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KERRANE: Pro golfer DeAngelis provides tips to improve golf game

By TOM KERRANE tkerrane@timesherald.com

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Center Square Golf Club sits on Skippack Pike Tuesday, January 3, 2012. Center Square Associates, Inc., which operates the Center Square Golf Club, 2620 Skippack Pike, Worcester, was one of two Montgomery County companies that received a portion of the \$245,380 grant money awarded by the Department of Environmental Protection in December. The money is geared to helping small businesses around the state invest in energy efficiency or pollution prevention projects. Photo by Christine Reckner/Times Herald Staff

For some reason, every year when the Masters rolls around, so many local golfers mark it as the traditional time to dust off the clubs, clean off the golf shoes, find that deformed golf glove buried in some pocket of the golf bag, and go to the golf course.

Most years, it has taken until the sights of Amen Corner, the sound of the Master theme song and the vision of those “ugly-the-other-51-weeks-of-the-year” green jackets for people in this area to venture out to play golf.

Well, Mother Nature gave us a gift of an easy winter, and what we usually do in April, we could have been doing in February.

Following last winter, in which two of the largest snowstorms ever recorded in the area fell — within five days of each other — and most courses remained an off-white tint until mid-March, this year there was more snow in October than in December, January and February combined.

For the local golfer, the first-round jitters might already have been replaced by the bad-swing muscle memory for 2012.

Yet, for the stragglers, we have the professional for you.

Don DeAngelis has been playing golf for 50 years now, and the second-generation golf professional has been one of the area’s most noted instructors for decades.

These days, he can be found as a teaching professional at Center Square Golf Club, and now also in the pages of The Times Herald. DeAngelis is here for the newspaper readers and website viewers of The Times Herald all during the golf season, willing to answer your questions and offer his knowledge to help improve your game.

“I love teaching,” DeAngelis said. “By teaching, you are actually going out and making somebody’s day more enjoyable. To work with someone and see improvement, and have them call you and say they just broke 80 for the first time, or 90 for the first time, that to me is what it’s all about. That is growing the game.”

As DeAngelis was offering these tips, his next appointment was arriving on the range at Center Square, getting ready for his lesson. It was Eagles broadcaster Merrill Reese, who could not have offered higher praise for his longtime instructor.

“He is the best teacher I have ever had,” Reese said. “He has done so much for my game.”

At 60, DeAngelis has certainly seen enough “spring swings” to know how most golfers need to begin the season.

“For most, when they come out in the spring, they immediately want to grab for the driver

right away,” he said. “The first couple buckets of balls you should hit, really, should be with an 8-iron or a 9-iron, the short clubs. You want to get your rhythm and your tempo down.

“One of the things I always do in the spring is put a tee under the ball, put the ball on a tee. I watch for people hitting that tee. Most people in the spring, if they haven’t played in a while, the tendency is for them to come up.

“I try to get people to focus on the very basics: their grip, their ball position. Put the tee in the ground, hit some short irons clipping the tee and try to work on balance and tempo.”

Now let’s be honest, the average golfer’s first swing of the year most often does not come on the practice range, but on the first tee of some local course with three equally ill-prepared buddies eyeing it up. For those, DeAngelis advises to pay attention to the shots during that maiden round of the golf season.

Note how the ball comes off the clubface and how the ball curves in flight — or dribble. He said where the ball starts off is generally the result of the swing path and the shoulders, while the ball’s in-flight shape comes from where the clubface was at impact.

“If there’s a consistent pattern while you’re out there,” DeAngelis said, “then we’re looking at where are the shoulders, where is the clubface, and we can work on that.”

Now, if there has been one thing to complain about regarding this season’s weather — and there is always something about the weather worthy of a gripe — it has been the wind. Some perfect days have been interrupted by heavy gusts or just a steady current across the course.

“When it is windy, and it has been windy, people tend to try to hit it just a little bit harder,” DeAngelis said.

“The old saying in golf, like my dad always said, ‘When it’s breezy, swing easy.’

“Do not try to overpower it, especially if it is into the wind. Stay nice and smooth.”

Unless you already have numerous rounds in, this is the time of the season to work on the overall soundness of the swing. It is about keeping a proper tempo and making solid contact.

“Scoring usually comes in May,” he said. “Once May is here, we get the greens all smoothed out, we get more growth in the course and it becomes easier to score. Right now, though, it’s about solid contact and basic swing techniques.”

So, if the clubs have not moved in months, and the 2012 version of the golf swing has yet to be unveiled, keep the expectations low for those initial few rounds.

“The big thing is how solidly you are hitting the ball,” offered DeAngelis. “You see it more

in the spring, people hitting low shots, topping it, because they just cannot stay down on the ball and make solid contact.”

Making solid contact is the key for April. Get loose, ease into the busy part of the golf season and get 2012 started in a positive frame. Use that first round as the starting point of the season, learn from those 18 holes, and as always, it never hurts to have a professional point you in the right direction.

For this golf season, Don DeAngelis will be helping out readers of The Times Herald and www.timesherald.com. If you have a specific question for him, please send it to golf@timesherald.com and DeAngelis will gladly offer his expertise.

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