

Little Thunder Hill adds 'kids' dimension to facility

By JOHN H. TIDYMAN

MADISON, Ohio — Last fall, Fred Slagle and his two boys, Darian, 6, and Damon, 5, were walking around the property adjacent to his Thunder Hill Golf Course. "What do you think we should do with this land?" he asked. "Dad," Darian piped up, "we gotta build a kids' golf course." Slagle laughed and continued the hike.

In 1967, he had built the most fearsome course in the area, Thunder Hill speckled

with nearly 100 ponds and lakes, almost that many traps and a topography difficult for tanks.

On the way home, Darian tugged on his father's pant leg. "We could call it Little Thunder," he said. Slagle looked at the earnest eyes of his boy and laughed again.

At the supper table that night, it became clear Darian wasn't finished selling the idea of a golf course for kids. His mother, Eliette, suggested the boys could sneak out on Thunder Hill. Darian heaved an exagger-

ated sigh and turned to his father.

"Dad," he explained slowly, "we can't hit balls over the lakes and those people don't want us there anyhow. Not only that, but where can our friends play?"

Slagle promised to look into the matter. Over the next week, he called the PGA, the United States Golf Association and other golf organizations to ask where can kids age 6 to 12 might play golf. The answer was always the same: nowhere.

Then along came The First Tee, a pro-

Reaching Out

One of a series of stories on projects and initiatives undertaken to bring new golfers into the game.

gram designed to bring kids to golf. "We immediately contacted them," Slagle said. "They were going to cities and hoping to have a few acres donated on which they would build a driving range and a three-hole course. It occurred to us, kids still wouldn't have a place to play."

Part of The First Tee calls for encouraging public courses to accommodate youths. "It's a well-known economic factor," Slagle said, "that it's very difficult to maintain any pace of play (with kids on the course.) We wish them the best, but it may be unrealistic to expect courses to accommodate kids."

The Slagle property measured 65 acres, roughly half what was needed for a regulation-length course. He crunched numbers in his office and came up with a greens fee structure. Too bad it would prevent any kid from playing. "To build, maintain and operate the course would mean green fees of \$25 to \$35. There's no way a kid can afford that. So we looked into the possibility of a non-profit golf foundation."

Two angels alighted immediately: Slagle's attorney, Tim Cannon, and his accountant, Bert Hudson. Both volunteered their professional services.

The normal way would have been to start the foundation and raise money for a couple years and then begin clearing the land, Slagle said. But he doesn't work that way. Taken with the idea of Little Thunder - A Kid's Golf Foundation, he was walking the property, tagging tulip, dogwood and dogwood trees. By the time he finished, nearly 900 trees had been tagged.

Dick Psolla, of REP Consulting, in Canfield, brought his son, Eric, to the property and the two took soil samples and had them analyzed at Brookside Laboratories, in New Knoxville. The abandoned farm land was perfect for a golf course.

The team was slowly forming, with neither a bugle nor a conscription. When providers of services or goods were asked to volunteer, all but one said yes.

Tim Stocker, of Crabbs Survey in Painesville, who has worked in the past for Slagle, offered his help with engineering; same with professional shaper Robert Zanko, from nearby Geauga County. Mahnen Machinery, Inc., in Painesville, loaned an excavator and bulldozer.

Over the winter, Slagle took topographical maps of the land to his winter residence in Costa Rica. It was there he designed the 18 holes.

When the family returned last spring, Slagle staked out the center lines. The routing plan was remarkably compatible with the 900 tagged trees; only seven had to be removed.

Five dozen sand traps and three lakes were incorporated into the design. Two of the lakes are aesthetic, one is for irrigation. None of the lakes is a forced carry.

It was time for a few more angels to appear and they did.

"As we worked, we realized the cost would be substantial, that we didn't have the resources to do it all. At that point," Slagle said, "we thought, 'we haven't

Continued on next page

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Little Thunder

Continued from previous page raised any money.' And that's the hardest thing to ask for. And none of us had any experience asking, either. So we wondered if people would help with raw materials and services."

Slagle's pitch was a simple one: He was building an 18-hole golf course for kids, a course where kids would be welcome, where they would learn the lessons golf offers all its students: honesty, fairness, consideration, respect.

The army of angels grew: R.W. Sidley Co. provided all the sand for the greens mix as well as tons of gravel for the base of greens. It also offered sand for traps.

Arms Trucking in Geauga County offered to haul the 4,000 tons of sand. "They did it according to our construction schedule, not theirs," Slagle said.

Blending the mix for the greens calls for a blender. Construction company executive Don Haueter had the blender trucked to the site and sent three of his employees there to do the blending.

Slagle called Barry's Trucking to see if it could help with the cleaning and shredding of the topsoil taken from the construction of the lakes. "He screened all our topsoil and then offered to do some trucking for us."

Psolla, the consultant who did the soil survey, put Slagle in touch with Chicago peat moss broker Jeff Kozell. Sungrow Horticulture, a Canadian peat moss company, was asked and truckloads of the stuff arrived.

"Dick also told us about a lime dealer in Detroit. We needed about 80 tons to sweeten the soil and make the growing faster and easier," Slagle said.

Alan Meyer, the Detroit, dispatched the lime and Janson's Soil Service, from Rock Creek, brought in a spreader and applied the lime.

The course needed drain tile and Advance Drainage, in Columbus, offered to provide all that was needed.

The shaper, Zanko, climbed aboard his bulldozer in July and made the place look like a golf course. While he went back and forth, a team of volunteer union pile drivers led by Albert Redden arrived and built a retaining wall.

"We'll be planting grass this month," Slagle said.

Even IMG, the sports promotion and agent company, got in the act. Slagle produced a six-page summary for use as a fundraiser. IMG created a color topographical rendering of Little Thunder to be included.

It is part of Little Thunder's application to the USGA for a \$100,000 grant for classrooms and equipment. "We'll know in November," Slagle said.

Next on the schedule is the

building of a log cabin golf school. The Amish community will donate that. Logging Enterprises is owned by Wally Byler of Middlefield and he will assemble a crew that will apply its barn-raising talents to a big pile of donated logs.

Words and Images helped create the logo which features a hand coming down from the clouds and children jumping from the palm to the golf course.

"One of the big challenges was creating a unique logo for Little Thunder," she said. "We looked at lots of other junior golf programs, but they all had a small boy with a bag on his shoulder. We wanted something a little more exciting, something with more impact."

Fine Line Printing, in Cleveland, created the stationery and Clean Stream, Inc. is providing environmental services. Lake Erie Golf

Cars, in Solon, and North Coast Golf Equipment, in Warrensville Heights, join Meadowbrook Golf Group in loaning equipment and carts. Meadowbrook manages Thunder Hill.

Little Thunder will be 100 percent for youths when out of school, Slagle said. "But we'll also have the opportunity to use the facility and allow the public to use it during the off-kids time."

The general public can pay

normal fees and it will help subsidize the kids."

It is Slagle's dream that kids' green fees be minimal or non-existent. He also dreams of money. Corporate sponsorships to complete the course and operate it are next on the list.

Slagle is looking for an executive director who will form the board of trustees and serve as rainmaker.

The dream is well under way.

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