

# Facilitating the FUTURE

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**Joe O'Brien**  
talks about The  
First Tee, fond  
memories of the  
GCSAA and being  
reunited with  
Steve Mona

BY PAT JONES

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**F**or a guy who says he didn't like teaching, Joe O'Brien sure seems like he's spent his life doing it. For almost 17 years at the PGA of America, he put together programs to help teach golf professionals how to do their jobs successfully. For seven years as the c.o.o. of the GCSAA, he helped teach the association's staff and leadership a new way of doing business. And for the past six years, he's been a driving force in teaching values to children through The First Tee organization.

O'Brien is an Illinois native who grew up loving and playing every kind of game that featured a ball. He attended the University of Illinois, graduated with a B.S. in marketing (he later earned an MBA at DePaul) and ended up as a high school teacher in the Chicago area at age 25. He wasn't thrilled with it and decided to pursue a career in sports.

He applied to professional baseball clubs and different golf associations. He lucked his way into an interview with Gary Wiren, Ph.D., the legendary PGA executive. The PGA wanted to expand and upgrade their education programs and needed someone. O'Brien was out of teaching ... and back into teaching.

He spent almost two decades building and refining education and training programs for the PGA and becoming a fixture in the industry at conferences and

events. He left the PGA for Marriott Golf for four years during a time when the hotel company was attempting to expand dramatically into facility management. After that, he did a brief stint with a D.C.-based hotel association before learning the GCSAA was looking for a new executive team. He was a finalist for the c.e.o. position along with Steve Mona and a couple others. Eventually, the GCSAA board made the wise decision of putting Mona in the "Mr. Outside" leadership slot and making O'Brien "Mr. Inside" to manage the daily operations.

Most superintendents probably remember O'Brien best for his work facilitating dozens of committee meetings. His constant curiosity and willingness to guide members to good decisions was a hallmark of his time in Lawrence, Kan. He also ended up as the GCSAA's point-person on environmental issues – a topic he admittedly knew little about at the time – and did such a good job steering the association's efforts the board rewarded him with the President's Award for Environmental Leadership, an unprecedented honor for a member of the staff.

He left the GCSAA in 2001 and landed at the still-young, still relatively undefined First Tee. His role – to develop programs and educational concepts for the



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## EXECUTIVE PROFILE

organization's 200-plus chapters – fits the teacher in him perfectly. Now, as The First Tee celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary and attempts to expand programs to offer golf as a curriculum for grade-school students, O'Brien is back trying to teach stuff to kids – but this time, his classroom has 1.5 million students throughout the country.

### WHAT IS YOUR JOB EXACTLY?

I'm responsible for developing education programs for the First Tee executives and chapters. That includes things such as curriculum for the kids and certification for our adult volunteer leaders. I'm also trying constantly to take the pulse of the chapters and the industry. I'm always checking financial reports, surveys, trends, etc., looking to see how we're doing. We're constantly benchmarking. When we were growing rapidly

was an important part of their lives as kids.

### WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE TO MAKE THE GROUP ULTRASUCCESSFUL?

The First Tee is basically just a network of chapters. If I could change anything, it would be to consistently attract executives and develop boards that are all high quality. We're only as good as our chapters, so the leadership at that level is critical.

### TELL US ABOUT THE GRADE-SCHOOL GOLF CURRICULUM PROGRAM.

That grew out of the Golf 20/20 initiative a few years ago. The idea was to provide a curriculum for phys ed teachers to use in the schools to introduce kids to golf and its values. It was successful immediately. Even teachers that had

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- JOE O'BRIEN

quantitatively, there still was some question about how we were doing qualitatively, so we have metrics to look at that as well.

### WHAT SURPRISED YOU WHEN YOU FIRST JOINED THE ORGANIZATION?

It's completely different from a junior golf program. We teach honest-to-goodness character development. We don't teach values, but they learn values. Take a typical junior golf program and turn it upside down. That's us. We're more focused on the development of children than the development of golfers. Kids who get into formal programs are more than six times more likely to play as adults, so eventually it will have an effect. But that's not the point.

We've had three different universities measure the skills and behavior we've helped the kids develop. It works.

I was also pleasantly surprised at how many successful people view The First Tee as their way to give back to golf. They genuinely want to make a difference through the game of golf because it

never played golf enjoyed it. So, it got big quickly, and Golf 20/20 moved it over to us to manage and grow. The PGA Tour events got behind the idea and helped fund it in their communities, and we've had good local and corporate sponsorship as well. It's a main priority for us now.

This is different than our general goal of character development. The point of this is to equip kids to enter the world of golf with acceptable skills and etiquette. It's different from other sports taught in schools, and that was difficult. You have to deal with safety issues and a variety of other challenges. But, it's definitely taking off – we've reached 1.5 million kids. Our goal is to reach to 4.5 million kids eventually. We're pretty good at making our goals.

### I WAS SURPRISED YOU GUYS HAVE A SMALL STAFF.

We don't need much administration. Our job is to help chapters find kids and engage them. We're focused. We're also lucky that we can rely on the PGA Tour and World Golf Foundation for that.

### HOW DO FIRST TEE CHAPTERS DIFFER FROM THE TYPICAL SUPERINTENDENT OR PGA CHAPTER?

Our chapter boards have an amazing amount of diversity. We have people of color, different genders, tons of folks from different business and personal backgrounds, including PGA or LPGA members and some superintendents. There are also many people with influence in the community. It's a melting pot of all sorts of different people who share the same vision. We're trying to give them direction. Obviously that's a lot different than the GCSAA or some of the other groups whose boards are largely similar professionally.

We held a network meeting for our chapter leaders in November, and I kept thinking it would be impossible to find 700 people in the same room that spanned the ranges of gender, age, ethnicity, wealth, etc., as we had at that event. That diversity creates challenges for us in terms of educating and equipping the chapters, but it's also a big part of our strength.

### HOW CAN SUPERINTENDENTS GET MORE INVOLVED?

I'm going to attend the Golf Industry Show in Orlando and help man our booth, so I made a list of things superintendents can do. We need them to serve on local boards, committees and in leadership positions. It morally fits so well with the way superintendents look at things. We don't have a specific element of the curriculum that deals with agronomy or the environment, but it's important, and it's extremely interesting to the kids when superintendents become involved.

Also, the facilities need resources. We're always looking for in-kind gifts – such as used mowing equipment, flagsticks, benches, ball washers and construction work – and money.

Lastly, superintendents can coach. There are many superintendents who are good players and teachers, and this can be fun for them. Just by understanding the program, they can influence people. Superintendents have more influence than they might believe. They can help spread the word.

### WHAT DO YOU MISS ABOUT YOUR DAYS AT THE GCSAA AND THE TURF BUSINESS?

The members. I had so much respect for their belief in their occupation. They're so passionate and have so much pride. It was all about what

was right, not about how much you make.

I also miss the underdog mentality. We were always fighting for more of something, even if it was just a seat at the table for some meeting. It was never routine. I loved the challenge. I also liked the diversity of things I was involved with: education, the trade show, the magazine, the foundation. You name it, and it came across my desk sooner or later.

### WHAT WERE A COUPLE OF YOUR FAVORITE MOMENTS DURING THAT TIME?

Receiving the President's Award for Environmental Leadership was probably – outside of my own family – the most significant thing that's ever happened to me. I loved the challenge of working on the environmental programs, but the award was a surprise.

I also liked facilitating the planning group and other committee meetings. The first chapter delegates meeting was pretty wild, too. I asked one question and, three hours later, I was still writing ideas and issues on easels.

We had many great people on staff, too. Turnover was tough, but there was a tremendous pool of talent at a great facility. People outside the association would come visit and be shocked at what they found.

### WHAT CHALLENGES AWAIT STEVE MONA AT THE WOLD GOLF FOUNDATION?

First, he's the right person for the job. You need someone that can coalesce a bunch of different things and bring people together. He has such good ambassadorial skills. The challenge is that he'll be dealing with new systems and new undertakings. He has to bring old things together, start new things and internationalize things.

### ANY FINAL THOUGHTS FOR YOUR OLD FRIENDS ON THE SUPERINTENDENT SIDE OF THE BUSINESS?

I still admire the job they do for golf and their care for the environment. I've gained even more respect for their focus at the GCSAA, and it's great to see them finally getting more of the recognition they deserve.

### WHAT'S THE SECRET TO HAVING A SUCCESSION OF GREAT JOBS IN THE GOLF INDUSTRY?

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