

CHARACTER STUDY | COREY KILGANNON

Guiding Golfers to Rock Their Shots

TO find the head professional at the Marine Park Golf Course in Brooklyn, look for a flamboyant outfit of plaids and pastels, and follow the smoke.

You will most likely spot him over on the driving range, enjoying a cigar, bantering with players and fixing swings. He is Hunter Watkins, 41, and he mastered golf by playing the guitar.

A veteran of hard-core punk rock bands, Mr. Watkins turned to teaching golf 10 years ago after he tired of record deals falling through. But instead of leaving music behind, he used it as his basis for instruction.

"He's the punk golfer," said Andy Cichon, who plays bass for Billy Joel and Shania Twain, and takes lessons with Mr. Watkins.

"I had no tempo," he said, "and Hunter got me to think rhythm and tempo and bring my own inner song into my game. He got me breaking 80."

Then there are Mr. Watkins's non-musical students, like the mortgage broker from Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, a total beginner, who showed up Wednesday for his first golf lesson.

Mr. Watkins told the broker, Pavel Vaysman, 31, that a golf swing is "like a piece of music — you have a series of unfolding sequential events."

Mr. Vaysman said he was not a musician.

"Do you play the stereo?" Mr. Watkins asked. "Good, then you qualify."

Mr. Watkins's teaching persona veers between radio D.J. and philosophy professor. He mixes high concept and lowbrow humor with the delivery of an infomercial salesman pushing miracle mops. But just as in those commercials, the results seemed undeniable for Mr. Vaysman, who could barely make contact with the ball when he arrived.

Mr. Watkins spoke to him about swing rhythm, and explained that with longer clubs, the swing sweeps the ball off the ground and makes a brushing sound, while a swing with a shorter iron has a steeper attack and makes a thump as the club descends, slamming hard into the ball and the turf.

"You want to hear lot of bass," he said as Mr. Vaysman held a pitching wedge. "Adjust the equalizer. The one thing that is going to allow you to rock this shot is sound."

"Now show me right now that you are not the same guy you were five minutes ago," he said.



JULIE GLASSBERG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

PUNK PRO Hunter Watkins at Marine Park Golf Course, Brooklyn.

Mr. Vaysman obliged by hitting a series of impressive shots.

Mr. Watkins whooped it up behind him, perhaps more impressed with his teaching system than Mr. Vaysman's proficiency.

After that, Mr. Watkins walked down the practice range and stopped at Rick Simpkins, 32, of Ozone Park, Queens, a former arena football lineman who had a golf tee tucked behind his ear, a cheap cigar in his mouth and a bad slice going.

Mr. Watkins told him he was simply moving his feet too much during the swing. Immediately, Mr. Simpkins began hitting better.

"Forget the dancing, man," Mr. Watkins said. "No James Brown, no Fred Astaire, no Michael Jackson."

For his unorthodox counsel, Mr. Watkins, who lives with his wife and young daughter in Bay Ridge, charges \$100 an hour.

Growing up on the Outer Banks of North Carolina and also in Los Angeles, he played some youth golf but mostly the gui-

tar. He eventually opened a music rehearsal studio in Wilmington, N.C., and became golf buddies with Darryl Jenifer, the bassist of the punk band Bad Brains.

In 1995, Mr. Jenifer persuaded Mr. Watkins to move to New York City to play in one of his side projects, a band that wound up dissolving quickly. Mr. Watkins led the rocker life until his wife prevailed upon him in 2002 to change careers. He got a job as a pro at a New Jersey golf club. And with no real teaching experience, he quickly devised his musical theory of instruction.

"I realized that music and golf were the same song, that music was one of the purest ways to learn golf, and that I could turn people into virtuosos of golf," he said.

"The golf swing is like four measures of a song," he explained. "You have to play those measures in the same order every time if you want success, whether you're at CBGB's or at Carnegie Hall."

In 2008, Mr. Watkins became the head pro at Marine Park, just off the Belt Parkway. The newly renovated course has country club conditions but hardly a country club crowd, and Mr. Watkins seems to thrive off the diverse set of characters here.

On the practice range, his next student was Sharia Jones-Bey, an experienced player from Bayside, Queens. As she prepared an approach shot, the punk golfer urged her to use her inner rhythm and to get the right sound with her swing.

"C'mon, let's hear it," he said. "You're playing the Sharia jam."

THE PARTICULARS

NAME Hunter Watkins

AGE 41

WHERE HE'S FROM Kill Devil Hills, N.C.

WHAT HE IS Golf pro, punk rocker

TELLING DETAIL One client pays for lessons by helping Mr. Watkins record and produce his songs.

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