

A young boy is captured in the middle of a golf swing on a lush green field. He is wearing a white short-sleeved polo shirt and dark-colored shorts. His eyes are closed in concentration, and his arms are extended forward, gripping the club. The golf club is a dark color, and its head is visible on the left side of the frame. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting a golf course. The title "Let the Kids" is overlaid on the image, with "Let the" in white and "Kids" in a large, bold, light green font.

# Let the Kids



**When the grumpy old man saw the kids overrunning the golf course, he blew his stack.**

“Get them out of here,” he barked. “They have 50 more years to play golf. I’m an old man, and I only have a few years.” • The setting was a course at Bethpage State Park in Farmingdale, N.Y. The old man’s complaints were directed to David Catalano, Bethpage State Park’s director of golf. • “He was disapproving of the fact that we had a junior tournament going on,” Catalano says. “My response to him was, ‘Have a nice day.’ It wasn’t a point we were going to debate.”

While an isolated incident, it bothers Catalano that some golfers don’t realize the game’s future — as in the number of players, the rounds they play and the revenue they generate — lies with the nation’s youth. But it’s not just cranky golfers who can’t envision that future. It’s also the golf industry’s decision makers, including owners, operators, general managers and superintendents, all of whom must realize that more young players are needed to grow into “core” adult golfers, defined by the National Golf Foundation (NGF) as those who play at least eight times a year and average 37 rounds annually.

It’s not that the industry’s decision makers don’t realize

the importance of attracting and retaining new players, such as youths. In fact, they talk about it all the time at industry meetings. But it’s time to walk the talk, says Mike Tinkey, deputy executive director of the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA).

“It’s one thing to say you welcome junior golfers,” Tinkey says. “It’s another thing to put a plan into action [to do so.]”

A golf course’s plan to accommodate junior golfers (those aged 12 to 17, according to the NGF) and even younger players begins with educating the course’s adult players that youths are welcome to play at the facility.

Tolstoy once wrote of kids, “A torment and nothing else.” Unfortunately, that’s the way some adult golfers view kids who play golf. They stereotype them as slow players who spray

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# Play

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Golf’s future lies with the nation’s youth.  
What are you doing to attract younger players?

PHOTO BY: DIGITAL STOCK





Sticks for Kids, an instructional program created for kids ages 7 through 15, recently teamed with the National Recreation and Park Association to help it expand.

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their golf balls in myriad directions. And they scold them, which doesn't help matters.

Mike Nass, general manager of Cantigny Golf in Wheaton, Ill., recalls older golfers berating his young daughter for slow play when she took up the game several years ago. "It wasn't a very good experience for her," he says.

Nass knows it's not a golf course's fault when its players behave in such a manner. But a course's personnel should instruct adult golfers not to react to youth golfers in a demeaning way.

Chad Ritterbusch, executive director of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), says good golfers can be the game's worst enemy. While they love the game, they want to keep it for themselves, which is not fair to other players.

"We need to work together to address

stereotypes and encourage golfers to welcome other golfers and support the game's growth," Ritterbusch says.

Of course, some kids do play slowly, Catalano notes. Hence, course personnel must instruct them when to pick up their balls to speed up play and avoid taking 20 shots on a hole.

### All in the family

If golf courses want more kids to play their tracks, they must market the message to parents that playing golf can be a family affair, industry experts agree.

According to the National Golf Foundation, seven in 10 junior golfers come from households in which one parent plays golf. Three in 10 junior golfers come from households with nonplaying parents.

"It's about parent involvement," says Dan Van Horn, owner and founder of U.S. Kids Golf, an Atlanta-based company that

### Check ... Check ... Check

Mike Tinkey, deputy executive director of the National Golf Course Owners Association, says owners and operators should consider the following questions if they want to attract more junior golfers:

- ✓ How often do you offer introductory clinics for junior golfers?
- ✓ Do you offer instruction in groups that are affordable (\$15 or less)?
- ✓ Are juniors able to play nine holes or less?
- ✓ Do you help juniors find people to play with?
- ✓ Do you offer special rates for junior players?
- ✓ Do you offer incentive programs for repeat players?
- ✓ Do you sell junior clubs, shoes and equipment?
- ✓ Do you offer discounted or loaner clubs for juniors?
- ✓ Do you have family tees or junior tees?

markets children's golf equipment. "The easiest kid to bring into the game is the kid who has a parent playing the game."

Frank Jemsek, owner of Cog Hill Golf & Country Club in Lemont, Ill., says his course markets to families because its most reliable traditional players — fathers — don't play as much today because of increased family commitments. As a result of Cog Hill's promotions, more dads are bringing their families with them to play.

Joe Louis Barrow Jr., executive director of The First Tee in St. Augustine, Fla., points out that mothers often can coax kids to play golf, too. "Many women are the

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**[ABOUT THIS SERIES]** "Growing the Game," a four-part series appearing in *Golfdom* throughout 2006, focuses on how the golf industry can attract more new players and create more rounds from four distinct groups: **disabled people; women; children; and minorities**, including African-Americans and Hispanics. *Golfdom* interviewed representatives from people representing each of these segments to get their views on what the golf industry needs to do to attract more players from their segments. Then we spoke with golf



industry representatives to see what the industry is doing and what plans it has to grow the game within these segments.

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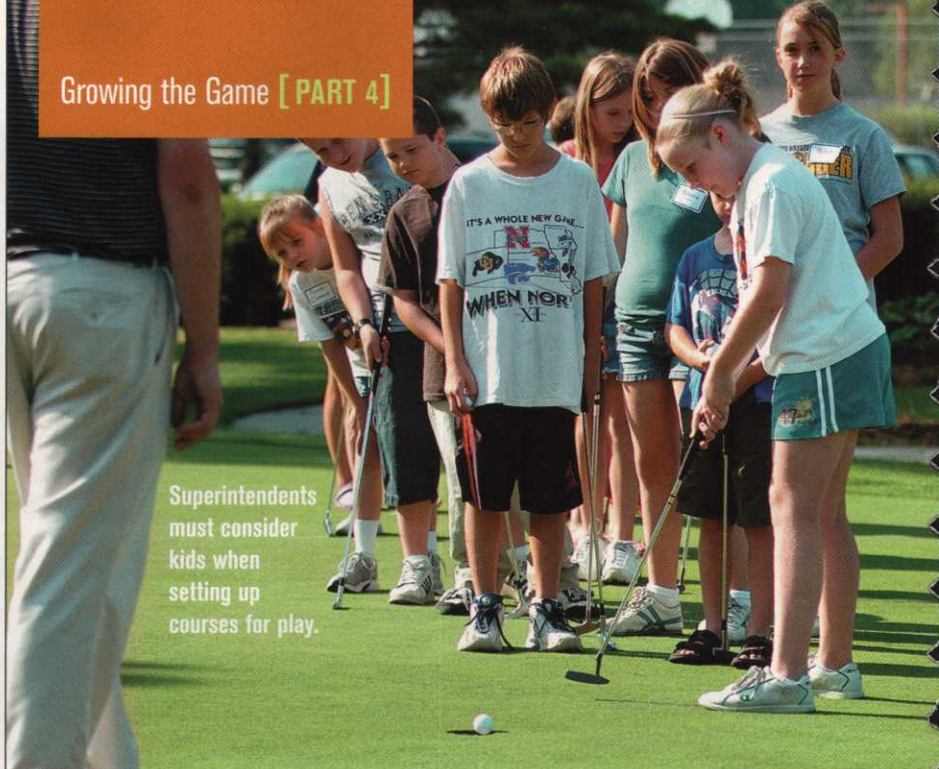
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## Growing the Game [PART 4]



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gatekeepers for their kids," he says. "They stimulate what activities their kids play."

Of course, some moms and dads are afraid to bring their kids golfing because the courses they play are too long for them. Parents are worried their kids will become frustrated after taking a couple dozen shots on the first hole and sour on the game.

Consequently, course managers must consider kids when setting up courses for play, Van Horn says. Providing a fair course setup is vital to attracting and retaining young golfers. And it's not simply a matter of having kids tee off from the red or forward tees.

"The red tees are too long for beginning golfers," Van Horn adds.

To help shorten the game for kids, Van Horn and his company created customized tee plates, which are placed in front of forward tees and easily installed in fairways. The tees are also close to cart paths.

U.S. Kids Golf recently made a deal

with ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance to provide its facilities with the tee plates. Greg Pieschala, president of ValleyCrest's golf course maintenance division in Calabasas, Calif.,

says the tees will help attract more young players to the courses the management company maintains.

"We believe courses that cater to families will have a competitive advantage in the years to come," Pieschala adds.

ASGCA members realize the importance of their role in designing courses more playable for children and their families, Ritterbusch says. That's why they're working with their local communities to develop practical golf courses to accommodate younger players with the goal of making the game

more easy, fun and exciting for them.

Ritterbusch says the ASGCA promotes "Building a Practical Golf Facility," a book by Michael J. Hurdzan, a Columbus, Ohio-based golf course architect and past

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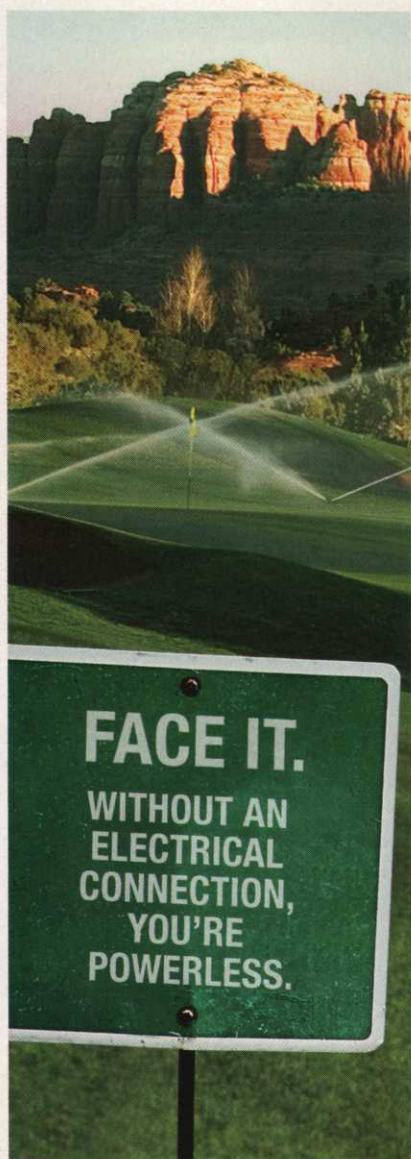


"We need to  
work together  
to address  
stereotypes."

• **CHAD RITTERBUSCH**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ASGCA





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**RAIN BIRD**

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president of the association, among its members and others involved with designing and building courses in the industry. The book advocates more practical and affordable golf facilities, including three-hole courses and executive layouts.

Jemsek also favors building more three- and nine-hole courses with shorter holes. "That's where the future golfers will come from," he says.

When his now-grown children played, Jemsek says they preferred playing at smaller venues than Cog Hill. "They had a better time playing short courses than they did playing our course because the holes were too long," he adds.

Paul Hollis, executive vice president of Redexim Charterhouse, a turf equipment supplier, supports the building of more three-hole and executive courses for another reason. He says many young golfers, especially teenagers, don't have the patience to play 18 holes. They're of the PlayStation gen-

eration and are accustomed to sensory overload on par with a mall arcade.

"After playing nine holes, they start getting fidgety and bored," Hollis says. "The golf industry needs to find a way to speed up the game to keep those kids interested."

The industry also must ensure kids are playing the game with the appropriate equipment, says Van Horn, who founded U.S. Kids Golf in 1997 on this premise. The company's Ultralight Kidsklubs are lighter than adult clubs and some junior clubs, says Van Horn who developed Kidsklubs from a personal need. While his children, ages 3 and 6, were enthusiastic about golf when they first learned the game, their interest waned quickly because the cut-off clubs they used were too heavy.

"They weren't having fun," Van Horn recalls.

That might steam dad if he paid \$30 for his 10-year-old son to play nine holes. Recognizing this, Cog Hill implemented separate rates for children several years ago. A child always



"Let them  
nurture their  
interests in a safe  
and controlled  
environment."

• **JOE LOUIS BARROW**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
THE FIRST TEE

### All About Junior Golfers

The golf industry needs to attract and retain more young golfers, including junior golfers, which the National Golf Foundation defines as those aged 12 to 17 who play at least once a year.

- ✓ Core junior golfers are players who play at least eight rounds a year and average 26 rounds. There are about 900,000 core junior golfers, but the number has remained flat since 1997.
- ✓ About 2 million junior golfers are regarded as occasional players and play one to seven rounds a year. The number of occasional junior players has increased, but not to the point of them becoming core junior golfers.
- ✓ Most junior golfers are boys (about 86 percent).
- ✓ 13 percent of junior golfers play 25 or more rounds a year.
- ✓ Junior golfers report playing 72 percent of their rounds on regulation-length courses and 28 percent on short courses (executive or par-3).
- ✓ 90 percent of junior golfers say they're likely to continue playing in the future.

Source: National Golf Foundation





**U.S. Kids Golf offers customized tee plates (close up, right) for young golfers. The plates are placed in front of forward tees and easily installed in fairways.**



pays a lower green fee than his or her parent, even on weekends.

Industry experts say more courses need to implement similar price structures.

### More than teaching

National organizations, such as The First Tee and Sticks for Kids, are lauded for teaching thousands of children to play golf. Many of these children never would have begun to play the game if it weren't for these organizations.

The First Tee, the industry's most visible youth golf-instruction program, has 202 chapters in 45 states and teaches golf at about 260 facilities.

Sticks for Kids, created for children ages 7 through 15, was a regional and annual event under the Golf Course Builders Association of America (GCBA) charitable arm. But GCBA Executive Director Paul Foley is taking Sticks for Kids nationwide. Foley recently teamed with the National Recreation and Park Association, which has 6,000 municipal and county park and recreation agencies nationally and more than 10,000 golf courses, to expand the program.

However, industry experts, including Sticks for Kids' Foley and The First Tee's Louis Barrow, agree that instructional programs alone will not get more kids playing the game. Courses must provide

young new players the opportunity to try the game they've learned in a real-life setting. And that setting must be a comfortable one, experts agree.

"Let them nurture their interests in a safe and controlled environment," Louis Barrow adds.

Nass knows it's not easy for golf courses to create playing opportunities for kids, especially when their bread-and-butter players — the ones who supply most of the revenue — eat up a lot of playing time. But courses must find a way to serve their bread-and-butter clientele of tomorrow.

"If you're an owner who's truly committed to growing the game for the future, you're worried about where your dollars are coming from in 15 years, not just today," Nass contends.

Golf facilities need to examine their slow periods during the week and then implement programs or leagues during those periods to provide kids set times to play, experts say.

Ultimately, it's up to owners and operators if they want to grow the game with younger players, Louis Barrow says.

"Golf is like politics; it's very local," he adds. "At the end of the day, it's the owners and operators who must accept the responsibility for reaching out to our communities." ■



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