

# The First Tee: Identifying places for kids to play

Tod Leiweke is executive director of The First Tee  
By TOD LEIWEKE

Throughout the United States, communities are embracing the idea that golf can play an important role in the life of kids. As our society continues to explore alternative means of engaging the minds of our young people, the concept of youth golf facilities is resonating in the public and private sector.

This has become abundantly clear since the World Golf Foundation's First Tee initiative was announced last November, as literally hundreds of interested communities and golf associations have contacted The First Tee offices in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

The First Tee's mission is to provide affordable access to golf by creating facilities that provide special learning and playing opportunities for kids.

These communities that have contacted The First Tee recognize golf as more than simply a recreational alternative. Golf truly is unique among sports in that, when embraced by its fundamental rules and merits, it instills such values as honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, self-discipline and self-respect... qualities that can have a positive influence on young people everywhere.

This said, a fundamental barrier to providing kids the opportunity to play is a place to play. Unlike other sports, such as basketball and baseball, the investment necessary to provide golf to kids is substantial.

Research bears out the need for youth golf facilities: The average age of a beginner golfer is 29 years old and 98 percent of kids ages 12 to 17 simply do not engage in the sport.

These numbers can be viewed one of two ways. On one hand, they might be considered discouraging. But the many golf, governmental and private organizations that have unified in support of The First Tee choose to see them as an extraordinary opportunity.

The goal of The First Tee is to have in development 100 facilities by the end of the year 2000. The First Tee will support local not-for-profit chapters in the development of facilities with a host of benefits, including design services, donated and discounted equipment, a teaching curriculum and certification program featuring The First Tee Card, and up to \$100,000 in project seed funds.

There have been, and continue to be, many commendable initiatives to introduce golf to those who otherwise might not have an opportunity to play. But never

before has golf experienced such a remarkable, collaborative effort involving the public and private sectors to broaden the game's reach.

For this to happen requires outstanding leadership, and it begins with The First Tee Oversight Committee: Chairman Tim Finchem, Commissioner of the PGA Tour; Jim Awtrey, chief executive officer of the PGA of America; LPGA Commissioner Jim Ritts; U.S. Golf Association (USGA) Past President Judy Bell; and Jim Armstrong, general manager of Augusta National Golf Club. We also are proud and honored to have former President George Bush serve as our honorary chairman.

In recent months, we have made a series of announcements reflecting progress with The First Tee. These have included:

- The identification of 24 sites that we expect to have under contract by year's end, and hopefully operational in 1999.
- The PGA of America's \$6 million commitment to The First Tee, half of which is an incentive program for its 41 sections to collaborate with First Tee facilities.

- The USGA's \$1 million commitment in 1999, with an additional \$1 million annual commitment anticipated over the next two years.

- \$500,000 raised for The First Tee at a golf outing organized by Herb Kohler at Whistling Straits golf course near Kohler, Wis.

- Ritts and Awtrey announcing the collaborative effort between the LPGA and PGA of America on the development of baseline policies for The First Tee curriculum.

- A memorandum of understanding signed by the Bureau of Land Management supporting The First Tee, which includes identifying public lands suitable for development of First Tee facilities.

- The Arnold Palmer Golf Co.'s donation of 15,000 junior clubs and 3,000 golf bags to The First Tee.

We can be proud that so many organizations and individuals share the vision and mission of The First Tee.

And because of this unified commitment, we also can be confident that vision will become reality, and that the lives of literally thousands of kids will be enriched through this remarkable effort.



Tod Leiweke will lead a First Tee panel discussion on Day 2 of Public Golf Form (Oct. 27) at Rancho Las Palmas Marriott Resort, Palm Springs Calif.

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