

## GOLF AND EDUCATION COMBINED

# Champions for Kids finds home at historic black club

By MARK LESLIE

**G**ARNER, N.C. — Champions for Kids, a 6-year-old program that had a head start on the bumper crop of youth golf initiatives being fostered around the country, is about to get a "headquarters" Junior Golf Academy and support from major industry organizations.

Meadowbrook Country Club here, one of the country's first black-owned private golf clubs, is allowing the program to use its facilities as its headquarters as well as build a new nine holes and rebuild the existing nine to be youth-friendly. The resulting 18-hole executive track will play to a par-64 for adults and par-70 for youngsters.

"We have done a lot in the six years we've been in existence," said Champions for Kids founder Larry Turner. "Now, in the development of this junior golf facility, we really feel we can be one of the models [for the rest of the country]."

The Champions for Kids mission is to provide youths 8-14 with golf training and focused academic mentoring using golf-related instructional materials, according to Turner.

The program has gained support from some famous names in the sports world. Its national spokesperson is LaRee Sugg of the LPGA Tour. LPGA Hall of Famer Kathy Whitworth is on national advisory board. Calvin Peete and Jim Thorpe have participated, as has Dr. LeRoy Walker, past president of the U.S. Olympic Committee. In 1996 Golf Digest awarded Champions for Kids its Junior Development Award.

But the main cog in its future is the new Junior Golf Academy.

While the program normally has 200 youths participate each year, Turner said: "This will change immensely with the academy because we will be serving a much larger area — five counties. And it's of major significance because of the enormous amount of growth here."

The Research Triangle (Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill) region's boom has seen some of the world's wealthiest companies build headquarters here, and Champions for Kids is beginning to form partnerships with some of them.

"At the hub of this was the negotiation for the facility," Turner said. "That was the most important piece — having the home base and having the leverage of the golf industry to put their brand name on this project. Once companies hear the PGA Tour and USGA are involved, their affection changes completely."

"We will be a charter member of First Tee, and the facility will be a First Tee site."

Turner sees the program as developing more than golf skills.

"This is a comprehensive and long-range effort, with the goal of seeing these youths go on and be successful and productive," he said. "I know, from my own experience, what kept me focused and motivated as a youngster, because adults valued the kids in our community. Also, youngsters learn through sports, especially sports steeped in the values of integrity and courtesy — things you find in your home."

In the mentoring program, college professors work with golf pros to establish the junior golf curriculum and evaluate the

## Reaching Out

This package of stories is one of an ongoing series covering initiatives and projects developed to bring new golfers into the game, particularly youths and minorities. People wishing to submit projects for articles should contact the editorial department of *Golf Course News* at 106 Lafayette St., P.O. Box 997, Yarmouth, Maine 04096; e-mail: mleslie@golfcoursenews.com.

*'This is a comprehensive and long-range effort, with the goal of seeing these youths go on and be successful and productive.'*

— Larry Turner, founder

program. Serious youngsters have continuing opportunities to move into college-preparatory work.

"The academy wants to promote self-respect, self-confidence and leadership through the youths' experience," Turner said. "This enables them to have personal achievement. We feel once they have a personal success experience, they can turn it into leadership capability."

How does golf help? "Their attitudes toward the game change completely once they get the ball up in the air," Turner said.

Once participants turn 15 years old, they can try out for their high school golf teams and return as mentors in the Champions for Kids program. They can also compete in junior events and/or begin to think of those fields of study related to the industry where there are internship opportunities. ("A number of internship opportunities are available for aspiring youngsters," Turner said.)

•••

Champions for Kids has been at the head of the curve involving youths and golf.

"There was no For the Good of the Game, or First Tee program in 1996," Turner said. "So we were ahead of the game. But, it was hard for people to grasp that we were trying to establish a junior golf facility."

Turner had worked with Meadowbrook for several years and club members "saw the opportunity to do something that otherwise would be difficult to accomplish," he said. "Once people see that you are really doing it for the kids and that becomes your mission, they come on board."

The reward, Turner said, is watching youngsters come into the program and develop into young men and ladies.

"How you behave on the golf course is how you behave in general," he said. "It makes you want to work with kids. If we have expectations that they will do well, they will do well. If we're consistent with those expectations, it's a reward to work with kids."

•••

Richard Mandell of Whole In One Design in Durham, who is designing the renovations and new nine, said the project will be built in three phases on the 120-acre site:

- From March to June 15, they will rebuild the tees and bunkers and add kids' tees to the existing 1st through 7th holes.

- Starting June 16, they will build the new nine, plus rebuild the existing 9th hole and half the 8th hole.

- Next, they will redesign the fairways and greens on the first seven holes of the existing nine.

# Group of citizens hold up gift of Va. First Tee facility

By MARK LESLIE

**R**ICHMOND, Va. — A First Tee project that seemed to be a shoe-in, with private donors providing all the money needed for construction and five years of operation, is stuck in neutral — seven months after ground was to be turned.

"It's astonishing," said Richmond First Tee Executive Director Tim Merry. "Just when we think we can't be surprised any more, we continue to be surprised."

"You've got to scratch your head and wonder what's wrong with Richmond," said local businessman Fred Tattersall, who first organized Richmond First Tee Foundation.

Hoping to open the country's initial First Tee facility making golf more affordable to youths, Tattersall raised \$2 million in private funds — \$1.5 million to build the course and \$500,000 to operate the program for five years.

The idea to build in the city apparently fell through when Tattersall's group and the city could not agree on a site. More on that later.

Chapter Two of the saga began with neighboring Chesterfield County offering land for the First Tee course in Iron Bridge Park. It was a promising beginning. The county's Board of Supervisors voted to lease the land to Richmond First Tee. And the Planning Board staff endorsed the course designed by local golf course architect Lester George.

But then came the opposition. Some park neighbors sued, claiming the county has no legal right to lease land. And the Planning Board disregarded staff recommendations and voted 3-2 to demand some bizarre design changes, including a 6-foot-high fence and a double row of hedges around a couple of ponds on the course.

In October, a circuit judge released a ruling leaning in the neighbors' favor, declaring the county may lease land but only if it controls fees and oversees the leasee's operation.

And the Planning Board, according to Merry, disregarded the fact that George designed irrigation ponds with a "safety bench," meaning the ponds would be no more than 3 feet deep a distance of 24 feet from shore.

"It's obvious they will use anything to delay and, ultimately, defeat this project," said Merry. "We went into this as a partner with Chesterfield County, but feel we were treated worse than any other developer would be. Our board members are very involved in the community and have not seen anything like this before."

"A lot of cities across this country have stepped up to First Tee and said, 'This is wonderful,'" said Tattersall. "Unfortunately, as much as it pains me, being a resident of Richmond, maybe that's why we ranked dead last in terms of affordability and accessibility in a recent poll of places to play golf."

In response to opponents:

- Chesterfield officials are appealing the circuit judge's ruling that the county cannot lease land without controlling it. The county already leases land for a variety of purposes from an airport to ball fields. But, County Administrator Lane Ramsey, who serves on the Richmond First Tee board, said the Virginia Supreme Court could take up to a year to decide the case.

- Richmond First Tee has presented a proposal that would eliminate the irrigation ponds, but it would mean an added cost of \$30,000 to \$35,000 a year in water-use charges, Merry said.

Why are neighbors opposed to the First Tee project?

"We tend to think the opposition is because they think only inner-city kids would be coming and they don't want that," Merry said. "There are a lot of misconceptions. It is a course for all kids."

Meanwhile, Richmond First Tee has returned to Richmond with a new plan to build a three-hole youths' facility on the property first suggested by city officials.

The site is a former landfill that now contains a driving range. George has drafted a two-phase plan calling for refurbishing the range and adding three holes. Merry said if the city provides enough additional land, the foundation will add six holes on that property.

"We never really walked away from the city," said Merry. "And with Chesterfield County stalling out, we've turned our emphasis back to the city."

"Since the new City Council took office in July, it has been working to get the inner-city project done," said Tattersall. He added that the foundation has agreed to spend up to \$500,000 to build three holes and refurbish the range, or \$1 million to build nine holes.

"Our great hope now," Tattersall said, "is that we start construction on the inner-city site by February if we're only doing three holes, or by April on the nine holes."