

# GolfTEC Nation

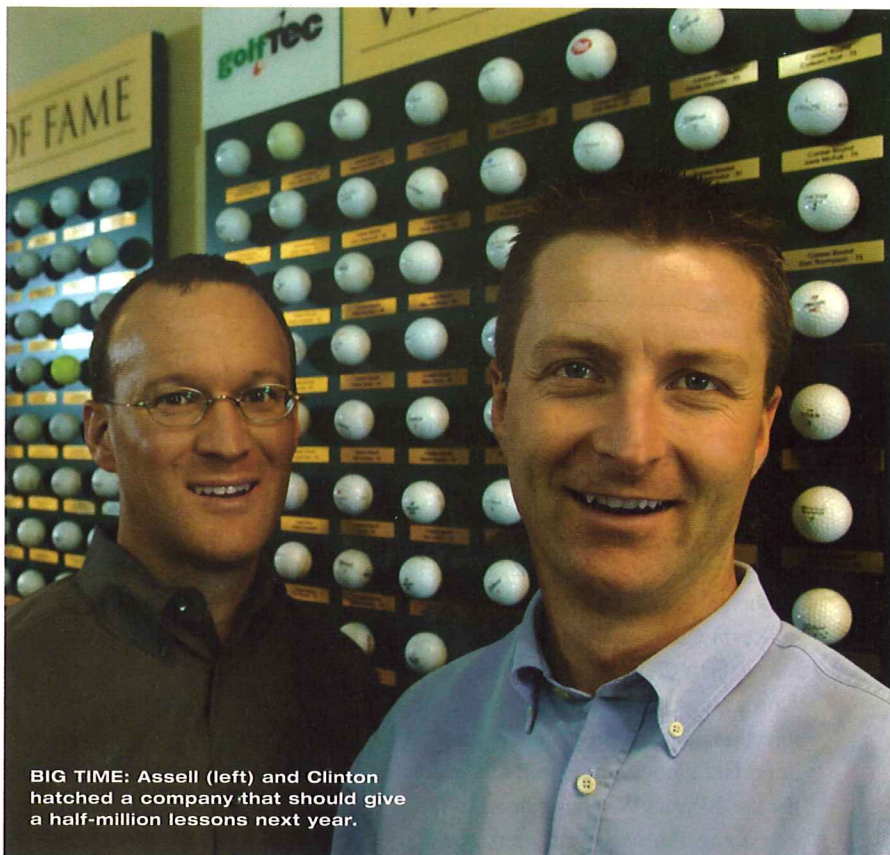
NOW ENTERING ITS 10TH YEAR, DENVER'S OWN HIGH-TECH GOLF INSTRUCTION COMPANY HAS 50 STORES ACROSS THE COUNTRY—AND AT LEAST ANOTHER 100 IN THE WORKS.

**BY MARY SCOTT  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARRY STAVER**

**L**AURIE MARVIN ARRIVES 10 minutes early at Denver's East Belleview GolfTEC learning center for her half-hour lesson with her long-time instructor, Ty Walker. She enters one of the several private bays, takes a few warm-up swings, then puts on a belt and shoulder harness equipped with sensors that feed information to a nearby computer. The bay also includes an impact-analysis monitor and synchronized digital video cameras showing both front and side views. Walker comes in and asks Marvin how her game is going and if there is anything in particular she wants to work on today. She responds that her iron shots have been jerking to the left and she's not getting the distance she wants.

Marvin hits some balls, and the computerized launch monitor reveals that her balls are fading to the left. Together, student and teacher check the video monitor and discover that her club face is too open when addressing the ball. Walker walks her through the proper swing and shows her a few drills that will help her keep her hands ahead of the ball, thereby allowing the ball to come off the club face at the proper angle. He then moves to the computer and inputs some key words and other information that Marvin can later access on the internet, along with the video of her swing and drills. Later in the week, Marvin will come in to work on her swing on her own, and in two weeks she'll return for another lesson with Walker. Her four years of lessons with him have paid off handsomely: Marvin's handicap has dropped from a 15 to a current six.

Although these are impressive results, they're not unique. Indeed,



**BIG TIME:** Assell (left) and Clinton hatched a company that should give a half-million lessons next year.

this is a scenario that's playing out at GolfTEC learning centers throughout the country. Since its 1997 founding, Englewood, Colorado-based GolfTEC now has 50 locations in 13 states. In 2004 the company propelled its growth into high gear by franchising. Forty new learning centers are opening this year, with another 68 contracted for the future. A handful of these new locations will be company-owned, with the majority being franchises.

GolfTEC's stats reveal the company's exploding impact on golf instruction. It employs 170 PGA teaching professionals, each of whom teaches an average of 2,000 lessons per year. Since its founding, GolfTEC has provided 625,000 lessons, including almost 150,000 in 2005, and will teach a projected 200,000 lessons in 2006 and 500,000 in 2007. Close to 90 percent of its students said their game improved, and even more rated their lessons as "good or great." Seventy percent of GolfTEC's clients come via referrals. Published reports indicate annual sales are now topping \$10 million, with a 50-percent growth rate during the last two years. The company anticipates 2006 growth to be up a whopping 100 percent. The company projects that by mid-2007, it will teach its one-millionth lesson since its inception, making it the market-share leader in U.S. golf instruction.

Today's numbers represent a vast leap from when the company was founded 10 years ago. Co-founders Joe Assell, 33, and Mike Clinton, 35, launched GolfTEC in 1997, having previously run an early video golf-instruction company, Driving Obsession. This fol-

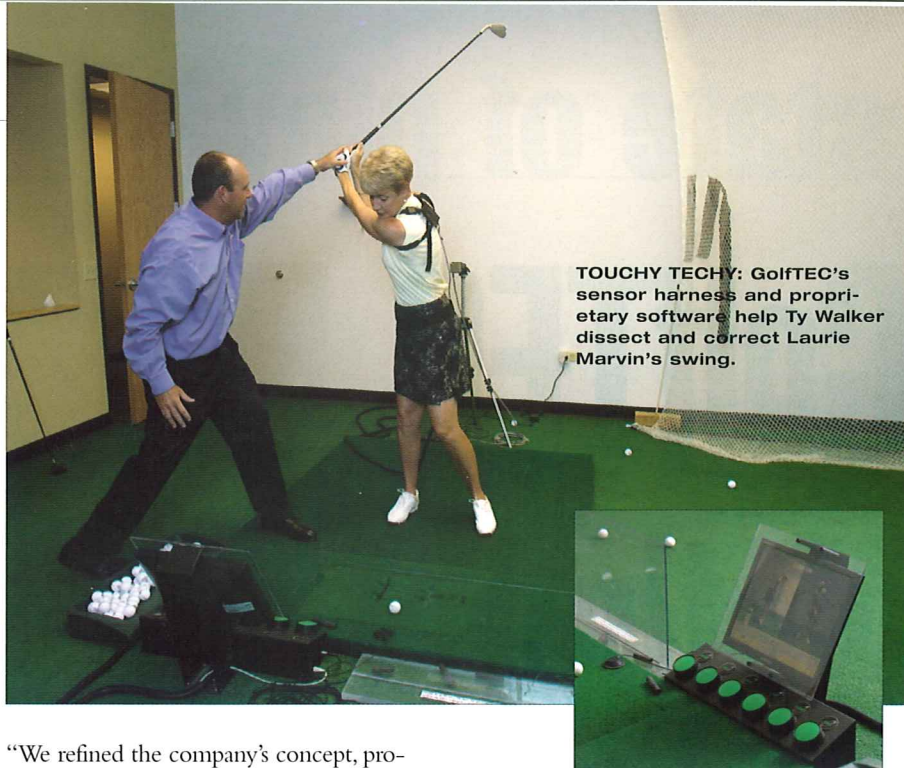
lowed a stint where both founders were assistant golf pros at Cherry Hills Country Club. Assell says there was a lot of hit-and-miss during the early days. "Back then the technology was pretty clumsy," he says. "We had one VCR, and we played back the tape on a television. We're 15 generations away technology-wise from when we started."

It was during those early days that Assell and Clinton discovered that although golf had been taught for more than 100 years, technology can vastly improve instruction. "We compare it to medicine," says Assell. "If a doctor eyeballs a patient, he can't really tell if you're healthy or not. However," he continues, "it's the blood-work, the MRI, the X-ray, etc., that allow doctors to diagnose a problem. Similarly, our use of technology allows us to better analyze a golfer's swing, discover the problem areas and help fix them."

Kevin Cabbage, a five-year GolfTEC instructor at the company's Cherry Creek North location, believes, "Video and the surrounding technology are the most important innovations in golf instruction in the last 20 years. Without video I can't see everything. But now, I can break down a client's swing and really focus on the problem areas."

During the company's nascent years Assell and Clinton, then recent graduates of Mississippi State University's PGA-PGM program, were busy giving lessons and mustering up ways to grow the company. They first reached out to friends and family members for funding, then eventually attracted outside investors. Now the company has the backing of several prominent Colorado-based investment firms, including Gart Capital Partners.

Co-founder Tom Gart, whose company also owns Colorado Ski & Golf, got to know GolfTEC well in 2000 when GolfTEC opened one bay in its Aurora learning center. "I took some lessons, and I was immediately hooked," says Gart. "It became immediately obvious that this kind of instruction is hugely beneficial." Soon his investment firm contributed funds, and Gart became GolfTEC's chairman of the board in 2003. "We immediately recognized that Joe and Mike were really capable individuals and had a great concept," says Gart.



**TOUCHY TECHY:** GolfTEC's sensor harness and proprietary software help Ty Walker dissect and correct Laurie Marvin's swing.

"We refined the company's concept, provided financial controls and helped with marketing and real estate. Once all the fundamentals were in place, we were prepared for rapid growth." Gart estimates that the U.S. market can accommodate about 300 GolfTEC stores. The company regularly receives inquiries regarding setting up international locations. "We've had calls from Latin America, Asia, etc. But we're focused only on the domestic market for now," says Gart.

Although video and its supplemental technology are common at golf facilities today, GolfTEC's founders, investors, teaching professionals and clients point to a combination of offerings that make GolfTEC an overall successful entity.

First is the use of the shoulder and hip sensors that measure the body's bending, tilting and rotation via the company's proprietary SEVA (Swing Element Video Analyzer) Pro Software. The client's data can be compared to those in GolfTEC's database of 150 Tour players with side-by-side comparisons. Clients can also go to the GolfTEC Web site, where they can upload video from prior golf lessons and access a number of drills. Both founders—who previously hadn't had computer software development experience—understand the need for the company to continually push the envelope to create the next best programs to help serve the burgeoning number of store locations and their customers. "When you roll it all together, no other golf facility offers everything that we do,"

says Assell. "We started with motion analysis and built other learning aids around it to add extra support."

GolfTEC doesn't have direct competitors on the national level. "It sounds ridiculous for a business person to say we don't have competitors, but that's the reality," says Craig Jones, who owns the Phoenix area franchises. "Other start-ups have tried, but they haven't been able to make a go of it. We have hundreds of PGA staff already, and the further we get out ahead, the harder it will be to catch us."

Many GolfTEC students supplement their indoor learning with other lessons at golf courses. "I took some lessons and had a practice membership at GolfTEC," says Berry Morton, M.D., an associate medical director at Colorado Kaiser Permanente. "On the plus side, the video replay forces you to confront reality. Most of us think we swing like Ernie Els, but when you see it, you know you're far, far away from that."

Yet Morton feels there are limitations. "You can only learn so much hitting into a net. The best instruction I get is being out on the green grass, either on the range or the course, and getting feedback from my pro," he says. "I really prefer to see where the ball actually goes. However, what really matters is that the sum product of learning—whether it's indoors or outdoors—puts you in the position to hit the ball where you want it to go."

Danny Harvanek, a PGA Master



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Professional at The Golf Club at Bear Dance in Larkspur, believes indoor and outdoor golf instruction do not compare. "Indoor is limited and doesn't come close to mimicking outdoor conditions," he says. "Outdoor lessons include all of the intangibles that golfers face every round, with hills and sand and winds and green grass."

GolfTEC lesson plans range from \$85 for a half-hour session to \$2,498 for a weekly session and unlimited practice times. The company offers multi-lesson packages as well.

Now, with its aggressive franchising effort, GolfTEC will be in a position to double its impact. New franchises cost \$135,000 to \$350,000, and interest has been keen. Franchise owners include Jones, a golf pro who worked in GolfTEC's Westminster learning center, and Victor Ornelas, a former and committed GolfTEC client.

Jones recalls the day in 2004 when he received an e-mail from the company announcing it would soon start franchising. "I met with Joe the next day and locked in the Phoenix franchise locations," he says. Currently, there are two Phoenix area learning centers open, with plans to open an additional three.


Ornelas, on the other hand, was a client in Dallas who often traveled to Los Angeles for work. "I learned from my pro that they were starting to franchise. I filled out the form on the internet that night. When Joe called the next day, I told him that I was GolfTEC's poster boy. I eventually got the Los Angeles region," he says. Ornelas now has two stores open, with plans to open another five in the next couple of years. He sold his advertising agency and now has a goal to teach at his own learning centers. "I'm planning on taking my PGA playability test," he says.

Ornelas will undoubtedly find plenty of willing students hoping to improve their games. And if they embrace what GolfTEC has to offer, their game can advance to levels comparable to Marvin's achievements. "It's imperative to commit to a program like GolfTEC," says Marvin after her lesson is complete. "It's about the only way someone can really improve." **AG**


Mary Scott is a Denver-based contributing editor.

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