

Attracting kids with golf to better their education

Twenty years ago, Jay Miller was vacationing with his wife, Barbara, in Hawaii, and she told him to write down what he would do if he had all the money in the world.

"I said I would try and help as many kids as possible by hooking them on golf," Miller says. "I put my plan in my desk, and it ended up in there for 13 years."

Miller is co-founder, president and c.e.o. of the privately operated Get a Grip Foundation, which was founded in 2000.

Miller is a golf aficionado. He started playing the game at age five, worked at a golf course when he was 11, was a high school all-American and went to Purdue University on a golf scholarship. He then tried to play on the PGA Tour, but failed. Eventually, he opened his own business of promotions, sales, marketing and fund raising.

"I did well because of golf," he says. "Back then (during the early to mid-1980s), the martini lunch was still in vogue. A lot of golf was played. I played 92 rounds of entertainment golf a year."

Shortly after Miller's father died on his 40th birthday in 1999, he was playing golf with friend Bob Hoff, who asked Miller the same question his wife asked when they were in Hawaii. Miller told Hoff about his program, which he called "Tee It High." It was renamed Get a Grip because Tee It High was taken already.

Miller and Hoff raised \$2.5 million to start the foundation. Then Miller and his wife sold their small business; he became c.e.o. and ran the foundation. Hoff became the chairman.

"My job was to write a blueprint, find a location and raise the money," Miller says. "We raised several million dollars, but didn't have a course. It took me one year to find the course, and I almost gave up finding it. A real-estate guy showed me a course that I couldn't afford, but the owner of the course directed me toward one that fit what I was looking for. It was a crummy course, but I bought the

leasehold on it for 35 years.

"The first thing I did was move 300,000 yards of cubic dirt," he adds. "I hired Superior Golf, but I had no design plans. I sat on a bulldozer with a guy and told him to form fairways the way I wanted. I never had to touch one green. Ted Horton (a California-based consultant) helped me oversee with *Poa annua* and aerated the greens an awful lot.

"When we finish redesigning the course, we did 3,000 more rounds - 39,000 - than the year before. In 2002, we did 42,500 rounds, and in 2003, we did 45,500 rounds. This year, we're on track for 47,000 rounds."

Miller says the course has a slope rating of 123, has six easy holes, six fun holes and six holes tougher than Chinese arithmetic.

Miller and his wife have owned the daily-fee Cresta Verde Golf Club in Corona, Calif., since Feb. 11, 2002, and the Get a Grip Foundation started to operate there March 1, 2002.

"For the foundation to be categorized as non-profit, we had to raise eight times the gross revenue of the golf course," Miller says. "In 2003, the course grossed 1.7 million, so we needed to raise 13.6 million."

The foundation's beginning seemed grim because only eight children showed up when the doors opened. But things got better quickly.

"We got up to 42 kids in two

months," Miller says. "And then 156 kids enrolled after a newspaper article about the foundation. Now,



For every hour of golf they play, kids in the program are required to spend 20 minutes in the learning center.

there are 525 kids in the program, but that number fluctuates yearly."

There is no monetary cost for parents and kids to participate in the program. The kids, age 7 to 18, receive 70 minutes of PGA instructions a week, a range pass and all the balls they want.

"The kids get to play the course after 10:30 for \$1, and they get all the practice time they want," Miller says.

The foundation continues to grow. A practice center opens in late November this year and a tutoring center is expected to open in the spring of 2005.

"There is education every day, and kids do homework with certified teachers and accredited tutors," Millers says. "For every hour on the

golf course, the kids owe us 20 minutes in the learning center. Golf is our hook, education is our mission.

We're not trying to produce the likes of Tiger Woods."

Miller says his foundation, which has a mandatory life skills program and a voluntary bible study, helps kids stay out of trouble, which is what can happen when they get bored.

"The kids were on the golf course property 39,000 hours during 2003 - that's 39,000 hours off the street - and hit over 478,000 range balls. In 2004, we're

projecting them to be on the course property 47,000 hours."

There were 1,750 rounds played at Cresta Verde in 2003, and there's more than 2,000 projected this year. Equipment for the kids is donated by Roger Dunn Golf Shops. Titleist and Taylor Made also donate clubs.

The foundation, which has a budget of \$400,000 on which to operate, has four junior tournaments a year that cost the kids nothing. Miller sees the tournaments as building a base of loyal customers. A large part of the fund raising is The Esteban Toledo PGA Tour Pro-Am. Toledo is the ambassador for Get a Grip.

"We now have 150 parents that play golf because of their kids," he says. "That's \$20,000 in potential revenue a year."

Miller also says kids return as adults to play the course to give back what they've received from the foundation.

"I'm building my own base of loyal golfers instead of participating in the golf discount wars," he says.

Miller wants to grow the program to 1,000 kids by the end of next year.

The foundation can be summed up by the two tag lines it has: "Making golf and education accessible to all children" and "Bringing golf back to the people starting with an owner who cares." For more information, visit www.getagripfoundation.org, GCN



With the help from Superior Golf, Jay Miller, founder of the Get a Grip Foundation, redesigned the Cresta Verde Golf Club.