



Setting up for

These kids are good,
but resist the temptation
to trick up your golf
course for tournaments

BY DAVID FRABOTTA
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**Above, Nicole Schachner sends
her drive down center fairway.**

Junior golf is growing up. About 400,000 new juniors picked up the game last year, according to a National Golf Foundation participation study released last month. Almost 5 million kids ages 6 to 17 play the game in the United States, and the number of junior golf tournaments at the local, state, regional and national levels have swelled in line with the heightened interest.

It's big business. And considering the popularity of growing-the-game initiatives, including Link up 2 Golf, The First Tee and Play Golf America, the niche is likely to flourish.

Subsequently, superintendents are likely to see more junior tournaments and outings. That begs the question: How should the golf course be set up? The answer is not much differently than that of everyday play. That is, resist the temptation to defend your golf course by growing out the rough too much or making the greens excessively slick.

"It's better to embarrass the course than the players," says Frank Jemsek, operator of Cog Hill Golf Club in Chicago. "So we do not change the course. Everyone wants to think that their course is not a pushover, but tournaments are supposed to be fun."

Jemsek started hosting junior tournaments at Cog Hill in the late 1980s. When an experienced tournament director helped him shorten nifty par-5s into 300-yard holes, Jemsek started thinking, "Gosh, some kids are liable to break par."

That's the natural mentality of any operator who is proud of his golf course. But Jemsek eventually understood that elite juniors play by a different set of rules at the national level. At the local level, most kids are playing for the experience.

"Once you're converted, you become a very strong proponent of trying to make it more like an outing than a tournament," he says.

The outing mentality means that Cog Hill uses the forward tees when possible. If the holes are too long to use the forward tees, then

Kids' Play

the crew finds a flat spot in the fairway for the teeing area. The unusual setup requires excellent signage and sufficient course markers to avoid slow play.

"If you have prominent markers on the first tee, then the players will be accustomed to looking for them throughout the course," Jemsek says.

Difficult pin positions can contribute to a painful pace of play as well. If you're choosing your own pin positions, Jemsek says its tolerable to have a couple challenging ones, but "tough pin positions are the slowest days of the week, so I would lobby against really difficult placements."

If a tournament company or association is organizing the event, then they're likely to select pin positions for consistency between days and multiple sites.

The American Junior Golf Association (AJGA) is one of the tournament organizers that prefers to pick the pin positions for each day for consistency — typically six hard, six easy and six moderate locations each day.

And although many of the AJGA's players are scratch golfers in the upper ages, the association refrains from making the pin locations or green speed too challenging, partly to let the kids play against each other instead of the course and partly to preserve the turf at the 75 locations that host AJGA events each year.

AJGA typically requests greens speed of 9.5 to 11 on the Stimpmeter, again because the association doesn't want conditions to threaten the health of turf. "If they can safely get their green speed to 10, then that's great," says Mark Oskarson, director of operations

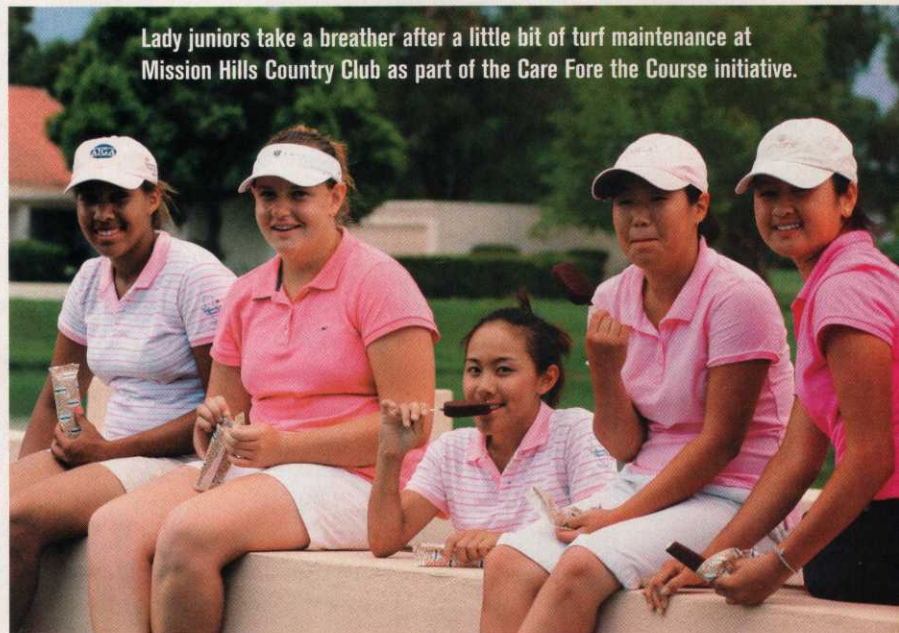
for AJGA. "We don't want to leave and have their greens burn up."

The AJGA tries to implement that low-impact philosophy throughout the management of its tournaments. Oskarson says he realizes that different golf courses have different capabilities with their staffs, so tournament directors will sit down with superintendents to talk about tee times, weather delays, mowing schedules and irrigation practices.

The maintenance coordination is the hardest part, considering some tournaments have a shotgun start at 8 a.m.

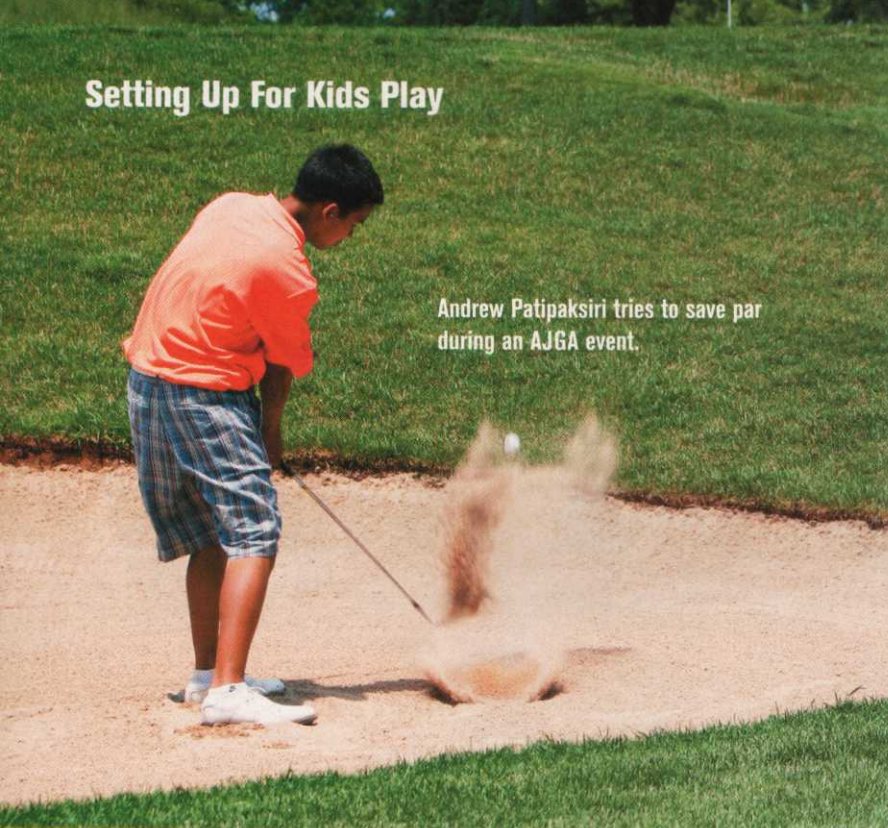
"Some staffs that we work with have the ability to mow tees, greens and fairways every day before play, but they might not have the budget for it," Oskarson says. "So perhaps we

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Lady juniors take a breather after a little bit of turf maintenance at Mission Hills Country Club as part of the Care Fore the Course initiative.

Setting Up For Kids Play



Andrew Patipaksiri tries to save par during an AJGA event.

"It's truly the Junior PGA for the upper 25 percent. And for some, it's the highlight of their golfing careers."

-MARK JORDAN
WESTFIELD COUNTRY CLUB

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might ask that greens and tees are mowed each day, but fairways might not get done until after play or only twice during the week."

The AJGA also consults with the superintendent and irrigation technician when marking teeing areas, placing signage throughout the course and marking pin locations with grass-deadening paint. And the organizers give the superintendent a radio so he or she can stay in the loop with last-minute changes or emergencies.

"After the tournament, we want the superintendent to say: 'Having the AJGA here made for the easiest tournament that we've ever had,'" Oskarson says. "We try to be as self-sufficient as we can, so we're going to take a lot of steps, like marking the golf course ourselves."

Some more sophisticated regional tournament organizers will help with course setup as well. The National Junior Golf Club, a tournament organizer in Belmont, N.C., works closely with superintendents to make sure the course is well marked for out of bounds, hazards and ground under repair, as well as intricate signage for teeing areas.

The National Junior Golf Club holds tournaments for children as young as 5 years old. The company has grown from a 12-tournament company in 1999 to hosting about 130 tournaments throughout the Southeast this year.

"We put the 5- to 7-year-olds about 125 yards out on the par 4s; we'll move them just over the hazard on the par 3s, and we'll move the par 5s to around 200 yards," says company founder Allen Wiggins. "We'll give them caddies and really try to let them have fun."

In contrast, AJGA members and The Junior PGA of America players are typically 12 to 18 years old, and they play from the tips.

The boys' setup plays about 6,800 yards to 7,100 yards, even stretching to 7,300 yards for some invitationals. The ladies play between 6,000 yards to 6,200 yards, which sometimes stretches longer than the member tees.

These kids are good.

"It's truly the Junior PGA for the upper 25 percent," says Mark Jordan, certified golf course superintendent at Westfield Country Club, which hosts the Westfield Junior PGA Championship for the seventh-consecutive year in July. "And for some, it's the highlight of their golfing careers. So we want to make it a life experience for everybody who plays."

Jordan says the club has tried to peak conditions for the tournament in the past by double cutting greens and fairways each day and growing out the rough. But there's a risk. Agronomically, turf stress can hinder conditions for the rest of the short Ohio playing season. But more worrisome, staff stress can burn out an already-weary crew.

That's why volunteers are crucial to any tournament, especially one that might qualify as a minor's Major. More than 300 club members, community residents and Westfield Insurance Co. employees volunteer to be everything from marshals to bunker rakers during the four-day event.

But volunteers aren't the only turf newbies on the course.

Many of the players cruise around to help repair turf after their competitive rounds thanks to a new initiative called Care Fore the Course.

A collaboration of the AJGA, PGA of America and the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, players attend Care Fore the Course classes that teach players about etiquette, turfgrass maintenance and occupations in the golf industry.

After the tournament, players help replace divots, sand the driving range and repair

ball marks as part of the initiative, which also helps "leave the golf course as good or better than when we found it," Oskarson says.

The superintendent plays a big part in the program by addressing players about conditions, golf course background, the grass types, the prevailing winds, the sand type, course layout, strategy and how all the conditions might affect play.

Superintendents also expose them to environmental benefits of green spaces for the community; environmental stewardship of lakes, streams and rivers; and preservation initiatives.

In the process, many kids are likely to recognize possible occupations in preservation, golf course architecture, landscaping and turf-grass maintenance.

"Not all of these kids are going on to the tour," Oskarson says. "So it might trigger a light in someone's head sitting in the crowd, and it could be a really neat way to stay involved in golf."

In the end, junior tournaments serve several functions, including growing the game by creating an emotional bond with the sport and a host facility. And the playing conditions are an extension of the way kids remember a golf course, just like adult golfers.

Tournament To-Do List

Prior to play:

- Drag fairways in the event of heavy dew.
- Mow greens and tees.
- Position water or donated beverage on each hole.
- Relocate ball washers, benches, beverages and trash to appropriate teeing grounds.
- Remove ropes, stakes and directions signage so tournament director can re-mark the course to set specifications.
- Place rakes outside bunkers.
- Place extra trash receptacles in appropriate locations.
- Identify a place for a pairings box.
- Identify appropriate areas for scoring tent and administrative tents; secure extra tables and chairs for these areas.
- Provide maps of the course to players and administrators.
- Borrow or provide squeegees in the event of adverse weather.

Source: American Junior Golf Association

That's why planning for the little touches — painting cups and benches, edging bunkers and planting or maintaining flowerbeds — can leave a lasting, positive impression with players and the gallery alike.

"There is not one set recipe to having a successful event," Oskarson says. "Every event takes on the personality of the facility, and every event has the ability to be great." ■

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