

The Professor Speaks

As Ben Hogan once did, Greg Hopkins lifted himself from a hungry and struggling touring pro, sleeping in his car, to an international CEO of a prominent golf equipment company.

By Mark Pazdur, Publisher

HUNTINGTON BEACH, CALIFORNIA: There are only two CEOs in golf's history who actively ran a golf equipment company and competed in the majors. This prestigious "club of two" belongs to the legendary Ben Hogan and Greg Hopkins, current CEO of Cleveland Golf.

"It is surreal," shied Greg Hopkins, "to have something in common with Mr. Hogan. I don't feel I should be mentioned in the same sentence with Hogan."



Greg Hopkins, CEO
Cleveland Golf Company

Nevertheless, the pride in being able to say it and having actually done it still took some breath out of him as we sat in his spacious, corner office for a two-part interview.

Hopkins was patient and considerate during the entire interview which, unexpectedly, took three hours. He was gentlemanly, polite, animated, outspoken, fielded every professional and personal question—and made me feel welcome. I'm certain his success and well-bred demeanor was destined by birth in

the Midwest and by enterprising parents. He was born in Decatur, Illinois, his dad designed and built agricultural factories, and his mom was a homemaker.

"While Dad was busy helping 'feed the world,' Mom had the toughest job in town chasing around five very active kids," remembered Hopkins.

"Baseball was my sport and shortstop was my position," he chuckled. "I was flown up to Minnesota to be evaluated by the Twins. I was good enough to get a look-see, but not good enough to get signed.

"I didn't get interested in golf until well into Lincoln College in Illinois. I was living in the athletic dorm when a teammate took me to the baseball field to hit a shag-bag of golf balls. Yes, golf balls—not baseballs," laughed Hopkins. "I hit those golf balls

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a mile. It was easy and fun," said Hopkins, warmly reminiscing it. "That's when I instantly fell in love with this silly sport."

SORRY, MOM, TEACHING WAS NOT HIS GAME

Hopkins earned a degree in education, got a teaching job, and at the age of 24, quit teaching to become a touring and club pro.

"My parents thought I was a knucklehead. I remember Mom saying: 'How are you going to make a living? How do you stack up against Nicklaus and Palmer?'"

Recalling that day made him turn thoughtful and somewhat solemn. "Looking back," he said, "there is some irony in Mom's questions. As it turned out, I made a pretty good living in golf, just not the way I originally envisioned it."

THE WAKE-UP CALL

Hopkins' eyes sparkled and his voice turned lighthearted when our conversation focused on his mini-tour career.

"I played the mini tours down south," he said, "and competed



Cleveland Golf's CEO Greg Hopkins, left, talks with Executive Golfer's publisher, Mark Pazdur, at Cleveland's headquarters in Huntington Beach, California.

in state opens to hone my game. Competition was tough. I was up against some of the best up-and-comers. It was not uncommon for me to be head-to-head with Bob Tway or Hal Sutton.

"I was earning a couple of decent paychecks and paying the bills, but," he sighed, "it was a struggle and money was tight I tried to 'live the dream.'"

Four years later, Hopkins had a wake-up call. His wife was pregnant and their first son, Chris, was on the way.

"I was playing in the North Florida PGA in Ocala," groused Hopkins, "and I slept in my car to save the cost of a hotel room. I was a particularly cold night and I woke up almost frozen. I realized, with Chris about to be born, I had to have a more sta-

“Greg’s success is a great example of putting the right person in the right job. Both he and his company have blossomed since he took the reins. We have enjoyed an excellent relationship with him and Cleveland Golf for years.” — Dick Rugge, Sr. Technical Director, USGA

ble income and lifestyle to support my family. I started the car, drove back to Decatur, and never finished the tournament, even though I was in contention.”

His voice softened. “I remember turning the key in the ignition to start the car ride home like it was yesterday. It was like an alcoholic recalling his last drink. I remember it was my last shot at my dream,” said Hopkins.

A FORTUITOUS COCKTAIL

While playing the competitive circuit, Hopkins met Gary Adams, the father of metal woods, and Eddie Langert at a cocktail reception during the 1982 Illinois State Open. Adams and Langert had just started TaylorMade. In 1986, after a friendly round of golf with Langert, Hopkins was offered a customer service job at the company.

“We were growing rapidly,” said Hopkins. “After only three weeks in customer service, I switched positions to become TaylorMade’s sales rep for Arizona and ultimately became the national sales manager.”

In 1997, Hopkins received a surprising phone call from the CEO of Rossignol, the world’s largest ski manufacturer and parent company of Cleveland Golf. The offer? To become the CEO and save Cleveland Golf!

Cleveland Golf Company was in shambles. It had



Hopkins (left) has completed a lifelong dream by competing in the 2006 Senior British Open at Turnberry in Scotland and the 2008 Senior PGA Championship at Oakhill CC in Pennsylvania.



Cleveland Golf’s 2011 lineup is strong. It has debuted the new CG-16 wedges with game improvement weighting characteristics and Launcher Drivers with its “right weight system.” Srixon, considered by Hopkins as the “best kept secret in golf,” has introduced its Z-Star series of golf balls which features the thinnest golf ball cover in the game, allowing the company to manipulate its core size to maximize distance and control. Never Compromise, after a quiet couple of years, has unveiled its Gambler putters, which Hopkins considers the “Stradivarius of putters in golf.” (Right) Greg Hopkins, left, with SRI President Hiroyuki Bamba at the 2008 shareholders meeting in Japan. Hopkins has earned the nickname “The Professor” while training and educating the company’s staff members around the world.

\$28 million in revenue and was \$6 million in the red. Hopkins flew to France and met with the Rossignol board. He boldly requested \$7 million for R&D, customer service, and sales support; and projected Cleveland Golf would be a profitable \$100 million enterprise within five years.

“In my fifth year at the helm, we did about \$110 million,” proudly exclaimed Hopkins.

“Congratulations—that’s \$10 million more than you projected. How did you manage it?”

“We worked on so many things,” replied Hopkins “We revamped our whole product line, took a different philosophy on Tour exposure, improved our vendor relationships, and launched a completely different marketing message to consumers. But,” added Hopkins, “the most critical thing we did was to make the wedge important. At the time, all manufacturers considered the wedge to simply be just another club in a set of irons. We felt differently. The wedge is as important a tool in your bag as your putter or driver. In 1997, we had 15 percent wedge market share. By 2002, we had 30 percent and continue to maintain 30 percent today,” said Hopkins with deep pleasure.

QUICKSILVER STEPS INTO THE PICTURE

Much to Hopkin’s chagrin, Rossignol was purchased by Quicksilver in 2005. “Quicksilver is a great company and has wonderful people. That being said, golf and surfing couldn’t have a more different business approach,” explained Hopkins. “Quicksilver purchased Rossignol for its ski franchise, not for Cleveland Golf. There were no synergies and it made no sense for Quicksilver to be in the



Greg Hopkins with Lee Trevino at the 2008 Toshiba Classic at Newport Beach Country Club, California. (Right) Hopkins caddied for Vijay Singh at the 2009 Dunlop Phoenix Open in Miyazaki, Japan.



“Greg is a very competitive player and he wants to do well in whatever he does, especially golf. I know that he loves the game very dearly. Greg is not only the CEO of my equipment company, but he is also a good friend.” — Vijay Singh

golf marketplace. After only two years, it was public knowledge that Cleveland was up for sale.

“Our current owner since 2007, SRI Sports, based in Japan, is everything Quicksilver wasn’t as a merger partner. SRI Sports [part of Sumitomo Rubber Industries] has the No. 1 club and No. 2 ball franchise in Japan, but had a weak international presence—particularly in North America. We are a nice fit geographically. Cleveland is strong in the U.S., South Africa, and continental Europe, while SRI is strong in Asia and the United Kingdom.”

Today, Hopkins oversees three brands: Cleveland Golf, Srixon, and Never Compromise putters. The Huntington Beach headquarters staffs 350 employees, maintains five satellite offices around the world, and receives a little more than one-third of the company’s revenue from the wedge category.

“Probably the toughest part of my job is the significant international travel I do. I go to Japan once per month and occasionally have to visit our teams in Johannesburg, South Africa; Sydney, Australia; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and London, England. I do enjoy training and educating our staff around the world. I have earned the nickname ‘The Professor’ in Tokyo.”

WHAT IS THE HEALTH OF THE GAME?

When I asked Hopkins how the game was fairing, he was quick to answer. “You have to ask, how is golf fairing in each part of the world,” said Hopkins. “Germany and Korea are strong, the United Kingdom is struggling, and Canada and Australia are steady markets. The U.S. market is in recovery mode and Japan is of great concern. Even before its catastrophic disaster, Japan was a shrinking market. The population is aging and people are playing less golf.”

“What about China?” I inquired.

“China is quite interesting. There is no middle class to support the game, but, with golf being named an Olympic competition, the government is investing heavily in the sport. China is willing to spend the dollars to chase the gold medal. In 15 years, China will be the largest golf market in the world,” boldly predicted Hopkins.

IS THE USGA BEHIND THE CURVE?

Hopkins is outspoken about the United States Golf Association (USGA). His comments over the years have earned praise and distain. He does not mince words on how, in his view, the USGA fell asleep at the switch.

“The USGA let technology ‘get away from them.’ In the 1980s and 1990s, all the major golf manufacturers had brighter engineers and better testing equipment. Breakthroughs in technology let consumers gain 20 to 30 yards in distance. Now, to save face, the USGA wants to dictate rules that may affect 200 of the world’s greatest golfers. I know this might be an over exaggeration, but I believe they would be content to have us go back to playing gutta percha balls and clubs with hickory shafts,” groused Hopkins.

“The USGA says it is trying to work with manufacturers to find a middle ground, but in my opinion, they are inflexible to compromise. In some way, they are just providing lip service. Fortunately, there are limits on their ability to roll back technology. Because of legal issues—and believe me, the lawyers would have a field day with this—the USGA has to be very careful on equipment rule changes,” opined Hopkins.

“I believe in the USGA and I support the rules of the game, but those rules must be appropriate for our gen-

“Greg is a very positive individual with a forward looking perspective. These attributes have obviously proven to be great assets both on and off the course.”

— Andy Stubbs, Managing Director, PGA European Senior Tour

eration. They must abandon their 1950s' mindset. If they have their way, the game could continue to decline in participation. I don't think the USGA has a clear vision," grumbled Hopkins. "They have the responsibility to grow the game, not stifle it!"

"The USGA," said Dick Rugge, senior technical director of the USGA, "tries to find ways to carry out our responsibility to maintain the challenge of the game with consideration for the needs of golfers and the equipment industry. But, like a baseball umpire's last decision, the USGA's relationship with any equipment manufacturer is usually only as good as our last conformance ruling."

"I've known Greg for 20 years. His success is a great example of putting the right person in the right job. Both he and his company have blossomed since he took the reins. We have enjoyed an excellent relationship with him and Cleveland Golf for years."

THE IMPORTANCE OF TOUR VALIDATION

I asked Hopkins, "How can you justify the endorsement money on Tour?" His answer was quick and candid.

"The major golf equipment companies have different goals. Titleist, TaylorMade, and Callaway have to protect their turf. So, they tout the number of players who play their brand. Cleveland Golf has gone in a slightly different direction," explained Hopkins. "We decided to sign fewer, big name players. Our Tour staff includes Vijay Singh, Graeme McDowell, David Toms, and Boo Weekley. Having our logo on Tour players' headwear and bags is important, but for separate reasons. Our logo on the player's bag gives us impactful exposure to two million spectators at tournaments

throughout the year. Headwear exposure provides enormous visibility in television, print, and website coverage."

GREG'S GOLF TIP AND PREDICTIONS

"I know this may sound a little self-serving, but it is essential to practice your chipping as much as your putting or pounding your driver on the range. Your short game has more to do with your putting than you realize. If you can recover and chip the ball within six feet of the hole, you have a greater chance to save par. Even on a good day, the best Tour players only hit 14 out of 18 greens. You can't expect to reach your ultimate potential without a good, short game," preached Hopkins.

"It is going to be an exciting decade," said Hopkins. "No doubt, we will see changes. My predictions: Traditional golf clothing will quickly go out the window. Apparel will become much more relaxed, following trends in society."

"Gross advances in equipment technology will be more subtle. You'll see significantly lighter shafts, possibly approaching the 29 gram range."

"Tours around the world will become more connected. The best players will compete in 'world tour' events comprised of the majors in the U.S. and the big money events globally. The best players will follow the money trail."

"The LPGA will seize the opportunity to become the first truly global professional tour—and possibly change their name to reflect the global nature of the game," surmised Hopkins. ■

If you wish to contact Greg Hopkins, e-mail his assistant, Kristi Camier, at KristiCamier@ClevelandGolf.com.



(Left) Hopkins is currently working on earning his private pilot's license. (Center, circa 1987) Greg Hopkins, (back row, center) with his parents, Jo and David Hopkins (seated), and siblings, from left, Judy McNeil, Randy and David Hopkins, and Lisa Prosser. (Above inset) A young, toothless Greg Hopkins. (Right) Greg Hopkins' first sport was baseball, playing shortstop for Lincoln College in Illinois.