

ANTHONY BAMBRIDGE

If you are a sports mad kid growing up in Warragul and you discover your father's clubs in the garage, what do you do? You start swinging of course. Well, what about if you are a natural right hander and the clubs are left handed? Probably stop and try and get some proper clubs. Not Anthony. He kept swinging and ended up with a professional career and a lifelong involvement with the game. So right handers, the next time you crawl to him in abject misery for a lesson to cure your "power fade", don't feel humiliated just because he demonstrates perfectly right handed what he wants you to do and you can't. He's actually one of us.

Early on Anthony had a choice of sports. He was obsessed with football (unfortunately more of this will have to be mentioned later) and if asked would always say that he wanted to be an AFL player. He was also a champion athlete and still holds a Junior Victorian record. For a kid less than dedicated to school there was always plenty of time for another activity. Father Sid signed him up as a 14 year old member at Drouin. He then came under the influence of Stan Anderson who organised junior clinics.

Anthony's promise was evident early. In his second year he won a West Gippsland Junior tournament. Over the next four years he was our Junior Champion twice - ironically missing out on the Senior Champion both times by only three shots - West Gippsland Champion Junior champion twice and Gippsland Champion once. He played in two losing Junior Pennant and one losing one Division 4 Pennant before hitting the jackpot in 1991. He was a member of our first victorious Division 1 Pennant team winning all seven of his matches.

Shane Dwyer, captain of the team had this to say: "Anthony has the potential and the talent to be anything he wants to be...he has been a tremendous ambassador for the club and one look at Sid told us how proud a father he is." It would not have been Shane's words that prompted the decision to try the professional ranks but it wouldn't have hurt either. And in any case at age nineteen he was ready to get more direction into his life.

Against his parents' wishes he had left school at the end of Year 10. He had tried a variety of things - potato grubbing, concreting, painting - the Bambridges were definitely not the sort of parents to tolerate a lay-about son - but none of these were attractive as a career. His other sporting interests came to a stop when his body started to fail him. The running action of a sprinter placed great strain on his hips. An unfortunate legacy of that is that today he suffers from arthritis; then it just meant that running and football became too difficult. Golf it was going to be.

This meant a golfing traineeship over three years at Yallourn, Traralgon and Warragul. A requirement was to spend 40 hours in the Pro shop per week but to play as much golf as possible. This included a Monday session each week at the top Melbourne clubs organised by the Victorian PGA involving all of the States traineeships. They were playing for their own money too because they had to pay to enter. Obviously it was a small way of honing the competitive instincts but the monetary reward was invaluable. A weekly wage of \$182 barely covered living expenses. Anthony was developing a serious interest in the future Mrs Bambridge and found that the \$150 winnings more than useful.

On the completion of his traineeship in 1996 and by this time married to Leanne, a decision in 1997 was made to give the Pro Am circuit a go based in Queensland. There were successes, the best of which was to win the four round Rich River tournament, at that time ranked the second most prestigious, and a top ten order of merit finish. It included competition against the likes of John Senden and Nick O'Hearn. Professional golf at this level is a tough business - perhaps the toughest entry for any professional sport. Anthony had all the shots and was a solid putter. To be a top pro he had to be a very good putter. The decision was made to come home.

I had thought this would have been a devastating decision. All his hopes and dreams unfulfilled. Not so. Yes, he had been ambitious to reach the top but had always found the other aspects of his traineeship interesting – teaching, club life and even retailing. The prospect of life as a club pro was appealing. It helped too that there was a home to return to. Prior to the two years in Queensland, Leanne and Anthony had bought a building block in Warragul. It meant that it was easy to get on with the next stage of life.

After a short time at Warragul he became Drouin's first golf professional in July 2000. Peg Hocking maintains that it was the efforts of the ladies who got him here. A group had been away at Merimbula when talk turned to the need for our own pro. It was agreed that Anthony would be ideal. On their return letters were written and no doubt subtle words of advice given and after due consideration, the Committee agreed.

His start coincided with the introduction of the GST and as it was his first venture into business I suspect it proved a testing time. He certainly worked hard in the first six months working a seven day week. The arrival of his first child, Lachie, in 2001 and then Zac in 2006 made obvious the need for a more balanced life. Today he is quite comfortable with where he is at although if the boys' sporting interest continues to develop he has a difficult juggling act ahead.

In 2008 he was approached by Warragul to be their pro while still retaining that role at Drouin. Despite it being financially attractive he rejected it saying that it wouldn't be fair to either club. Members like their pro to be around. It also sounds like admirable business ethics to me. It was a decision too he made before our club committed to the building renovations that finally saw him housed in decent premises. I had always been surprised that he put up with the cubby hole but that was never an issue although he certainly appreciates the space he now has. It was as much a decision about staying at a place that he liked. Perhaps it was "home" and if so it was the second time he had made that decision.

So what is there about the job that he sees will keep him here for the foreseeable future? You are dealing with people - all sorts of personalities and ages - in a pretty positive way. They are here to enjoy themselves. That is a different atmosphere to say the local Centrelink office. Of course not all of us are nice but Anthony has the ability to deflect their anger or moans. Of course he can sledge too if the situation arises.

This diplomatic touch is seen in other ways. Golf clubs are political. Everyone knows Anthony; everyone talks to him even if he doesn't always want to hear. This means he knows more secrets than is probably good for him. During the bloodletting time over the controversial land sale he had both sides getting in his ear. What could he do? In part he is a paid servant of the club. He can't take sides. I bet Leanne had to be patient when he got home though because it is the one time I have seen him really bothered. Usually he smoothly avoids trouble. Well, he must be doing some right because he is very popular.

He is a salesman. Anyone who has been tutored by John Toyne has to have that skill. If he needs to offer a bargain to make a sale so be it. A satisfied customer will come back next time. He didn't say it but I assume that he likes playing this "game" as much as the one on the golf course.

Teaching gets him out of the house. He wouldn't want to do this all of the time but there is pleasure in seeing someone grasp a principle, practise it and emerge a better player. He keeps his advice simple and certainly doesn't overload us with instructions. He states the obvious: it is only at point of impact that your swing needs to be correct. How you get there is up to you. I had a putting lesson from him once and he was excellent and the drills he recommended really good. I was disappointed that he did say though that he could do nothing to stop me missing the one-footers.

He also is interested in improving the golf course but knows that he is no golf designer. That takes a special eye. Still he has been happy to make suggestions. He is particularly pleased with what has been done to the 10th. This was his reasoning. The average golfer hits about 180 metres. Our second shot to the green was blocked out by the trees unless we could do a massive slice. Well some of us can but the course should suit everyone. Remove some of the trees and extend the dam and there is risk-reward for all. The big boys can go over the dam if they are good enough. The rest of us still have the dam and the bunker will catch the other sinners amongst us. Stop muttering. It makes sense.

And now for the ugly stuff because he is not always a saint, in fact he is definitely not a Saint. He is one of that rare breed: an obnoxious Geelong Supporter. It is almost like his DNA is actually Collingwood but hasn't been detected yet. He is a sore loser. He still whinges about the 2008 Grand Final. Inside fifties is but one measure of success. Hawthorne clearly won two quarters and shared another. Geelong won only one. When plan A failed, Geelong had no Plan B. Get over it and now that the Geelong era is over, club members with a passing interest in football, should help him.

If you ask Anthony for a golf ruling, he is hopeless. He makes no attempt to see it from your point of view. He just quotes the rule book. He is as bad as Lea Caldwell. An example. On a day when we were playing preferred lies, I birdied the fifth hole before realising I hadn't replaced my marker correctly. Preferred lies so obviously no penalty. Anthony's laugh was contemptuous.

Of course Anthony stills plays the game even though he is forty. When the temperature is between 22 and 24 and providing there is no wind and the glare from the sun is not too intense he is to be found out on the course. Still fit enough to walk the distance, he nevertheless uses a cart because he knows the owner and doesn't have to pay.

He should probably put this time to better use though. He has been challenged to play as a right hander. He says he can beat you off the stick but will need a little time to practise. Somehow it never happens. He should remember the exploits of Wagga Golf Club's Noel Craig. As a leftie he played off 1; as a rightie he played off 3. He was the only player in the world at that time to have single figure handicaps simultaneously. Or what about Tommy Burns, Australian Welter Weight champion from the forties? He was a rightie for his woods and a leftie for his irons. Come on Anthony, lift your game.

So, clearly we are very lucky to have Anthony but he has a few challenges. And if these flattering words cause his head to swell there should be someone around to box it into shape. Is Doug Scott still a member?

Written by George Shand