

# The art of the puttable

*Sarah Claridge's decision to mould golfers as opposed to plaster of Paris has proved a smart move, writes Lee McLaughlan*

A world of clay, plaster of Paris and sculpture came close to snaring one PGA professional for whom the letters P G and A could quite easily stand for passionate, gritty and ambitious.

Those characteristics and many more, epitomise Advanced PGA professional Sarah Claridge, whose online smartpro toolkit has already improved the working lives of more than 500 coaches.



The toolkit has barely touched the surface of the profession, with promotion achieved primarily via word of mouth.

However, 18 months after going online, plans are afoot to further enhance the product and to roll it out across the world.

It has taken 41-year-old Claridge half her lifetime to reach this definitive point in her career, even though smartpro, like many ideas, has been a constant work-in-progress, almost from the time she decided to ditch the potter's wheel and join the professional ranks at Cotswold Edge, where she worked under Dave Gosling, the originator of the Young Masters Golf programme.

"I was meant to be going to art college but I was approached by one of the members at Cotswold Edge suggesting that Dave Gosling needed an assistant professional to work with him," she recalled.

"I was 21 at the time and had played the amateur circuit for three or four years by then. During those amateur days I used to get distracted by other people's golf swings and I wondered if they did X would they improve. I was always born to be the coach rather than the player.

"And so it was as a coach, even in those early days, that smartpro was born. I created certain templates to help me organise my golf lessons. That was all on paper, while I did skills and drills cards to give to my pupils.

"I did spend a bit of money making more of an impression in the lesson by giving my pupils something to take away to improve them. They could then feedback to me and I could spot their strengths and weaknesses and take them forward."

Claridge left Cotswold Edge after qualifying in 1996 and the focus became on self-improvement, putting smartpro on the back burner.

"I went straight to the Kendleshire in Bristol as an assistant to Paul Barrington, who went on to become the longest drive champion and world trick shot champion.

"At that time we were working from a hut but a year later moved in to the brand new clubhouse and I became head coaching professional.

"From that point I've been freelance and my early career was coming up with ideas to generate a good income from it. That's where the business side kicked in.

"I advertised my own short and long game schools in magazines. I organised golf holidays abroad and early on I became a master NLP (neuro linguistic programming) practitioner, which opened up my coaching. That allowed me to understand how brains tick better. It made me think out of the box a bit more, develop my coaching and take my career forward.

"I was developing my education more than the smartpro idea. I spent 10 years with the English Women's Golf Association as a development coach and in that time I attended a huge amount of workshops, seminars and undertook a lot of reading to improve my coaching skill set.

"The next step was to become a PGA tutor and in about 2005-06, I became one on the foundation degree and did that for four years. That was fantastic as you learnt things from the assistants as well as the tutors. That widened my knowledge hugely."

Each stage of Claridge's learning has been factored into smartpro, which she would work on when she took pupils away on golf holidays.

But the desire to turn it into an online facility for the benefit of all coaches saw a rethink in her schedule.

"I stepped away from tutoring as smartpro became much busier and gained a contract with the English Golf Partnership to provide the country golf partnerships the AASE programme (Advanced Apprenticeship in Sports Excellence).

"Since the beginning of last year it's gone fantastic as now we've got 550 coaches using it and they've got 12,000 players signed up.

"But so far it's been self-perpetuated by me, but now we're looking to make it more commercial and take it forward as there are still people who don't know about it.

"It's a nurturing website, we train and help. There are lots I take to it. It's a resource that has a bit of everything. It's got business, marketing, good practice and skills test and player resources. It's a business toolkit for the golf coach."

Used by the likes of Garstang's Paul Eales, now part of the EGU under-18 set up, and Cumberwell Park's John Jacobs, Claridge, who still finds time in her schedule to coach, is now looking to get smartpro to the attention of the wider world.

"We've got aspiration to go international. We're in about 10 different countries in Europe. It's just a matter of time."

For more information go to [www.smartprocoaching.com](http://www.smartprocoaching.com)

