

the teaching legacy of the LPGA's Ellen Griffin

BY LISA D. MICKEY

Down ON THE Farm

Anyone who has ever taken a group golf lesson may thank the late Ellen Griffin. Teachers who have used instructional manuals in college golf classes may also thank Griffin, who helped pen some of the earliest educational golf literature. And although the teaching facility called The Farm, located just outside Greensboro, NC, is still a thriving memorial to its founder, Griffin's greatest legacy is embodied in the vast number of golf schools that have been established throughout the nation, the quality of teaching professionals who have followed in her footsteps, and the countless students who learned their basics from the small woman with a giant spirit.

Considered by many the pioneer of large group instruction, Griffin developed her skills for teaching golf at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), where she taught physical education for 28 years. The 1962 LPGA Teacher of the Year and among the first LPGA Master Professionals named in 1978, Griffin helped write a number of golf instruction manuals, including the textbook *Golf Manual For Teachers*, which she co-authored with LPGA founding member Betty Hicks in the 1950s. In 1962, she created the National Golf Foundation's (NGF) Educational Services Program. Later, taking a leave of absence from the university, she toured the nation—mostly at her own expense—giving lectures and clinics to other educators who taught golf.

In the late 1950s, Griffin was busy sharing her ideas with such players as Peggy Kirk Bell, who in 1953 bought Pine Needles GC in Southern Pines, NC, with her late husband Warren Bell. Bell, two-time Curtis Cup team member (1948 and 1950), was an accomplished amateur player who knew little about teaching at that time. But by the time Griffin had finished with her, Bell had adopted the idea of

setting up a golf school for women at her course. With Griffin's guidance, she became a proficient



golf instructor and was filling up her golf schools at Pine Needles as fast as she could print advertising brochures. Women, Bell discovered, were hungry to learn the game and were especially receptive to instruction by other women who understood their perspectives of playing golf.

"Ellen was the one who said there's a real vacuum for women teaching women how to play golf," says 70-year-old Bell, who lists among her victories as a player the 1949 Titleholders Championship and the 1947 International Four-Ball championship with the legendary Babe Zaharias. An LPGA Master Professional since 1978, Bell was the 1961 LPGA Teacher of the Year. "Ellen is also the one who directed me into teaching. She'd come to some of the tournaments I was playing and she'd always say that when I was in their area, I should come by and help put on a clinic."

Bell believes that their earliest golf schools during the mid-to-late 1950s were the nation's "first real golf schools." She and Griffin were among the nation's first instructors to film students' golf swings. Bell also credits Griffin with pioneering

practice drills and instructional loop films, precursors of today's golf videos.

In 1968, Griffin left her post at UNCG to open her own teaching facility, which she aptly named The Farm. Mary Beth McGirr, an LPGA Class A Teaching professional who now runs The Farm and coaches the women's golf team at UNCG, learned her own teaching paces at Griffin's side as a graduate student at UNCG. She remembers how Griffin would make excuses to go inside her *Tee House* (office and shop) to allow her apprentice a chance to teach solo.

"She did it quickly and spontaneously, but never before you were ready," says McGirr. "And, with the students, she always got on their level, whatever that level was. She was way ahead of her time."

Anyone who ever had the privilege of learning golf or refining their skills under Griffin's eye would say that her wisdom made the lesson unique. She would stand back and watch, hands thrust into ever-present pockets, carefully scrutinizing the good, the bad and the often ugly shots that frequently scattered the peacocks strutting in the far reaches of her practice range. Griffin once said that she might forget a face, but never a golf swing.

Beyond Golf's Mechanics

Barn cats, peafowl, and guinea hens were frequent visitors for lessons and clinics. To Griffin's patrons, The Farm's ambiance was far less intimidating than a crowded driving range. It was a quiet learning environment that reflected Griffin's own personality. She had turned an actual farm into a rural golf

instructional facility, tossed out the stones from the Carolina clay by hand, and sowed acres of grass on which to teach students the rudiments of golf. But even with the changing civilization of her Farm, Griffin's animals were still always welcome. When her creatures ventured too close to lessons in progress, she gently shooed them away with an 8-iron, never missing a beat in her lesson delivery.

While teaching was both great fun and serious business for Griffin, her students—who ranged from grassroots beginners to professional tour players—found learning a surprisingly easy by-product of time spent with their teacher. She taught by positive reinforcement. She never gave her students answers, but instead demanded they explore and learn aspects of the game on their own.

"She gave you the keys and worked with qualities of the swing, not just mechanics," says Dot Germain a veteran LPGA touring and teaching professional who inherited The Farm following Griffin's death in 1986. "She'd never overload students with too many things. She could get results and keep things simple with very few words. That's how good she was."

But perhaps more importantly, Germain adds, Griffin's lessons maintained a distinct personal approach throughout her teaching career. "Golf was her subject matter, but she taught people. For Ellen, the frustrations of golf were always overcome by fun. Even gathering up balls from the range was an excuse for a chipping contest, and picking up balls from the green invited her favorite, a putting competition."

Griffin's tools were sharp. While swing mechanics comprised her basics, she never locked in to one method of teaching. She was creative and believed that every player's swing was different. At NGF conventions, she relished the times when she could clear an entire hotel ballroom to conduct a group lesson with several hundred persons under a chandelier ceiling. In more humble settings, she would set up contests in her Saturday golf clinics at The Farm and challenge her students to perform particular shots for prizes. Sometimes she would summon one of her student professionals, such as Germain, Debbie Masses, or Dianne Dailey, from a nearby practice session to show the amateur students just how the shot should look. She enjoyed putting them on the spot, and they typically responded to her liking.

"She was a genius with groups," adds Germain, who hasn't played on the LPGA Tour since 1989 because of chronic fatigue syndrome. "She was like a conductor leading an orchestra."

Germain began her own apprenticeship with Griffin during graduate school at UNCG and joined the LPGA Tour in 1974. She worked with Griffin as a player as well as a fledgling teacher, and it was Griffin who encouraged Germain to play the tour.

Massey began taking lessons from Griffin in 1982 when she would go to The Farm and spend several days at a time working on her game. Griffin constantly guided Massey, a skier-turned-golfer, back to the basics: posture, balance, and timing. As much as she feared Massey's hell-bent penchant for downhill skiing, she frequently used examples from that sport to clarify for Massey particular aspects of balance and footwork in golf.

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“She had such an unbelievable understanding of people and knew how to get to them in a way they could understand,” says Massey, who is now in her 16th LPGA Tour season. “My times of discipline with her were fundamental to my becoming a shotmaker. She gave me the ability to draw on things and fix myself when I get in trouble with my game. And she helped me become a lasting player, one who can laugh at myself and keep it fun. She was simply the greatest teacher I’ve ever had.”

Even after Massey had won on the LPGA Tour and proved herself a successful and proficient player, Griffin treated her much like she treated her other students. Her encouragement and compliments were subtle but sincere. “She used to tell me to go out there and try to be average,” says Massey. “She never said I was a great player. She just dared me. It was the greatest compliment I ever received.”

Teaching is Delivering Yourself

Even when Griffin’s health took a turn for the worse, she managed to teach a final lesson from her hospital bed. Germain and Massey spent several days by her side taking notes on legal pads as she talked about teaching. Only a month earlier, she had greeted her friend Peggy Bell at The Farm with plans to organize an international teaching exchange between Gleneagles in Scotland and Pine Needles in North Carolina.

“Within a year after suffering a stroke, she was trying hard to learn Spanish. And later, after months of being in the hospital and not able to eat solid food, she was planning gourmet meals which she could only hope to nibble,” says her nephew, Charles Griffin III, of Washington, DC.

Ellen Griffin died at age 67 of complications from Crohn’s Disease. She’d had 16 surgeries, bouts with cancer and several strokes, but somehow always managed to hide her pain. Typical of her humor was the time she had revived from a stroke and her brother Charles, a physician, informed her what had happened, She quickly replied, “A stroke? Did you count it?”

Griffin’s spirit was matched only by her heart. She gave away more equipment than she sold. When she sold equipment, it was only after she had determined the student was ready for it, and new clubs came with a free lesson and maybe a golf ball that had seen action on the LPGA Tour. She took juniors under her wing and taught them more than swing mechanics and shotmaking. She made struggling seniors feel important. Most of all, she always gave her students the opportunity to enjoy the game.

“Many times she’d be teaching about golf, but you knew she was really teaching about life,” says McGirr. “Golf was just her form of expression.”

Griffin’s contribution to the teaching of golf was formally saluted in 1970 when she became the first recipient of the Joe Graffis Award, which is named after the co-founder of the National Golf Foundation and “honors individuals who demonstrate outstanding service and dedication to the educational advancement of golf.” The LPGA Teaching Division has named its highest annual honor in her memory. Appropriately, Peggy Bell was the first recipient of the Ellen Griffin Rolex Award in 1989. The 1991 LPGA Teaching Division Championship, held last fall at Bell’s Pine Needles Resort, honored both Bell and Griffin.



“She was just a great gal,” says Bell. “When they gave me the Ellen Griffin Award and presented me with a Rolex watch, I thought that Ellen Griffin would probably be the last person in the world to wear a fancy watch. But it means a lot to me to have her name on the back of this watch, because she gave so much to me and to the game.”

Perhaps her own words, written 21 years ago in a gift book of verse for friends, best describe the teacher and character in Ellen Griffin, a renowned wearer of old hats, teller of old jokes, and lover of nature, homegrown vegetables, animals, and children. “Some people deliver lectures, sermons, or speeches,” she wrote, “but the ones you remember are those who deliver themselves.” □