

# Little Thunder looks to grow game

Foundation seeking endowment to allow children to play scaled-down course for free

By DEREK RICE

MADISON, Ohio — With rounds played numbers down in 2002 and competition to attract golfers to courses fierce, the industry is seeking out ways to draw new players into the game.

If golf is to survive into the future, many of those new players are going to have to be children. However, this is a double-edged sword, as children, as well as other beginners, are not welcomed with open arms at most courses, especially those with members.

Joe Biscotti, a 42-year PGA professional and president and chairman of Little Thunder Kids Golf Foundation Inc. thinks his employer has the right idea to skate that thin line between bringing new players to golf while making them feel welcome.

"The biggest thing that I can see is kids are not welcome at country clubs and other golf courses," Biscotti said. "How many times have you seen kids out there playing and you see four old members standing on the tee with their hands on their hips? Even if the kids are educated and have etiquette, they just don't seem to want them out there."

The non-profit Little Thunder Foundation operates Little Thunder Kids Golf Course and Learning Center in Madison. The course is a 3,160-yard 18-hole course designed and built on 60 acres for children ages six to 12. It features six par-3s, six par-4s and six par-5s. The longest hole is 310 yards and the shortest is 46 yards.

The course is the brainchild of Fred Slagle, a real estate developer who owns and designed Thunder Hills Golf Club, which is right across the street from Little Thunder. Slagle built the course after his own children complained about the length and difficulty of Thunder Hills for kids.

"He decided to go across the street and build a little golf course because his kids said to him one day, 'Dad, we can't play that big golf course. We can't hit it over the lakes,'" Biscotti said. "He spent \$2 million of his own money to build a golf course to scale for kids between the ages of six and 12."

Biscotti estimates that in the nearly three years Little Thunder has been open, Slagle has put close to \$3 million into the course. He said the foundation would like to establish an endowment to fund the upkeep of the course and allow kids, who pay around \$10 to play all day, to play for free.

"We need somebody to give us some help," Biscotti said. "Fred Slagle has funded this thing for three years and he's put up almost \$3 million, so we'd like to get an endowment and let the endowment pay for it. He's done

a hell of a lot more than other people in golf are doing."

Most of the donations the foundation receives go to necessary expenses, Biscotti said, leaving nothing to help with greens fees.

"We don't have any money to

speak of. All the money we get in, we have to use it for maintenance and taxes," he said.

Biscotti likens Little Thunder to some of the smaller-scale athletic fields located around the country.

"To teach kids soccer today, you go out and build a little soccer field. That's easy. You go out and get a 100-yard piece of dirt and grass and you put two nets up

and play," he said. "It's more difficult to go build a \$2 million golf course where kids are the members."

With Cleveland only 28 miles away, Little Thunder also reaches out to the inner city, Biscotti said.

"We have a lot of programs though the schools, through churches and the YMCA. We do some things with the inner cities and minorities," Biscotti said.

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