callahan, an instructor at the school who actually gave Tomasi his first lesson. "I wish they had something like this when I was 25 years old."

The education isn't cheap. Gitel says his tuition will cost about \$36,000, which is a lot of tips for an ex-bartender.

"Anything's a risk in life," Gitel said. "I just look at the quality of the teachers and the technology here and I know I made the right choice."

The school's admissions director, Ron Lewis, said there have been about 100 graduates from the College of Golf so far. He estimates the job-placement percentage at 85.

"The vast majority are starting out as assistant pros," Lewis said.

That's what made the lesson Gitel took this week from Callahan even more important. Gitel isn't just learning how to play the game better, but also how to be able to teach the game to others.

"I'm not only giving him information to help his game, but also to relate it to the courses he's taking," Callahan said. "Like I said earlier, I sure wish they had something like this when I was younger."

Don't we all?

Craig Dolch is a correspondent for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers with more than 30 years golf writing experience.

KEISER UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF GOLF

Where: Port St. Lucie.

When: Established in 2010.

What: A 16-month program to help students enter the golf industry, either as a teaching pro, course architect, greens-keeper, club repairman, golf-course operator, salesman or food and beverage.

Who: Admissions director Ron Lewis said the school has about 160 students, with 110 having graduated so far with an 85 percent job-placement average. Students come from 46 states in the U.S., along with Poland, South Korea, Brazil, Canada, Argentina, Ecuador and the United Kingdom.

Curriculum

Here are the 15 golf-related classes offered:

Traditions of Golf: History and Culture

Golf Swing Fundamentals

Short Game Fundamentals

The Mental Approach to Golf

Fundamentals of Golf Instruction

Golf Club Fitting and Repair

Rules of Golf

Retail Management in Golf Operations

Tournament Operations

Golf Course Design

Golf Course Maintenance & Turf Management

Advanced Golf Instruction

Strategic Management in Golf Operations

Food and Beverage Services

The Business of Golf (Capstone)

