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Phil Mickelson's approach is in focus at 2011 PGA Championship

By Barry Svrluga
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JOHNS CREEK, GA. — Just after noon Wednesday, Phil Mickelson arrived for some work on the putting green at Atlanta Athletic Club, making his final preparations for the PGA Championship. At his side were two of the mainstays of his team, caddie Jim “Bones” Mackay and swing coach Butch Harmon. Joining them all: Julie Elion, a Washington-based mental coach who has worked with PGA Tour players for nearly 20 years.

Elion's interactions with Mickelson have been increasingly visible over the past month. She walked the entirety of Mickelson's five-and-a-half-hour practice round Tuesday here. That followed her appearances during Mickelson's practice rounds during the British Open in July and last week at the Bridgestone Invitational.

Mental coaches and sports psychologists are nothing new in golf, but players deal with their relationships differently. British Open champion Darren Clarke, for instance, openly speaks about how he works with Bob Rotella, perhaps the most well-known mental coach in the sport. Lee Westwood, ranked No. 2 in the world but still searching for his first major, recently divulged that he is, too, working with Rotella.

Count Mickelson in the keep-the-details-of-the-relationship-private camp.

“It's not an area I'm going to discuss, other than to say she's helping me,” Mickelson said after his Tuesday practice round. “It's probably not an area I ever will [talk about], but obviously I'm spending time with her.”

Elion, too, declined to comment on her work with Mickelson; her policy is to discuss her work with players only if the players are comfortable with such a public discourse. In that regard, J.B. Holmes, a member of the victorious 2008 U.S. Ryder Cup team, is the

most visible of her 10 or so clients on tour. Holmes, who has worked with Elion for nearly three years, is quite public about their work.

“I had been struggling on the course, thinking too much, maybe just worrying about stuff too much,” Holmes said Wednesday. “It's really helped to have her experience, as long as she's been out here on tour, just talking to me, helping me being able to learn to control my thoughts a little better and be able to calm down. Once you clear your mind of some of that, you can focus better. It helps to know that you're not the only one dealing with that stuff.”

Mickelson, 41, has acknowledged disappointment in his own play over the last two years. Since taking the 2010 Masters, he has won just once in 33 starts. But he arrived at the British Open last month with what seemed like something of a new attitude. He dismissed his dismal record in the United Kingdom by saying he was approaching that tournament as if it were his first British Open. When he tied for second there, he didn't lament his missteps — particularly a short missed par putt at No. 11 — but instead talked about the positives he took from a changed temperament.

“I've just got to change my attitude,” he said after the final round. “I played the whole week, whether I had dumb mistakes like 11 or whether I had great shots like 7, I tried to be upbeat, enjoy every minute of it. And I did. I really loved playing this week.”

He appears to have brought that attitude to Atlanta Athletic Club, where he was runner-up to David Toms in the 2001 PGA Championship.

“I feel like I'm headed in the right direction, and I'm patient,” he said. “I'm being patient with it.”

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