

Entrepreneur Says Thinking Small Means Big Business

by *Tod Leonard*

If John Parsons were an aspiring restaurateur, he wouldn't be cooking up the Grand Slam at Denny's. If he wanted to break into the retail biz, 7-Eleven wouldn't be his dream. If he sold ice cream, he'd probably do it the old-fashioned way, out of a truck with the neighborhood kids running to the sound of music.

John Parsons is a different breed, an enthusiastic entrepreneur, the kind you like to root for because it seems there are so few left in the world.

Take one look at his golf shop, All Pars Golf in Lemon Grove, Calif., and you can't help but buy into his dream. Situated near an offramp of eastbound Highway 94 near San Diego, in a light industrial park between a music shop and a company that makes industrial staples, Parsons' place appears to be little more than a storage shed with roll-up doors. A closer peek reveals one man's vision for a better, friendlier golf shop.

Into 900 square feet, Parsons has packed a driving net for lessons, a large rack of clubs for sale, a club-repair area and a cluttered office. A heavy-duty fan sits at the entrance because there is no air conditioning. Perfect, really, because Parsons puts on no airs.

"I want to let people know that you don't have to spend so much money on golf to become a golfer," Parsons was saying as he stood in his shop last week. "Shops like this versus the big guys - they just want to sell you something that maybe you don't need."

Parsons has sets of irons to sell for \$99. He can custom fit someone into a new set of "retail-style" irons - big-brand knockoffs - for \$199, one free lesson included. Parsons' lesson plan must be the lowest around - \$75 a month for all the half-hour blocks one can carve out.

"You can come for 12 or you can come for one," he said with a grin, "but if you come for just one, you're probably going to wish you had taken more." The big retailers do huge volume and have an excellent selection, but Parsons thinks something gets lost amid the clothing racks and the hitting simulators.

"Hopefully, my lessons aren't just about hitting a white ball, but there's some understanding of the game of golf and what it stands for, and the direction it needs to be taken," Parsons said.

Parsons, 37, believes what sets him apart from other shop operators is his standing as a PGA teaching professional. In the early '90s, the Roseville, Calif., native attended the San Diego Golf Academy. He then

worked at Steele Canyon Golf Club, built clubs at the Titleist facility in nearby Oceanside and eventually became the head pro at Temeku Hills in Temecula, Calif.

The last stop gave him some status, but not enough satisfaction. Parsons wanted his own show, closer to his home in Santee, Calif. When a bid for one small retail golf shop fell through, Parsons opted for the site in Lemon Grove, next to the industrial shop his father-in-law worked at for 26 years.

"You see it all right outside this door," Parsons said with a grin, waving to the gritty buildings across the street.

But this is the same place where Parsons can be seen kibitzing out front with guys in orange vests. They were surveyors who wanted to talk golf.

Parsons celebrated the first anniversary of All Pars' opening recently, and though the going has been tough at times, he's happy to be staving off the odds against making it work. He's made inroads with locals, offering lessons to high school golf teams and giving out clubs and bags to the San Diego Inner City Golf Foundation.

"I think I had been here a week when some guys came in and said, 'What are you doing, dude, opening up a golf shop here?'" said Parsons. "I told them everything about me, what I stood for and what I believed, and you know what? They came back."

Photo by Nelvin C. Cepeda
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