

Busting the Myths Surrounding The First Tee



BY JOE O'BRIEN

Misconceptions about the program,
what it does and what it plans for the future

As I've traveled across the country promoting The First Tee program, I often encounter myths about what the organization is and does. The myths gain currency because of the word-of-mouth popularity of the program and its continued evolution.

I believe these myths impair the program's growth, so I've developed answers to the 10 most damaging ones to dispel them:

1. The First Tee program adds to the oversupply of golf courses while new golfer participation is flat.

This is by far the most damaging myth. Out of 85 operating First Tee facilities, existing golf courses host 41 of them. We've only added two 18-hole courses in the past four years. Most of our facilities have three, six or nine holes — hardly the type of operation that would seriously compete with the bread-and-butter of our industry, the 18-hole golf course.

2. There is a distinct look to a First Tee facility.

I could drive you to 20 First Tee facilities, and you wouldn't know from looking at them that there was any physical-identity connection between them. The First Tee is not a franchise (like McDonald's or Marriott), which means we can adapt our program to individual facilities. After all, it's the experience for the kids that's important, not the packaging.

3. The First Tee is a program for inner-city youth.

The First Tee is, primarily, a program designed to provide affordable, accessible golf for all kids, regardless of background. While it's true that many of our facilities are located in urban areas, The First Tee also sees opportunity in rural areas and suburban areas. We want to bring the game of golf to kids who wouldn't normally have the opportunity to play.

4. The First Tee works in isolation.

Every First Tee chapter is a collaborative community effort with local youth organizations, park districts, schools, foundations and others with a view toward bringing kids in contact with golf. The program wants its facilities to be models of public/private partnerships.

5. The First Tee is primarily dedicated to creating the next Tiger Woods.

We at The First Tee strive to introduce the game of golf to as many kids as possible, but for reasons other than creating professional golfers. Instead, The First Tee believes golf teaches lessons for life, such as the importance of rules and setting goals. It also develops values such as honesty, sportsmanship, respect, courtesy, judgement, confidence, perseverance and responsibility.

6. The First Tee program can only be taught by golf professionals.

Golf is only a means to an end, so it doesn't require people with the most golf skills to teach the life skills. We want people who instruct at The First Tee's facilities to possess two important qualities: a love of golf and a love of kids. We want people who can teach kids about the importance of networking and other skills that will help them later as they enter the workforce. Of course, qualified PGA and LPGA professionals must teach the grip, stance and swing elements of the game, and amateurs must be careful not to violate the rules of their amateur status.

7. The First Tee is focused on junior golfer retention.

Of course, The First Tee is concerned that the number of golfers has remained flat over the last three years. As concerned as we are, however, we are equally focused on how golf improves the academics, self-esteem and core values of children. We hope they will grow

to love the game and the life skills it teaches so they will stay golfers for life, but this is not the focus of our program.

8. All First Tee facilities are struggling financially.

Some of our newer and larger facilities face the same economic hurdles that all golf facilities face, but we don't have facilities in danger of failing. In fact, several of our programs are doing quite well and are operating within their budgets. The fact that The First Tee is a 501c(3) corporation allows additional revenue opportunities unavailable to for-profit operations. Our funding model is more like other charity-based youth organizations.

9. The First Tee facilities are required to support themselves with a traditional golf-business model.

As a charitable organization, we operate as a nonprofit, so we can depend on community support for funding to supplement user fees. Each facility is managed by a board of volunteers, who work hard to raise money from the community, often taking advantage of co-marketing opportunities at golf tournaments. The rules that govern fundraising for The First Tee are no different from those that govern any other charitable organization.

10. The First Tee experience must revolve solely around a golf facility.

In fact, many of our boards of volunteers do much of their programming off-site as well as on-site. They can take the golf instruction right to the schools. In addition, I know of First Tee chapters that are involved in community projects as well. It's true that the centerpiece of any First Tee golf activity is a golf course, but the program can reach well beyond the boundaries of the home facility.

I hope I've clarified what being a member of The First Tee is all about. The First Tee is still a young organization, and its role will evolve in support of our mission. We really run our business with three watchwords in mind: We seek to have an impact on youth, partner with constituents, and develop facilities and people.

We look forward to working with everyone in the golf industry to refine our programs so we can do what's in the best interests of the game — and the kids. ■

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