

Golfweek

Q&A: Why is France's Jean Van de Velde, who nearly won the 1999 British Open, teaching golf in Mexico?



[Adam Schupak](#)  follow

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I flew to Mexico for a golf lesson from a Frenchman.

That's where Jean Van de Velde, the affable golfer who once nearly had both hands on the Claret Jug but let it slip away in dramatic fashion is living and working these days, heading up the Jean Van de Velde Golf Academy at Punta Mita, located on the southernmost point of the Riviera Nayarit, 30 miles northwest of the resort city of Puerto Vallarta.

Who can forget the way he squandered a three-stroke lead on the last hole of the 1999 British Open at Carnoustie and lost to Scotland's Paul Lawrie in a three-man playoff?

Van de Velde kept his chin up and dealt with defeat with class and a smile on his face. In October, we met for a golf lesson and a talk about the game he loves. It could've continued for hours, especially if we started drinking a good bottle of his wine, but unfortunately he had pick up duty and had to run off to fetch his son. Suffice it to say, he's still active in the game as an instructor, television broadcaster, tournament operator and wine merchant among other things. One of the more fascinating parts of our talk occurred when we talked about the golf swing as he tried to straighten out my penchant to hook it and more recent struggles with a block to the right — "That's when you load too much on the left on the backswing," he said.



Jean Van de Velde gives Golfweek senior writer Adam Schupak a lesson at his golf academy in Punta Mita in Mexico. (Adam Schupak/Golfweek)

“I’m a guy who looks at what the golf ball does to identify what system you’re in. Whether it is a draw or a fade, as long as you control that shot it’s OK. What matters is repetition,” he said. “Then you decide, OK, this is what you do, and maybe with a little effort this is where you can be. Do you want to embark on that journey or learn to control the system you’re already in? I’m not the guy who is going to try to transform you just for the sake of it just because I

have one swing thought in my head. Do I have a few preferences? It's like the salt and the pepper in a recipe. At the end of the day, you need to have the ingredients."

During his playing career, Van de Velde worked with legends in the teaching world from John Jacobs to David Leadbetter to Butch Harmon.

"David tried to re-make a few things," Van de Velde said. "We tried to work on my takeaway. I was bringing the club a little too inside, I was crossing the line, my body had completed the turn and my arms were still moving. It's all fine as long as you have the right timing, but when things go wrong again, where do you start? How do you get back on track as fast as you can? He said, 'This is what I think,' but at the end of the day it was my decision. He didn't burn me with an iron and you're going to do it. I implemented a few changes so I could swing in a way that was going to be more reliable. I did believe and I still do that he and Butch and John Jacobs and a few others were a big influence on me and they were right in their analysis."

He continued: "Technique and teaching, I've always been very interested and read a lot of things and been lucky to be around some great thinkers on the swing. I believe the

swing is made up of little imperfections. If you look at me swinging, I always had my hands behind at address, but I always started with a forward press. Do you want to change that or look at what goes together and make it happen? In 1999, I had control of my system and I putted pretty well. That year you see what I did at the Open but the best golf I played was in 2000 — by a mile. I played 18-20 times in America and finished 60th on the money list. I played I think 10 times in Europe and was 20 or 30th. In my life, I tried not to reinvent things. I used what others had done and adapted to myself. I told Bernhard Langer that I was going to try to play both tours and he said, 'Just be careful. I tried that and it was complicated.' I knew playing in the U.S. was going to have an expiration date. My kids were already in school in Geneva. It was hard to say, you know what, I'm going to play in America. Who's around me? Who do I rely on? It wasn't easy. It's different now. The guys start playing in college golf and they make their lives straight away in the U.S. They are already structured whether it is Viktor Hovland or Jon Rahm."



Jean Van de Velde attempts to fix the ball flight of Golfweek senior writer Adam Schupak, saying, “It ain’t going left, Sunshine,” after he straightened him out. (Adam Schupak/Golfweek)

Van de Velde suggested I do a drill where I held the club with the face a few degrees open at address. In his disarming style, he said, “you’re on the range. It doesn’t matter. Let’s see what happens.”

I swung and the ball flew right at the flag where I was aiming.

“It ain’t going to go left, Sunshine,” he said. “Not possible.”

In that moment, Jean Van de Velde became my latest golf guru. Here’s more from Van de Velde on the Ryder Cup, what went wrong with budding French star Victor Dubuisson and the time he stuck Jose-Maria Olazabal with the tab for a dozen or so bottles of fine wine from the Augusta National wine cellar.

Q: I’m only going to ask one question about the 1999 British Open because you’ve addressed this topic a million times and there’s so much else I want to get to but what possessed you to hit driver at 18?

JVV: I don’t think it would’ve changed anything. You could always argue the choice of the second shot but how about the first 71 holes that put me so far ahead. Are we going to argue any of those? Everyone was hitting iron off the tee. I was pretty much the only one hitting driver. You could argue I had the wrong strategy except I pretty much had the right strategy. I was ahead of everybody else. I looked at my friends’ hitting irons into the rough and realized I

might as well hit the bloody driver in the rough because you'll be 60 yards up ahead. It's common sense. Instead of chopping out and still having a long third, I had a short iron in my hands.

Q: How did you wind up in Mexico and running a golf academy at Punta Mita?



Jean Van de Velde teaching a lesson to a student at his Punta Mita golf academy.
(Adam Schupak/Golfweek)

JVV: I was living in Valderrama (Spain) at the time. I lived there for four years. I'm married to a Mexican woman from the north. I was getting bored in the winter. I love it but 3-4 months a year, I needed something different.

I broadcast a bunch in America for French TV, doing the majors, Players and Ryder Cup, wherever that is. Though I married a Mexican woman, she lived in Arizona for 25 years. She said, 'Are you sure?' I said, 'We're not getting married to the place. If we don't like it, we can leave in six months.' I needed a different stimulation. We came to Mexico, found a place and moved in and two weeks later COVID strikes pretty hard and the city basically goes on lockdown.

I have a friend who is like a brother and he has a place in Careyes, which is 2 ½ hours south. You feel like you're in Italy. He said, 'Why don't you come down? What are you going to do in Mexico City? We spent 3 ½ months there. I called Carl. He had invited me here before but I'd never had the opportunity before. I said to Carl (Emberson, head of marketing for Punta Mita), 'I'm down the road, can I come for a week or so?' He said, 'Yeah, stay for as long as you want.' Months and half later, we were still here.

We worked out a deal. I really like the lifestyle. We have a 17-year-old who lives with us and is going to the American School. We found a place halfway between here and the school. I didn't want my son to commute 3 hours per day and I'm on site. So this is how we started. I've made a commitment to be here for at least the next three years. When I'm here, I'm here and when I'm not, I'm not.

Sometimes you have commitments and you have to go and you put a smile on but I've reached a stage in my life where I want to settle down and put the suitcase down a little more.

Q: Why didn't we see more of you on the PGA Tour Champions?

JVV: When I turned 50, they sent me a bunch of invites. I stopped playing in 2011 and in 2012 I started my own company and did consulting and many different things. The French Federation had a joint venture with a company. They owned the Tour de France in cycling and ran the French Open. At the time they weren't happy with the direction it was going and offered me the job to run the French Open for five years. That was a big part of my life. When I turned 50 in 2016, I had played golf casually no more than 10 times

a year. Never went to the gym, never went to the driving range. I said, 'Sure,' and went and played for six weeks and it was a disaster.

I played at Pebble Beach in the First Tee event and after 45 holes I was in the top 10. I saw my name on the leaderboard and got stage fright. No, I didn't but there's an expiration date to everything.

Mentally, more than anything else, I needed different challenges and the French Open gave me that opportunity. We transformed it a lot and I was very proud of what we managed to achieve. We went from 10,000 spectators to almost 70,000. We had a more structured tented village and were enriching the experiences for the spectators. I liked that. I had been there and done that and that's why I didn't push. I've played about once a year on the Legends Tour. I played about four times this year and I've committed to playing a little more next year. I want to see where that tour can go. I promote the Legends French Open with my company. We take the financial risk. We can't compete with the big boys but it doesn't matter. We have a lot to offer, some of the guys still want to be out there. We just need to find the right model. We've been tip-toeing a bit. I also do

an exhibition, like a skins game in the north of France. Jose-Maria Olazabal came one year, I bring one of the French guys like Thomas Levet. That takes up a bit of my time. I've got a wine business too.