

Measure of success

The Sticks for Kids program has exposed underprivileged youth to the game of golf.

By Brittany Schmigel

What began as an idea to provide children with golf clubs has evolved into the Golf Course Builders Association of America Foundation's international Sticks for Kids program. Identifying children as the next generation of players, the GCBAAF developed Sticks for Kids in 1998 as an instructional program for underprivileged youth, designed to give them an opportunity to play golf and learn about the values the sport teaches.

Since then, Sticks for Kids has grown to more than 500 programs nationwide and 10 international military bases. The program has been so successful that China recently adopted the program and now has more than 120 programs of its own.

Paul Foley, GCBAAF executive director, says shortly after its inception they realized the program would need more than GCBAAF assistance. After talking to other youth-oriented organizations, such as the Boy and Girl Scouts of America and the Boys and Girls Club of America, Foley was directed to the National Recreation and Park Association. After the NRPA agreed to partner with the GCBAAF, the organizations decided they would donate 10 sets of new junior golf clubs to each program, provide funds to employ a PGA professional instructor and supply each program with marketing materials and teaching aids to assist in running their own camp. The participating golf courses would need to do the rest of the work, such as recruit volunteers to run the program.

"A big part of the curriculum ensures

the instructors teach life values – integrity, sportsmanship, etiquette, respect and safety. We hope they learn these things in addition to learning how to swing and putt," Foley says.

In addition, the program added an environmental stewardship segment. "We find that the age groups that attend have minds like sponges, so we teach them that you made that divot with your golf club – why do we tell you to replace it?" Foley says. "If you hit a tree, what should you do? Let's say you hit a ball into an environment friendly area and you're not supposed to go there, why?"

"It's all about life skills and golf and how to be good environmental stewards," he says.

Here are a few success stories:

Jim Ager Memorial Golf Course, Lincoln, Neb.

Dale Hardy, director of golf at the Jim Ager Memorial Golf Course, says the 9-hole par-3 course is perfect for the Sticks for Kids program. "The course was built by the city and donated to the youth of Lincoln in 1965," he says. "They wanted to develop a program in Lincoln along with the Ager course, so in 2000 they brought Sticks for Kids here and it's been going strong ever since." The program's first year gathered 82 kids and has had a steady following.

"It's been very well received in the community and everything we do and utilize is donated by different companies around the city, such as the snacks we give them every day," Hardy says. Businesses donate drinks, chips, granola bars, fruit and hot dogs. And to say the Lincoln community fully supports the Sticks for Kids program is putting it lightly: Guest speakers are part of the curriculum each day, such as coaches from the University of Nebraska and local amateur golfers – and Lincoln's Senior Men's Golf Association gives three memberships a year to Sticks for Kids graduates. In addition, donated clubs are cut down and re-gripped, so each child can leave the program with a new



The Golf Course Builders Association of America Foundation, in partnership with the National Recreation and Park Association, donates 10 sets of new junior golf clubs to each Sticks for Kids program.

golf club and a handful of golf balls.

“Part of our job as PGA professionals is to promote play,” Hardy says. “We touch a lot of kids and a lot of people with the program, but to get them back to the course has always been an issue. So we’re developing programs to get them involved in the game and then get them back to the course, too.”

This year the course will hold a scramble and invite past participants back, to help stay in touch with the kids. “Lincoln is very fortunate because it’s a big golf community and a lot of people step up when you ask them to, and they do above and beyond what it takes,” he says. “That’s one of the reasons why this program is so successful. I’ve been in the golf business since 1974 and if you take youngsters and give them some clubs and they get excited about the game, but then they learn life values while growing up and playing – then I don’t think there’s anything better.”

Rock Island Parks Golf, Rock Island, Ill.

“There are an awful lot of kids up here and in the summertime, they’ll never see a golf course unless someone provided a program for them. We wanted to make sure they got exposed to golf,” says Bill Fetty, manager of golf services of Rock Island Parks Golf. The Rock Island, Ill., Sticks for Kids program grew from around 80 kids to more than 300 in just three years. The program was so successful the USGA funded the program’s expansion. Unfortunately, when the economy began to worsen, the program lost players and Fetty was forced to cut staff.

Many of the companies that had supported and funded the program backed out, as well, so Fetty cut field trips, lunches, picnics and prizes – narrowing the program to its essentials: golf instruction and making available opportunities for the kids to play.

But Fetty is determined to keep the program running, even if he has to do it by himself. “The program is down to two days a week. I beg and borrow every



In addition to teaching the game of golf, The Sticks for Kids program instills important life lessons.

piece of transportation I can get; I even pay for it out of my pocket when I need to.” Fetty says lack of transportation is what hinders the program, since most of the kids are without a way to get to the golf course. But his dedication to Sticks for Kids and the children pays off, every year at least 2 or 3 past Sticks for Kids participants make the area’s high school golf teams.

“I had a kid that had gone on to college and came back to me,” Fetty says. “He doesn’t live in the area anymore, but he sought me out and thanked me for keeping him in golf because he had been heading down the wrong road. He said if he hadn’t had the opportunity, he didn’t know if he would’ve ever graduated from high school or anything.”

Pekin Boys and Girls Club, Pekin, Ill.

After Keith Dunkelbarger retired, he wanted to give back to the industry. He began an indoor golf program at the Pekin Boys and Girls Club, using

Snag golf clubs – which Dunkelbarger describes as “funny-looking plastic clubs with the swing weight of normal clubs.” He recruited other retirees to assist and they began calling themselves the Junior Golf of Pekin. The program became so successful, JGOP was asked by elementary schools, churches and latch-key programs to hold their programs for the children there. As a result, JGOP has taught more than 1,000 children.

“The kids could learn how to hit real golf balls using golf clubs and it was fantastic,” he says.

Paragon Golf also donated clubs to each child at the Boys and Girls Club. “When you see a 7, 8 or 9-year-old who comes from poverty, when they get a new set of clubs – it’s like giving an adult a new car. The little ones are so happy and so proud. We know there are a lot of values that come from playing golf, because we’ve all learned them ourselves – like integrity, sportsmanship and courtesy.

“So we teach kids that you don’t talk when others are hitting and you root when others hit a great shot,” he says.

Dunkelbarger believes kids don’t play sports like they used to, unless it’s in an organized league.

“The kids aren’t getting exercise, they don’t care to play ball,” he says. “It’s a sad situation, but with golf, the kids are lining up at the door to participate.” ▲

Getting INVOLVED

If you’re interested in becoming involved with the Sticks for Kids Program, applications will be available in September on the NRPA website at www.nrpa.org. For additional questions, please contact Colleen Pittard at 703.858.4741 or cpittard@nrpa.org