

Bunker

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→ School initiatives help kids find golf

IT ISN'T GOLF WEATHER in many parts of the United States, but at a growing number of elementary schools, the climate is better than it has ever been for introducing the game to children who otherwise might not have had the opportunity. From The First Tee's National School Program, which gives kids a taste of golf—and the values it can teach—during mandatory physical education classes, to after-school group lessons offered by Total Golf Adventures, youngsters are getting to explore the game without leaving campus.



“When they hear ‘golf,’ it’s not a foreign word, and when they see golf on TV, it’s not a foreign experience,” says Joe Louis Barrow Jr., CEO of The First Tee, of the 1.6 million kids who have experienced the National School Program since it began in 2003. “Every one of those young people has gotten an introduction to the game and nine core values of The First Tee.” The National School Program, in which students learn with SNAG plastic clubs and oversize balls, currently is in 3,400 locations and plans to be in 4,000 of the nation’s 64,000 elementary schools by year’s end.

Total Golf Adventures’ golf enrichment programs were launched at six Los Angeles schools in 2003 after its president/CEO, Joshua Jacobs, realized that while activities such as Spanish, piano and taekwondo were options for kids, golf was not. “I taught at one of the first programs in L.A., and it was

conducted in a hallway,” says Jacobs, a 33-year-old Emory graduate. “I had 17 kids sign up and pay to learn golf in a hallway. If you don’t think there is a demand to learn golf at those ages, there absolutely is.”

TGA, which also conducts summer golf camps, went nationwide in 2005, with a network of franchisees, often PGA of America or LPGA professionals, paying an average of \$15,000 to \$18,000 to obtain a territory. Through 2009, about 90,000 children have paid between \$80 and \$130 for five- to 10-week classes. TGA’s group lessons—which utilize traditional junior clubs and soft, reduced-flight “Almost Golf” balls—are being offered at 2,000 schools in 20 states, and Jacobs hopes to be at more than 5,000 schools in five years.

Teaching TGA classes has reinvigorated 44-year-old PGA pro Champ Detamore, who left a private club in California and

established the Charlotte territory. “I would never go back to being a conventional golf professional after having this experience,” says Detamore, whose franchise taught 1,800 children at 35 schools in 2009. “It’s amazing how many kids gravitate to the game once they’ve seen it and touched it. Golf isn’t for everybody, but if you can make it fun and enjoyable for the hour you’re with them, you can get them hooked.”

From simple moments can spring a lifelong love. “When a kid gets the ball up in the air for the first time, there is no better look,” Jacobs says.

“People who criticize the game don’t realize golf is having a broader social impact, particularly through The First Tee and other junior golf programs, on the attitudes of young people,” says Barrow. “The more golf can be in different, non-traditional locations, the better.”

—Bill Fields