The project officially started when Clark took a soil sample from the clay- and silt-laden ground. There were problems with the soil — it was very high in sodium because of the high salt content in the reservation’s water supply — but

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Field of Dreams

Continued from page 51

it was treatable. Clark determined that gypsum amendments would improve the soil and make it fertile.

Cannon and the superintendents then called their own meeting for their peers and Garagiola. Nearly 25 superintendents attended, and all committed to giving their time and energy to build the field.

“I couldn’t believe it was happening,” Garagiola says. “I never lift my nose at someone writing a check [to make a donation], but these people wrote a check with their hard work, muscle, sweat and tears.”

Smith was awed that so many superintendents and others from the golf course maintenance industry, including several equipment suppliers, were willing to help. Nearly 50 people showed up at St. Peter to help install the irrigation system in May. “We knew this would be something that could galvanize our membership and bring our members together,” Smith says.

Heart of the matter

Garagiola jokes that he changed the name of St. Peter Indian Mission to Our Lady of Quicksand. “Because once you get in, you can’t get out,” he says.

Garagiola has an endearing relationship with the students. They know that because of the former St. Louis Cardinals catcher, they have a new basketball court, new floors in classrooms, new restrooms, a new feast house and new carpet in the church, not to mention a new convent for the five nuns.

Garagiola knows a lot of people in high places. When he tells them about St. Peter and asks them to help, they take out their

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Sister Martha Carpenter is filmed by a local TV cameraman. The project has received mainstream media attention.

A group of volunteer workers, including former Cactus and Pine GCSA president Randall “Hoke” Holyoak (center), help install the irrigation system in May.

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wallets. Garagiola says his friend, Joe Crookham, president of Oskaloosa, Iowa-based Musco Lighting, promptly donated lights for the softball field after hearing Garagiola's pitch. When Garagiola walks in a second-grade classroom, the kids see him, smile and exclaim, "Hi Joe!" in unison. Garagiola cherishes the gesture.

"I just want these kids to have a chance," he says pensively. "Life is a race, and we're all at the starting line. I want these kids to be in the race. They're no different than anyone else."

Smith is touched by the undertaking and honored to be a part of it.

"These people — in a strong, silent and efficient way — got the job done," Joe Garagiola says of those who helped build the field.

"You can't put into words what you see and experience there," Smith says. "It's really something special."

Smith spread the word about the project to the association's affiliate members, who also responded in droves to help. Shawn Connors, president of Horizon's golf division, presented Sister Martha with plans for the field's irrigation system on April 21, which happened to be Good Friday. "She told me, 'This is really a good Friday,'" Connors says.

Of course, the kids are ecstatic about the field. Cameron Fasthorse, a sixth-grade student, says he won't miss running and kicking up the annoying dust. All John White, a seventh-grader, can say about the field is, "Cool!"

Sister Martha says the field will be like an oasis in the desert. "People will be out here all the time," she adds. "It will change the face of the earth here."

Everyone knows the field must be maintained if it's to endure. But superintendents and others vow their support and insist they won't forget about the project in a few years.

"This ball field will get treated like a golf course," Clark says. "We have people lined up who will aerify it annually."

But Clark realizes that he and other superintendents won't be able to stop by St. Peter on a regular basis to mow the grass or service the irrigation system. "They have state-of-the-art everything," Clark says of the equipment. "But there's a lot here and not just anyone can run it. It's going to take training."

Garagiola and Sister Martha say they will train parents of students to maintain the field. "There’s a hidden element in all of this, and that’s parent involvement," Garagiola says.

Garagiola, who an Indian medicine man dubbed "Awesome Fox" for his dedication to St. Peter, admits he was a doubting Thomas and wondered if the field would ever be built. Now that he sees a thick grass field in place of what used to be, Garagiola is inspired. His soul is especially stirred by the altruism exhibited by superintendents and other industry representatives who embraced the project so passionately.

"They're hall of famers," Garagiola says. "The kids feel important because these people didn't just give them lip service. A lot of people come by here and say they're going to do this and that. But these people — in a strong, silent and efficient way — got the job done. You judge people by what's inside of them, and these people have heart."
red Slagle gazes at the rolling hills and the verdant turf of the Little Thunder GC in Madison, Ohio. He eyes the course from right to left and back again. A cool rain has left the fairways and greens glistening in the setting sun, like tinsel sparkling on a lighted Christmas tree.

Slagle envisions Little Thunder packed with children ages 6 to 12 from all walks of life. Little Thunder, which opened in June, is Slagle’s gift to the kids, whom he says badly need a place of their own to experience golf.

Slagle, owner and designer of the nearby Reserve at Thunder Hill GC, known as one of the most difficult courses in the state, is on a mission to get more kids to play golf and, more importantly, to get them to learn and heed the etiquette of the sport.

“Where can kids play golf today?” Slagle asks before quickly answering his own question. “The unanimous answer is nowhere.”

Even golf’s marketers say the game needs more kids’ courses to grow interest in the sport, which is dominated by white adult males and not exploding with new golfers. The National Golf Foundation stresses that golf needs to be more “comfortable” and “exciting” for kids.

A 10-year-old kid, unless he or she is a budding Tiger Woods, is going to feel out of place and intimidated playing a course that’s 7,000 yards long. Slagle’s 9-year-old son, Darian, encountered such humbling feelings when his father let him play at the Reserve at Thunder Hill, a long and formidable course. Darian realized quickly that kids need their own courses.

So Darian began lobbying his father about three years ago to build a course on the tree-filled land near the Reserve at Thunder Hill that Slagle had purchased for his three young boys as a trust fund. Slagle chuckled at the thought, but Darian was impassioned about his request.

Darian told his dad that regular golf courses, such as the Reserve at Thunder Hill, were too big for kid golfers. Besides, adults don’t want kids on such courses, Darian said, because they take too long to play. Darian also made it clear that he wasn’t talking about miniature golf or a pitch-and-putt course.

“He wanted a real golf course like the Reserve at Thunder Hill,” Fred says. “He just wanted to make it a little shorter.”

Slagle’s other son, then 5-year-old Damon, chimed in that it was a great idea. He told his dad that they could name the small course, Little Thunder. Slagle still thought it was a wacky idea, but he agreed to research the possibility of building a golf course for kids.

Slagle discovered there were plenty of three-hole, nine-hole and par-three courses for children to play, but no scaled-down, 18-hole courses with bunkers, ponds, multiple tees and other components that characterize full-scale courses.

If he was going to build a course for kids, Slagle wanted to provide them with a full-fledged golf experience — from making them think about strategies involved with certain shots to teaching them how to repair divots.

The more Slagle began thinking about the project and its benefits, the more he wanted to build the course. And he had the 65-acre site, which he says was a perfect spot for the project. “It’s almost like God said, ‘If you’re going to build a golf course for kids, this is where it should be,’ ” Slagle says.

To date, more than 40 businesses have donated nearly $1 million in supplies, equipment and labor to the cause. Slagle says most everyone he asked agreed to help as soon as he mentioned kids and a golf course.

It’s a challenging course, but that was Slagle’s intention. While it’s billed as a kids’ course, it’s difficult for some adults, who are encouraged to play the course with their kids.

The greens pose a tough putting test, with undulations that would challenge Arnold Palmer in his hey-day. There are plenty of hazards, Continued on page 58
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too, as in 64 bunkers and four ponds.

Slagle realizes that a 7-year-old kid may not have the patience or desire to play 18 holes. So he designed the course with that in mind, along with skill levels. While kids can play 18 holes, they can also play six at a time. The first six holes on the course are the easiest, the second six holes are harder and the third six holes are the most difficult. “We needed to make the course flexible,” Slagle says.

While golf is about strategy, it’s about etiquette perhaps more than any other sport. Slagle believes golf is the only sport that teaches kids respect for fellow players and the environment.

He did not build Little Thunder to teach kids how to drive a golf ball 250 yards as much as he did to teach them about social grace. “It’s a sport that teaches you to be a gentleman,” he says.

Kids will feel out of place and intimidated playing courses that are 7,000 yards long.

When Slagle began plans for Little Thunder, he envisioned a place where kids could learn and play golf for free. He wants to stay true to that concept, but he realizes Little Thunder must have big money to make it happen.

Little Thunder is incorporated as a non-profit organization, and a major fundraising effort to obtain $5 million is under way to offset playing fees. Slagle wants to invest the money as an endowment so the course can function off annual interest revenues of about $500,000.

Standing on the fairway of the 9th hole, Slagle pauses to view the landscape, dotted with maple, dogwood, beech and tulip trees. He jokes that he wanted to please his kids, but this time he may have gone too far. Then he dwells upon what he has created.

“We’re not doing this to see what kids can bring to golf,” Slagle says.

“We’re doing it for what golf can bring to kids. We want to give kids the chance to be introduced to a sport of gentleness, honesty and consideration for others.”

It’s an understatement to say that Fred Slagle is on to something.

Larry Aylward

editor of Golfdom,
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But Bill Rose, president of Hubbard, Continued on page 61
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