

Growing the game

Since its inception in 1997, The First Tee reached 975,000 kids by the end of 2005, according to Joe Louis Barrow Jr., the organization's executive director. Photo: The First Tee



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YOUTH PROGRAMS PLANT SEEDS TODAY TO GROW THE GAME LATER

by JOHN WALSH



Spurred by a stagnant number of rounds played, a decline of new course construction and declining club membership numbers, many executives in the golf industry have been talking about the crucial need to grow the game, which means encouraging more people (women, minorities, the disabled, youth, baby boomers, etc.) to play the game more often.

"Our growing-the-game effort has been going on for a while," says Mike Hughes, chief executive officer of the National Golf Course Owners Association. "We've been educating owners about this since the '90s. It's been on

our radar since 1997."

But it's not just the present executives are concerned about. It's the future. There are several programs in place to help secure that potentially bright future. They include: Play Golf America, The First Tee, Sticks For Kids, Hook a Kid on Golf, Kids On Course, Link Up 2 Golf and Take Your Daughter to the Course Week, to name several. The NGCOA is involved with many of these programs. Yet, there are many more throughout the country at the facility level.

"Kids are a long-term solution, but we also need to get people to play now," Hughes says. "Both have to be done."

More than a game

As part of securing the game's future, The First Tee views its program holistically, as more than just encouraging kids to play golf. Its business model consists of five components:

1. To reach young people who normally wouldn't choose to play golf;
2. To provide consistent and affordable access to golf;
3. To promote local ownership of First Tee facilities;
4. To create public involvement; and
5. To position golf as more than a game.

Now in its third phase of develop-

growing the game

ment, most of The First Tee's growth was between 2001 and 2005, during the second phase of its development. By the end of 2005, the program reached a total of 975,000 kids, surpassing the goal of 500,000 kids, says Joe Louis Barrow Jr., executive director of The First Tee. The program reached 675,000 kids at facilities throughout the country plus an additional 300,000 kids in the national school program.

"When taking a percentage of the young people that participated, 75 to 80 percent of kids had never participated in the game of golf," Barrow says. "At the chapter level, we have three-, six- and nine-hole golf facilities. The goal was to have 500 relationships with nearby 18-hole golf courses, and right now, we have 690. As the young people mature, they can graduate to the 18-hole courses, but we're not moving them too quickly."



The hope is that kids who partake in The First Tee program eventually progress to play 18-hole golf courses. Photo: The First Tee

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It's well known there are three main deterrents the industry faces to growing the game: the time it takes to play a round, the difficulty playing the game and the cost. The First Tee address those by:

1. Offering three-, six- or nine-hole courses so it doesn't take that long to play. "We're expecting the kids to play in less than one hour," Barrow says. "Beginners are playing with other beginners."

2. The holes are shorter and don't have as many hazards. "We don't make it difficult," he says.

3. The fees are modest. "If someone

can't afford it, he or she can work at the facility to earn money to play or earn a scholarship."

Another component of The First Tee is the nonprofit organizations that run the program's chapters. There are 202 chapters operating 257 facilities in 46 states.

"If the local community can't embrace The First Tee, it will never be successful," Barrow says.

There's a unique relationship with public and private partnerships, Barrow says. The First Tee hasn't had to buy land, and most facilities are on

ON THE WEB

Below is a list of Web sites for growing-the-game-type programs geared toward kids. Find out how your facility can be more involved with encouraging kids to play the game.

- www.playgolfamerica.com
- www.thefirsttee.org
- www.hookakidongolf.org
- www.kidsoncourse.org
- www.nrpa.org/content/default.aspx?documentId=4756
- www.golf2020.com/linkup2golf.asp
- www.getlinkedplaygolf.com/index.aspx?ID=556

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long-term leases. All the land that comprises the facilities is worth about \$200 million, Barrows says. The private sector provides resources to improve the facilities.

But now the model has shifted: 25 percent of the facilities are stand-alone and the rest are part of another golf course or park.

"The 'attached' model is what we want because the golf course superintendents who maintain the 18-hole courses can also maintain The First Tee facility," Barrow says. "We would like to see that 25 percent go down even more. Most partnerships are with well-working facilities. We don't encourage buying poorly run golf properties and don't encourage our chapters to take on debt and challenges of a poorly operating facility."

One course's mission

One of those partnerships is with Colbert Hills Golf Course in Manhattan, Kan. Colbert Hills, which generated about 30,000 rounds last year, is the brainchild of PGA professional Jim Colbert and was designed to help Kansas State University's men's and women's golf teams and introduce golf to disadvantaged kids. The course is about a mile from the university.

The Manhattan, Kan., golf market, like many, is competitive. There are 19 courses in a 50-mile radius, according to David Gourlay, director of golf operations/general manager.

"It's unbelievable," says Gourlay, who's been at Colbert Hills since it opened in 2000. "On paper, you wonder how it works. You need a good marketing effort to bring people in here."

Part of that marketing effort includes The First Tee. The daily-fee facility, which includes an 18-hole championship golf course and a par-3 course, hosts The First Tee National Academy each year. Annika Sorenstam's coach is one of many who comes to the academy

and devotes some of her time to help teach the kids, Gourlay says.

During The First Tee programs, Gourlay speaks to the kids about the various professions in the golf business.

"Many kids think the only job in golf is the golf pro, so we're enlightening them with the other opportunities," he says. "This is done so they're not lost when they find out that they can't be a golf pro."

Gourlay says the academy is planting a seed.

"We're optimistic about the future," he says. "The seed isn't just germinating here in Kansas because the kids go out all over the world. They come away more grounded. Today's society moves so fast it's easy to get lost in the shuffle. The First Tee helps them pursue goals confidently. It's a life-changing thing for them."

To continue a young person's link to golf, Kansas State created two programs for high schools to keep The First Tee kids involved with the game.

The program's impact

The third phase of the program's development started in January 2006 and will go through 2010. Operating the facilities efficiently will be the focus during this phase.

"We have relationships in the queue and have 10 to 16 projects in the development phase and opened about 10 in 2006," Barrow says. "In phase three we want to be in all 50 states and in 90 of the top 100 [metropolitan statistical areas]. We want the education to be consistent among all locations. We're focusing on quality and consistency."

The First Tee opened 50 facilities in 2005 and 50 in 2004.

Even though The First Tee is in its third phase, there's still a need to measure the program's success.

"We've tracked retention rates

through the five levels of the curriculum," Barrow says. "In 2003, there was 27-percent retention; in 2004, there was 34 percent; and in 2005, there was 35.5 percent retention. We have First Tee kids playing high-school golf."

Barrows says Golf 20/20 conducted an analysis that concluded if golfers came to the game through a junior golf program, they would be likely to



The third phase of The First Tee program is to concentrate on operating facilities efficiently. Photo: The First Tee

growing the game

spend \$1,000 on golf in one year; and those who came to golf from outside a junior golf program were likely to spend \$600.

"That's a \$60 million impact on golf downstream," Barrow says.

The key to The First Tee's success is positioning it as more than a game, Barrow says. The program is in 140 additional school districts and 4,000 elementary schools, reaching two million young people. The school program is

delivered by teachers and is a mandatory two-week class in the physical education rotation.

"Seventy-six percent of the parents whose kids have participated in The First Tee program said they saw increased confidence in their kids, 62 percent saw grades improve, and 66 percent saw an improvement in their kids' social abilities," Barrow says.

Additionally, the program is reaching a wider audience.

"The perception of golf is that it's an exclusive, white game," Barrow says. "Fifty percent of the kids involved in the program are minorities, and 35 percent are girls. We're reaching a more diverse group of people than all of golf. We're reaching four million people through the participants and their friends, relatives and family. More cross-sections of society will be involved in golf in 2010, 2015 and 2020 because of The First Tee." GCN



Programs such as Sticks for Kids make it easier for kids to play the game. Photo: GCBA

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Program puts kids on courses

Like The First Tee, Sticks For Kids is a golf program gaining momentum. Started by the Golf Course Builders Association of America during the late 1970s as the Sticks for Kids Foundation, the association is tweaking the program to make it stronger.

The GCBA's Web site states: The future of the game of golf in the United States depends on those young boys and girls interested in learning and respecting the game. The responsibility to secure the future of golf lies with

The GCBA had 30 Sticks for Kids programs in place throughout the years, and all the programs were set up where a member had to take charge, says Bill Kubly, c.e.o. of Landscape Unlimited and president of the board of directors of the GCBA Foundation, the charitable arm of the GCBA.

"That was the original direction, and 15 were still active a few years ago, but we discovered some programs weren't as successful as we'd liked

based at the GCBA headquarters in Lincoln, Neb.

The GCBA has partnered with US Kids Golf, a company that manufactures golf clubs for kids, and every facility will receive 10 sets of clubs, Kubly says.

"We'll be buying a minimum of 1,000 sets of clubs a year," he says. "The clubs will be used in the classroom, on the driving range and on the golf course. This is a 12-month program. Our investment, which is about

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those of us benefiting from golf today. The GCBA established the Sticks for Kids Foundation to provide the tools and opportunities necessary to allow as many junior golfers as possible to enjoy the game.

For golf courses that would like to participate in the SFK program, there are four requirements. Each facility:

- Must have an active junior program – the SFK program may establish, enhance or replace a current program;
- Must have the ability to store the clubs for use by junior golfers;
- Is expected to promote the program through the use of posters and displays; and
- Is expected to work with local media and businesses to promote the program.

because we all had full-time jobs," Kubly says. "We needed a partner, so Paul Foley (executive director of the GCBA) hooked up with the National Recreation and Parks Association, which has embraced golf. The NRPA had done this type of work with tennis, and there are 700 tennis programs now. They have 6,000 members that represent 10,000 golf courses. NRPA is connected to municipal golf courses. They are a major player."

The NRPA and the SFK program was a good fit because the NRPA didn't have a golf program. The GCBA Foundation is committed to starting 100 programs a year for the next three years. The GCBA is supplying golf clubs to these programs and is helping market and administer the program, mainly through an assistant

a quarter of a million dollars, will touch at least 100 kids per program."

Kubly says there have been 245 course members sign up already, but only 100 are going to get in.

To measure the success of the program, Kubly says the GCBA needs to know how many kids are using the clubs, how many times the clubs are used and to closely monitor the program to see how well it's doing.

The SFK program, like the other programs designed to grow the game, is about inclusion.

"Our sport has always been a blue blood sport, so we wanted to reach kids who otherwise wouldn't play golf," Kubly says. "It's also important to work with baby boomers, women, etc. Every initiative to get more golfer out there is important." GCN



There are 245 golf facilities interested in participating in the Sticks for Kids program. Photo: GCBA