A conversation with Tracy Mehr

By Andy Winchell ’90

The office is littered with golf equipment. Dozens of clubs, in and out of bags, are strewn about like toys that no longer interest a child. Golf ball bags sit idly in a corner. A telescopic ball-retriever peeks out of one of bags, how comforting it is to know that even good players occasionally put one in the water. In contrast to the floor, the walls are neatly decorated with pictures of past teams, awards of past players, and the obligatory poster of the Old Course at St. Andrews. Nowhere is there any indication of whose office it is. His name is not on any of the plaques. His likeness is in none of the pictures. It is definitely the office of a golf coach, but no golf coach in particular.

Professor of Physical Education Tracy Mehr sees as excited about being interviewed as he would be about root canal surgery. He squirms anxiously in his seat as he ponders the questions. He scornfully each time that he notices the machine that is recording his words. What it records are measured doses of softly spoken, carefully chosen words that reveal sensitive, pragmatic approaches to everything. Ask Mehr a question, and back come bits of wisdom acquired during many years of coaching. “Golf is so singular, so individualistic. Every young person in an athletic event has to learn to deal with their emotions, and part of that is fear. The fear in golf is the fear of exposure, the fear of revealing yourself and your inadequacies. No one, unless you have competed, really understands the fear and the nervousness of stepping on the first tee.”

“Golfers have to gain their satisfaction from within. They have to learn to separate themselves from the score and enjoy the gradual improvement that takes place. One part of my job is to teach them how to swing; but my educational function is to teach them how to live with themselves and their limitations, to accept the game for what it is, to turn weakness into strength, and in the process to grow a little bit.”

“I love for young players to have moments of success because the game is so fragile, and I know that they’ll have many more moments of disappointment. In golf, you have to anticipate disappointment. You have to recognize that you’re going to hit more bad shots than good shots. You have to cope with that. It’s a very difficult thing for young people to deal with.”

When Mehr first came to Amherst back in 1965, he was hired as an assistant football coach and did not take over the golf program until 1970. Yet, he has always been involved with football at some level and also coached basketball, lacrosse, baseball, and skiing along the way. This year, he has given up his most recent duties in football, as defensive backs coach, to spend more time with golf.

“Jim [Ostendarp] and I used to have fun — I did anyway — because there were really only two coaches coaching football. And by golf it was fun. Now we have so many coaches, we ought to suit up the coaches.” But he says that he will not miss coaching football: “I love the on-field coaching of the players, but I’ve enjoyed too much responsibility over a long range of time in football, and I don’t want to hang on. I was thinking last night that I’ve been involved with football since 1938. There comes a time in every coach’s life when he has to move on.”

He seems grateful that he has been able to do so many things that he enjoyed: “Amherst has allowed me to grow as an individual and appreciate a whole range of activities that I couldn’t have gotten any other place. I’ve coached six different sports here. I’ve seen athletes in a variety of sports get excited about that sport. I’ve grown to appreciate that.”

Given the chance, he would bring about a few changes in collegiate athletics at Amherst and elsewhere.

Like so many coaches, Mehr wishes that the NCAA would eliminate freshman eligibility: “They say that some of these youngsters are physically able to play on the varsity level. Sure they are. But simply because they’re physically able doesn’t mean that emotionally and psychologically they’re necessarily ready. We like to think of them as adults, but they’re young people and they have young needs. The adjustment from high school to college is extremely difficult. Without a freshman program, you create a lot of unnecessary turmoil for young kids.”

He also would like to see a return to one-platoon football. It would be more fun for the players, it would decrease the risk of injury, and it would have financial and staffing benefits for the college, he says. The most outlandish idea that Mehr spoke about is probably the most interesting: “It’s like to see Amherst College experiment in some educational ways for the betterment of the student-athlete. I have often thought what a fun weekend it would be to have the Amherst-Williams football game or baseball game played with the coaches up in the stands. The players would be prepared for the ballgame during the week, but on Saturday the game would be turned over to the captains. The players would have the opportunity to shoulder the burden of playing the game. I’ve often felt that at this level, if we don’t get too hung up on shape over winning or losing, we have the opportunity not only to increase the educational opportunities for the players themselves, but an opportunity to test different approaches to athletics that could influence the national scene.”

Once again, he speaks in generalities: “The role of the coach is really over-played. Good talent wins; the coach’s job is not to lose games. Coaches win games very, very seldom. Our job is to take the talent that we’re blessed with and win the games that we should win and be competitive in the games in which we are over-matched.”

Now that his coaching duties have turned back to golf with enthusiasm, both as a player and as a coach. Naturally, he approached all of his tasks realistically. “Now I’ve gotten to the point where I’m trying to compete as a senior in regional and national senior competitions. I don’t work at the game as hard as I should if I want to be successful at that level. I have found that I really get more enjoyment out of working with young people than playing. To be a good competitor you have to be extremely single-minded, and I’m not willing to do that. I’m not willing to substitute that for what I enjoy. It might be, but I have to become somewhat satisfied with moments of brilliance, an increasing degree of mediocrity, and the pleasure of sharing a great game with men my own age.”

President Poulsen has a favorite story about Tracy Mehr that he is always eager to tell. “One fine spring day I ran into Tracy and said to him, ‘This is it, Tracy. This is the year. I’m going to hit them long and straight.’ Tracy looked right at me and said, ‘You can’t have both.’ He was right.”

Mehr: Unwilling to be totally single-minded.