

### Free Golf Lessons Help Grow the Game – And Then Some

By Larry Aylward

Even though she worked at one of the golf industry's major equipment suppliers, Madge Nelson never really thought about working on her golf game — until the leader of her company decided to offer free golf lessons to employees.

Nelson is employed by Club Car, the Augusta, Ga.-based manufacturer of golf cars, utility vehicles and other equipment. Thanks to the golf lessons, she's working on her game and loving it.

"I've played golf off and on for quite a few years," says Nelson, who has worked at Club Car for about 24 years. "I love to play. I could spend three days a week on the golf course."

That's just what Phil Tralies, Club Car's president and CEO, wants to hear. About three years ago, Tralies, disenchanted with golf's stagnant growth, decided to offer free golf

lessons to the company's 850 Augusta employees to get them more involved in the sport and grow the game. As a representative of the industry, Tralies felt he owed it to the industry to do so.

The free lessons, offered by Club Car through the teaching staff at The First Tee of Augusta, have been a hit. The program has attracted about 200 participants. Nelson says most of those employees probably would have never picked up a golf club if not for the lessons, especially women.

"I always thought golf was a man's game," Nelson says. But now Nelson,

who recently purchased a new driver, plays the game often with her husband, Chuck.

Jennifer Murphy, Club Car's credit and collections manager, says she also didn't give golf much thought before Tralies introduced the program.

"But when I heard about it, I thought it was neat," she says. "I thought it was a great way to get employees more in tune with the industry. I was excited about it."

Eugene Smallwood, who works in Club Car's service parts shipping department, says he couldn't hit a ball across a golf course's green before taking the golf lessons.

"Now I can hit it about 200 yards," he states. "I've been having fun."

Smallwood, who is African American, says he previously believed that golf was a rich, white man's game. But since learning the game and playing it more, he dismisses that notion.

"I always wanted to take golf lessons," he says.

Tralies says the lessons, which span seven weeks, only cost about \$105 per employee. He's also not stopping with lessons. Concerned that employees wouldn't have a place to play after the lessons and might lose interest in the game, Tralies struck a deal with one of Club Car's customers, Jones Creek Golf Club, for Club Car's new players to take their games to a real course. The company subsidizes employee play at the course and recently started a league at the club.

"But you have to hit the ball straight at Jones Creek," Smallwood says, noting that there are houses on the sides of the fairways. "[Tralies] won't pay for broken windows."

While Tralies introduced the program to create new golfers within his own company, there have been ancillary benefits, which have improved the company's corporate culture. Employees are meeting each other for the first time at the golf lessons and on the course. Now they talk golf around the water cooler at work.

"[The lessons] have brought a big social benefit to the company," Nelson says.

The lessons have also improved company morale.

"We all have very busy jobs," Murphy says. "A lot of us work a lot of hours to make sure we meet the needs of our customers. I'm thankful that we have support from upper management that encourages us to do other things, to have fun and be more involved in the business that we take part in every day. If you ask anybody who has participated in the program, I think they would say the same." ■



(From left) Eugene Smallwood, Madge Nelson and Jennifer Murphy are grateful for the lessons.

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companies, even competitors, to replicate Club Car's program. He says he would be happy to provide them a blueprint of the details.

"If everyone is pushing in the same direction, all of the sudden the needle starts moving," Tralies reasons.

Mona says the GCSAA is also aware that the people who work at its Lawrence, Kan., headquarters need to do their part to grow the game and their profession. About 10 years ago the association struck a deal with a local golf professional to provide a discounted rate for group lessons to interested employees. The GCSAA pays half the cost for each person's lesson.

"It's not completely free, but our view is you need to have a little skin in the game yourself," Mona says.

The lessons have spurred a lot of interest in the game, Mona says. When Mona joined the GCSAA nearly 14 years ago, he says only handful of people played. Now at least one-third of the association's 120 employees are teeing it up, including at a weekly summer golf league.

Other industry companies are cognizant of their growing-the-game duties.

The Toro Co. has formed employee golf leagues at manufacturing plants and other facilities throughout the country. In Bloomington, Minn., where the company is based, the Toro Employee Club sponsors two golf leagues from May through September. The Par 30 League, for new golfers and those working on their games, plays on an executive golf course. The Regulation League, on an 18-hole course, is for more-advanced players.

Toro believes "everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy the game of golf," according Sandra Donnelly, the company's commercial division spokesperson. That's why the company supports the game's growth through the Special Olympics, National Amputee Golf Association and the Sister Kenny Rehabilitation Institute.

"We have a very balanced approach to helping build interest in the game with youth and underserved populations," says Michael