

Pint-sized equipment key to Kids Course success

By MARK LESLIE

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The genesis of the Kids Course at Bob-O-Link Golf Course here was actually Bill Ridge's idea in 1995 to manufacture kids-sized golf clubs and bags.

Bill Ridge, a PGA professional like his brother Jack, owned Club Pro Products, which was building windshields and covers for golf cars. Adding golf products for children just expanded the business. The rest is history.

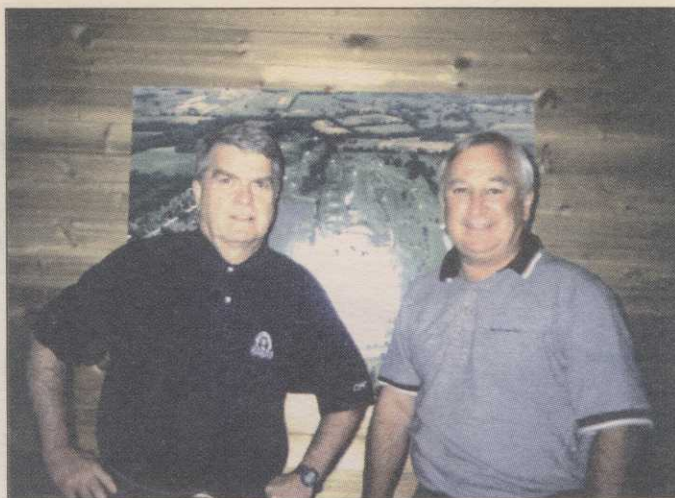
First came a kids' golf bag, called My First Bag, which the company introduced at the PGA Merchandise Show in January 1996 in Orlando, Fla. A quality bag, it was the first one marketed for children 3 to 6 years old and it was "a big hit," Ridge said.

Next came a set of child-sized clubs, My First Clubs. Rather than cutting down the shafts of regulation-sized clubs, these were a 3-wood, 7-iron and putter forged specifically for little people.

When Jack took over as president in the fall of 1996, the trend continued. Now the company offers pull carts, golf clubs, head covers and travel bags.

Then there are the teaching tools. *My First Golf Lesson*, a video developed by PGA professional Rob Stanger of Provo, Utah, and endorsed by Johnny Miller, led to *The Kids Kingdom Golf Coloring and Activity Book*.

The video and coloring book teach children about the golf



Kids Course designers Mike Ridge, left, and Jack Ridge. They have patented the name *The Kids Course*.

course, the game, how to hit the ball and keep score.

The kids products are in 400 to 500 pro shops around the country as well as at such stores as Bloomingdale's, Neiman Marcus and Disney World and at the World Golf Hall of Fame.

Club Pro Products recently signed a licensing agreement with United Media to supply logo-ed Snoopy clubs, bags and shoes for kids.

"This is booming like crazy and going farther and farther," said Mike Ridge, assistant to the president of Club Pro. "We can't make the products fast enough."

Child's Play

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Club Pro clubs and bags, then asked where they could take their children to play the game.

"I always suggested a par-3 course or driving range," Ridge said. "Where else was there?"

"We're very excited because this will be testing the waters [for similar, future projects]," said Mike Ridge, his cousin Jack's vice president in Ridge Golf Design and assistant to the president of Club Pro. "The whole idea behind this is to let kids experience the game and fall in love with it by actually playing it. It gives them goals, thrills, the challenge, a perception of the game. They're not taking a dozen shots to the green with daddy. They want a chance to make a par or birdie. That's what will keep them coming back."

Although they fought horrible weather, the Ridges said a layout like the Kids Course at Bob-O-Link could be built in a span of two weeks in perfect weather. At Bob-O-Link they simply added far-far-forward tees on 13 holes and used five ladies' tees that are in strategic places, then built bunkers situated for children's play. Kid-sized benches and ball-washers at the tees, and 5-foot-high flag sticks for a second set of kids' holes on the greens add to the built-for-children feeling, as do the kids' scorecards.

The opening on Father's Day was special, Mike Ridge said, because "we wanted the kids to feel it is their course in a sense that Dad is their guest."

Jack Ridge explained: "By installing new sets of tees and the strategic location of new bunkers, hazards and mounding, a routing was being created which, in essence, resulted in a course within a course, with its own distinct character that does not compromise the integrity of the existing full-sized layout."

A PGA professional who has given hun-



Bob-O-Link Golf Course member Buddy Flora tends the flagstick for son Buddy Jr. as he putts into a Kids Course cup.

dreds of lessons to children, Jack Ridge designed the Kids Course with a good feel for how far they hit the ball. He and Mike figured 85 yards on a drive. Therefore, a hole from 85 to 160 yards long is a par-4. Longer than 160 yards is a par-5. An adults' straight-away par-4 of 385 yards can also be a double-dogleg 275-yard par-5 for kids.

Bob-O-Link's Kids Course is a par-74 layout measuring 3,100 yards.

Looking forward to other kids' courses, Mike Ridge said more than one set of children's tees can be built per hole — perhaps having one for 3- to 6-year-old and one for 7- to 10-year-olds. Once a child can shoot par from the shortest tees, he or she could move back to the next set of tees. Once he or she shoots par there, they can move back to the ladies' forward tees, and so forth.

"When people bring their small children here to play, it will be exciting to them," Jack Ridge promised.

Pointing out smaller children's rela-

tively short attention span, Mike Ridge said: "To try to take your children out on the range for an hour is too much. You want to make it fun for them. This course does that and we expect it to be a tremendous success."

The Ridges originally proposed that the State of Kentucky Parks and Tourism departments build stand-alone kids' courses at the state parks. "They loved it, everyone from the head of the golf section of the state Parks Department to the secretary of tourism," said Mike Ridge. But they thought courses strictly for children would not be economically feasible. Still, state officials may decide to build kids' courses within the several existing state-operated regulation golf courses.

Also, the Ridges are including kids' courses within their bids for full-length course projects.

They hope the idea will catch on nationally. Until then, "the kids are standing there growing up and there's nothing for them," Mike Ridge said.

THOMPSON NOW THOMPSON GOLF PLANNING LTD.

SAN RAFAEL, Calif., USA — Thompson Planning Group Ltd., a long-time player in the Asian golf design market, has changed its name to Thompson Golf Planning Ltd. According to company president Peter L.H. Thompson, the new name more appropriately reflects the organization's "overall work in golf course planning and architecture." The company is currently working on a second 18-hole development at Jin Shi Tan (Golden Stone Beach), golf resort in Dalian, China.

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