

# “YOU START AT ZERO EVERY DAY”

**L**IKE MANY YOUNGSTERS PLAYING THE GAME in their growing-up years, Jay Seawell always found time to dream, and not just at night. Jay’s father, a club professional, would send his sons to the range at the end of the day to pick up balls and get them ready for tomorrow’s customers. The work was tedious and his mind would race ahead to glory.

“We all worked together,” Seawell remembers. “Sometimes you were with your brothers and probably making fun of each other or things like that, but you think of a lot of things: you dream of winning the Masters, you dream of making the winning shot in basketball, just depending on what season it was. You definitely go through a lot of things like that.”

Golf was the family business, but all sports captivated Seawell. When he was 12 years old, his South Carolina baseball team even made it to the Little League World Series. But it was the high energy and quick pace of basketball that especially excited him. Still, he was, in his words, “slight,” and the physical advantages other kids had were less important in golf. So little by little, this was where he placed his competitive attention, until he won the South Carolina high school championship as an individual in both his junior and senior years.

Seawell took his game to college at the University of South Carolina, where his father had played and where his two younger brothers would follow him. He was glad to keep playing, but the new dream of coaching had already been forming in him.

“I can remember, and I still do it to this day, after an athletic

event is over, I always want to hear what the coaches say before, during, and after about strategy, to pick up things here and there,” Seawell says. “I know there’s clichés, but inside of those clichés there are real truths. So I’ve been enamored with that my whole life.” Indeed, he was volunteering in his teen years at the local Y, helping younger kids learn the fundamentals of basketball.

It was only after he finished at South Carolina that the reality hit Seawell, thanks to some counsel from his dad. “He was wise enough to remind me that I didn’t go to college to play basketball, so I probably wasn’t going to be a college basketball coach.”

Soon he was on the phone with Clemson golf coach Larry Penley, who was a family friend, asking for advice on how to get into the profession. This was the early 1990s, and only the biggest programs were enlisting assistant coaches. So Seawell called the athletic director at the local junior college, Anderson, and discovered that the golf coach was soon retiring. Seawell had found an open door. He was a collegiate head coach at 23 years old.

**T**he trajectory any of us take through our adult careers is usually unpredictable. We can set our sights and lay our plans, but timing and connections play a big role. These are things we can’t control.

It was his young family that temporarily drove Seawell out of coaching after five years at Anderson. “I couldn’t afford it,” he says. “I had to get a real job.” He sold concrete.

That work was nothing like what he’d always wanted. So he found a way back to Anderson, then landed the job at Augusta State Univer-

## and other life lessons from a national coach of the year



sity, in Georgia. This call came four years after Seawell had originally interviewed to coach the Jaguars, but the job was now his and he held it for four years before moving on to one of college sports' biggest stages, the University of Alabama, in 2002.

Seawell has been with the Crimson Tide ever since. His teams have won two NCAA team championships, and individuals Justin Thomas and Michael Thompson have found their way to victories on the PGA Tour, with Thomas gaining the number one spot in the world in 2018. Two other Alabama teams have been national runner-up under Seawell, who was himself named the Dave Williams National Head Coach of the Year after the 2014 championship season.

But résumés are perhaps most tiresome when they list accomplishment after accomplishment. It's the highlights Seawell is after, and among these he counts the academic strength of his teams through the years, as well as their service in the community. And he loves contributing to players' lives.

"My favorite part of the job is what I call getting in the dirt," Seawell said in the winter off-season. "I love getting in the dirt. I was in the dirt with a young guy just now. He's battling for a spot, and I love it when kids want to get better. So my favorite part is getting in the

dirt and discussing how you get better at golf.

"A lot of those answers sometimes aren't about taking the club more inside or outside. It may be really, truly how do you set your priorities or how do you set your vision, how do take ownership of your golf game, things like that. How do you become more mature about golf and understand the game more, so that you can play it at a high level when you're very nervous and a lot of people are counting on you?"

"The reward is when you get to see them fulfill their dreams. Not all of them do, but my favorite part of the coaching is when they look at you and say that was the best three years or best four years, and they thank you for that. That's my favorite when they say, 'This was better than I thought it would be.'"

For that reason, Seawell finds himself alongside his former players quite often. A popular place for team reunions is behind a tailgate at Alabama football games. Seawell calls meeting up with former players his "real favorite, because I'm just Jay to them. They still call me Coach, but I'm just Jay.

"So it's one of my favorite things to see when former players come back and they bring their wives and tell me how things are going in their business or golf or just life. We reminisce about old

## THE SEAWELL STANDARD

The head coach at Alabama for the past 16 years, Jay Seawell has led the Crimson Tide to four Southeast Conference Championships, ten NCAA tournaments, and the 2013 & 2014 NCAA championship. His alumni include PGA Tour winners Justin Thomas and Michael Thompson. He has coached 31 All-Americans and was voted the Dave Williams national coach of the year in 2014.



stories and make fun of things that I've said or done while I was their coach."

**P**layers may love to laugh with their coach, but Seawell continues to take his work seriously, learning all the time.

"I think the day you think you know it all might be the day you want to quit," he says.

He has his fundamentals: You start at zero every day and you do the best you can every day. But around these, he's adding to his knowledge about technique and routine. He's looking for new ways to say old things. And again he leans on his former players.

"Sometimes I talk to former players about what they liked while they were here, and I realize I've kind of abandoned that a little bit. So I go back to what we've done well," Seawell says.

That doesn't mean he's constantly comparing this player to that one or this team to the teams that won the championship. "We've

telling his players he is a man of faith during the recruiting process. He doesn't choose players based on whether they agree with him in this matter—his is a public university, after all. But he also wants them to know where he's coming from and what is important to him.

"This is their first time in the world by themselves. They have a lot of questions. Young people are smart. Anybody that says they're not, hasn't been around them. They're very intelligent. They want to know. They're very curious. And they have great questions."

Part of that support includes a players' Bible study with College Golf Fellowship's Stephen Bunn, who also spends time as part of the chaplaincy group on the PGA Tour. "It's voluntary," Seawell says, "but it's somebody who comes alongside them and helps them with the questions they have. The reason I get somebody outside myself is it may be me they struggle with—why does Coach make these decisions? Or, what am I supposed to do here in school? Or whatever. I just want to make sure we come alongside a person at this time, be-

*"Young people are smart. Anybody that says they're not hasn't been around them."*

never said, 'Oh, you can be the next Justin Thomas,' because that's not fair to anybody," he explains. "Every team has its own life and its own years and success. I get athletics and I know the scoreboard and I'm cool with it. That's how we play—I'm very competitive. But success doesn't always mean that you get a trophy. Sometimes you do and sometimes you don't."

That's a big lesson, of course, which is something else Seawell doesn't shy away from. One of golf's most difficult challenges is handling expectations. It's so easy to set yourself up for disappointment, especially when you're not playing only for yourself but for your coach and teammates, too. This is the kind of thing Seawell and his staff face head-on.

"First, we deal with it. We talk about it," he says. "Those are good things, expectations. Now then, how do you develop a plan and a process and a practice to not make it a burden, but something that gives you energy? You want players who are driven, and driven means expectations. So, I want to do great, I want to play great, I want that. So we tackle them, we talk about them, and then you try to set a heart and head plan so that you can be successful in that. Not to hide from them, but to set a plan and use them to your advantage instead of a disadvantage."

Beyond golf, the challenges may be even greater. Seawell begins

cause I would say the most growth that happens in a person is while they're in college. I want to make sure that we put things in front of them that help them in decision making."

**R**unning a top-flight program at a Division I school demands a lot from a coach. Each player wrestles with what the game means to them, and a caring coach wrestles with the same thing for all of his players, as well as for himself.

"Golf is a great game," Seawell says, "but it has a terrible side. Identity things come up. There always seem to be issues, and we're always going to go through trials and tribulations. Our identity can be in Christ or it can be in ourselves. One just has a great remedy.

"When they're going through those trials and tribulations and their identity is being broken—because it will be broken—and they ask questions about it, that's when you want to come along and say, 'Well, this will never satisfy. That 5-iron to a foot, the next shot, the next year, the comparisons are always going to be there, so you're never, ever going to be fully satisfied. There's only one satisfaction that I believe happens and that is through a relationship with Jesus.' There are moments when we talk about things like that, and I'm honored that I am in a position where I have an opportunity to do it." ■■■