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A vest for success

N.H. company helps students get swing in order



Sensors placed at the top and bottom of the spine and on the glove hand combine to give golfers feedback on swing sequence and body movement. (courtesy photo)

By Jim McCabe, Globe Staff | May 24, 2007

BEDFORD, N.H. -- Green is good. Red is trouble. If you prefer music, that, too, can warn you your golf swing is headed in the wrong direction.

Welcome to a new era of instruction, one that is heavy on technology -- the wireless kind, of course -- but still true to age-old principles of good posture, good balance, good tempo. It's called the K-Vest and since its arrival on the golf scene in 2006, it has been greeted with much fanfare from some of the game's most distinguished teachers and celebrated players.

"It's by far the coolest technology I've ever seen as far as the golf swing goes," said Charles Howell, a two-time winner on the PGA Tour.

"This," said Tom Cavicchi of The Harmon Club in Rockland, "is where instruction is headed." If it is, then consider this quiet town just over the Massachusetts border a starting point for the future of golf instruction, because in a corner of a quiet industrial park sits Bentley Kinetics, Inc. The principals behind this company that specializes in motion analysis have spent thousands of hours fine-tuning the K-Vest and indoctrinating it into the golf landscape. They could fill your head with data, but there is a greater quest involved.

"We want to keep it so damn simple, because at the end of the day it's about the students," said Tony Morgan, who wears the title of director of marketing, but has a background as PGA professional.

This gives Morgan something in common with Mike Bentley, founder and chief technology officer of Bentley Kinetics, and John Scheffler, a sales representative for the K-Vest. Together, they are at the heart of this instructional aid.

"The K-Vest team is comprised of golf professionals," said Morgan. "We understand the teaching profession, but even more, we understand students."

The ones strapped into a vest in front of a monitor are the ones they feel they can help the most, however.

Howell had heard about the K-Vest from his former college coach, Mike Holder of Oklahoma State. Finally, the coach's passionate endorsements convinced the 27-year-old that he needed to visit New Hampshire and put on this contraption.

"And immediately," said Howell, who visited New Hampshire in May 2006, "I fell in love with the product."

Now Howell will never deny that he loves gadgets and a variety of swing aids, "but what I liked about this one was, it was complex, but at the same time it was really simple."

The vest comes attached with wireless sensors at the top of your spine, the bottom of your spine, and on your glove hand. When he put the vest on, Howell got instant feedback as to how his body was moving -- just by swinging the club and peering into a monitor. The sensors measure how much the hips open, how far the shoulders turn, and where the arms are at that most crucial point: impact.

When his motions were correct, Howell noticed on the computer screen that his body was a color green, but if he were to open the hips too much, it would go red. Same thing with the shoulders. He could also get immediate feedback on information that was crucial to him: At impact, what was his sequence, his timing, his speed?

All of this is where Bentley and his colleagues concede that things can get overwhelming. They'll point to charts on the wall that measure the kinetic progression of swings once made by Nick Faldo and Ernie Els, convoluted lines that followed their hips, shoulders, and arms from start to finish. Based upon interviews with hundred of swing coaches, Bentley works off the premise that the hips should open to a certain degree, whether it's 30 or 35 or 40 (depending on body size) and reach the impact point first, followed by the shoulders, then the arms. The K-Vest will measure a player's "swing performance" and report in which sequence the order occurred and measure timing and speed. If players aren't in synch -- that is, hips, shoulders, arms -- the K-Vest will tell them and thus can alterations be made to the swing.

"It's a such a wonderful tool in that respect," said Kelli Kostick of Brae Burn CC in West Newton, who just recently was named the New England PGA's Teacher of the Year for a second time. "It allows us to show [the student] and when you can show them it's 10 times more effective." What Kostick and Cavicchi like about the K-Vest is that the student can see on the computer screen -- thanks to the colors green and red -- how much their hips should open, while their shoulders should continue to turn and it's at this juncture that quite often the instructor has gotten his or her point across.

"When they can 'feel' what the move should be, then it helps sell fitness," said Kostick, who thinks this is a long time coming.

Athletes in other sports, she argues, have for years studied the best way to generate every ounce of power and strength from their bodies, but only recently has golf successfully tapped technology sources to convince players that stretching and working out should be part of a player's routine. "It's about time we got there," said Kostick.

Kostick, one could argue, is already "there." She's been certified by the folks at Bentley Kinetics to offer instruction using the K-Vest, all sides comfortable that she can translate the data and pass it on to the student.

Cavicchi is also certified, though he doesn't simply strap a student into the K-Vest and go to work.

"People have to be into [the technology]," he said, and Kostick agrees. "It's not for everyone," she said.

The thing is, they are finding more and more players who are "into" the technology, especially younger players who have never known life without computers and wireless capabilities. The Harmon Club is a haven for junior golfers and it's where Boston College's golf team trains. Cavicchi senses these young minds can really relate to the high-tech prowess of the K-Vest. "I can say something 20 times, but [when they see it] they understand it the first time," he said.

Morgan can relate, because that's how things happened for him a few years ago. He was a teaching professional at the Camelback Spa & Golf Resort in Scottsdale, Ariz., when he met Bentley.

At the time a teaching professional at the Okemo Mountain Resort in Vermont, Bentley had secured backing from Kodiak Venture Partners in Waltham and was on the road pitching the K-Vest to his fellow golf pros. That meant an Arizona audience with Morgan. "Within minutes," said Morgan, "I was captivated."

And within months, Morgan had accepted an offer to join Bentley in Vermont along with Scheffler, who grew up the son of a longtime head professional (John Scheffler of Eastward Ho! in Chatham) and had been teaching for years.

"But I must admit, I didn't know that day back at Camelback that the [K-Vest] vision would go this far," said Morgan.

He was referring to the dozens of college teams that use the K-Vest, to the roll call of heralded instructors -- most notably David Leadbetter and Chuck Cook -- who use it at their academies and schools, and to the growing list of teachers such as Cavicchi and Kostick who sing its praises. There are eight certified instructors in Massachusetts; a complete list can be obtained through the website, bentleykinetics.com.

There is also the potential for the K-Vest with other athletes, most notably baseball and hockey, sports in which so much energy is generated by proper hip turn and leg drive -- just like golf. "The best thing about it," said Howell, "is that no matter what parameters you want to teach, whether it's shoulder turn or hip turn, whatever it may be, all teachers love it because it's not a teaching aid that's locked into one theory so you can't use the product."■

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