

CHARACTER STUDY

Mario Calmi, a Teaching Golf Pro, Makes Time to Fish and Eat Well

By Corey Kilgannon

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On Monday, Mario Calmi stood at the North Woodmere Golf Course driving range, where he is the head professional, and gripped the shaft, aimed and swung.

“You see the length on that cast?” he said, reeling in his fishing line as the shiny lure splashed along the surface of Hook Creek, which abuts the range, a lonely grassy field just east of Kennedy International Airport.

Mr. Calmi, 57, grabbed his beach chair and fishing pole — “My most important pieces of equipment” — and pointed to a sandy stretch of shoreline on the creek, a less-than-pristine waterway that feeds Jamaica Bay.

“The guys here call that Mario Beach because I’m always out there with my chair and umbrella,” said Mr. Calmi, for whom golf seems an afterthought.

His lesson count on Monday totaled one: John Passela, 22, who was benefiting from a number of Mr. Calmi’s homemade teaching props, including a rolled-up towel duct-taped into a cylinder and placed behind Mr. Passela’s ball, to help him swing along the proper path.

“You’re never going to see this on the Golf Channel,” Mr. Calmi said, as Mr. Passela hit one blistering 8-iron after another and then followed Mr. Calmi to a pair of bricks for a balance drill, swinging while standing with a brick under each foot.

“Hey, I’m Italian — we know how to use bricks and tomatoes,” said Mr. Calmi, who keeps a narrow garden along the side of the range to grow his tomatoes, supported with stakes made of — what else — broken golf club shafts.

For the arugula he grows, Mr. Calmi has bottles of olive oil stashed on shelves in his teaching shed next to golf equipment, and a bottle of balsamic vinegar in his golf cart.

“It’s an Italian thing, we do food,” said Mr. Calmi, lighting his charcoal barbecue, another daily ritual, to grill some cheeseburgers. Then he made cappuccinos in the shed, to have with the fresh cannoli he brings daily.

“My students come hungry because they know I’m all about food,” he said.

“Teaching golf is like cooking. You can’t learn golf from a recipe. You have to teach by feel. You add a little garlic and you stop and taste it.”

Mr. Calmi charges \$100 an hour, or \$60 for 30 minutes, which includes a video swing analysis he emails to students immediately after the lesson for further study.

“A lot of my students don’t come back, which is good,” Mr. Calmi said.

“Golf pros are like chiropractors. They want you to keep coming back. But I tell my students, ‘I’m going to teach you so good, you don’t have to come back.’ ”

This public nine-hole course is so isolated, it is visible only to passengers on the low-flying planes landing at Kennedy, he joked. Students on flights have spotted him in his colorful outfits at the end of the lonely range.

“One guy calls me and says, ‘Mario, are you wearing an orange shirt right now?’ ” he said. “He was watching me from the plane.”

His teaching canopy has a camouflage tarp on the back, giving it the look of a duck hunter’s blind. For hot days, he has rigged a hose on the roof, to mist the lessons. As windscreens, he wired old range mats onto the chain-link fence.

After fixing the jammed ball dispenser on Monday morning, he said, “The I.Q. is low, but I’m very handy.”

“You’ve seen the movie ‘Tin Cup?’ ” he asked, referring to the film starring Kevin Costner as a slacker golf range pro. “Well, this is the real ‘Tin Cup.’ ”

Mr. Calmi also drives the tractor picking up balls, passing the model duck decoy he found along the shoreline and posted on a pole, some 100 yards out on the range, along with a cowbell, for golfers to hit.

Mr. Calmi said he grew up in East New York, Brooklyn.

“I grew up playing stickball and punchball, so I have good hand-eye coordination,” he said. Married, with two grown children, he now lives in Douglas Manor, Queens.

Mr. Calmi said he worked in his father’s construction business and first tried golf while honeymooning in Hawaii. Early on, he began traveling to Florida to study with the golf professional David Leadbetter.

He retired from construction and became a range pro at the bustling Alley Pond Golf Center in Douglaston, Queens, then retired to North Woodmere, on Long Island.

“No one else wanted to teach here because it’s a dead end, out of the way,” he said. “I do more fishing than teaching.”

Given that he is “too hyper” to play a full four- or five-hour round of golf, he said, teaching at North Woodmere keeps him active in golf. “It’s what I know,” he said. “This and cement.”

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The Particulars

Name Mario Calmi

Age 57

Where He’s From East New York, Brooklyn

What He Is Teaching professional at the North Woodmere Golf Course

Telling Detail Among his homemade teaching tools are a foam “noodle” float, which he said he pulled from a swimming pool, to help keep swings on-plane. Then there is the golf club with a tennis racket wired to it, to compare the whipping release in a golf swing to a topspin volley in tennis.

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