

From the Mouths

The First Tee's finest convey the importance of youth access to golf

BY DAVID FRABOTTA

The First Tee works. It might be the only golf organization that delivers on its mission: to teach life lessons through sport. Of course, that sport is golf. And the members of First Tee chapters around the world are some of the most exceptional young adults I've ever met. They look you in the eyes when they shake your hand, and they are comfortable and confident in new and awkward situations. They are super cool under pressure.

They also have a very unique perspective on how to grow the game. Many of them grew up in golf, and many have recruited friends, mentored cohorts and taken it upon themselves to unleash an unprecedented wave of youth interest.

They treat it like a little pay-it-forward project. And it's working. Chapters are growing, largely due to the students who help mentor and lead the individual chapters. They might be doing more to grow the game of golf than any multi-million-dollar ad campaign conceptualized in a boardroom or on a conference call.

These over-achieving stewards of golf have as much insight as anyone on how to grow the game among their peers, so *Golfdom* decided to talk with a few of them at the Future Leaders Forum, an event held by The First Tee Event in partnership with Walt Disney World Resort and The Toro Co. last November. The program helps 50 First Tee participants to strengthen their leadership skills, prepare for college and explore career disciplines in the game of golf and hospitality. Here is what some of them had to say:



of Babes

Bradley Chandler

Age: 16 **Handicap:** 10

Years active in The First Tee: Six

Bradley Chandler of Pinehurst, N.C., began golfing with his father as part of a youth program. But the First Tee program, launched by his father in Pinehurst, took his game and development to a new level. That First Tee chapter had seven members, including Chandler, when it started six years ago. It has grown to about 100 members.

“Kids want things to do, and they want to do those things together,” Chandler says.

Part of his accessibility to the game revolved around

a par-3, nine-hole layout with artificial greens. The low-maintenance turf allowed the course’s owners to set a lower price point: \$15 to golf all day. Chandler and his friends could stay at the facility all day and play golf, cards and then more golf. Chandler scored an ace at age 10.



Bradley

Lauren Lynch

Age: 16 **Handicap:** Doesn't keep one

Years active in First Tee: Five

Lauren Lynch began participating at the Maple Grove, Minn., chapter of The First Tee when the organization began to recruit more women in 2004. It was offering free golf programs and, of course, focused on character development.

She began the program with a couple of friends from school, and now those bonds remain close as they mentor younger kids in the program.

“The more kids that get involved at an early age will mean more kids that carry through and continue to play later in life,” she says. “I’m not very competitive and I don’t score well, but golf has so many great things, like being outdoors, getting exercise, participating in business opportunities. But most of all, it helps you grow with your etiquette and become a more charismatic person.”

Lynch says more parent-child events can help grow the game because playing with a parent in the beginning helps create a positive experience and lasting bonds with family and the sport.

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Lauren

[ABOUT THIS SERIES] “Growing the Game” is *Golfdom*’s quarterly series – now in its fourth year – that focuses on how the golf industry can attract more players to create more rounds. In addition to this installment on how to make golf more accessible for youngsters, we’ve also explored the impact women, minorities, disabled golfers and baby boomers could have on increasing play. We’ve also talked to golf course architects about ways they can make the game more friendly for beginners and average golfers, and we’ve highlighted creative marketing programs that golf courses use to attract new golfers. Visit our archives at www.golfdom.com to view the 2006-2008 “Growing the Game” series.

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Viviana

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Viviana Perez

Age: 17 **Handicap:** 6

Years active in First Tee: Seven

When she was a child, Viviana Perez of Chesterfield, Va., began going to the golf course with her father, driving the golf car and basking in the summer sun. She

says letting kids have fun first on the golf course is an effective way to help engage them and coax them to come back.

“What kid doesn’t like to drive a golf car or hit balls as hard as they can on the driving range?” Perez asks.

As a Hispanic, Perez says she grew up in the game knowing she was different than most players. While the sport has grown more culturally diverse, she says it still has a way to go.

Perez says diversity is a key way to grow the game, especially because younger generations have lost ways to learn formal etiquette. In an era of instant communication like text messaging, as well as a breakdown of respect for elders, kids don’t know how to learn proper etiquette. Perez says golf can teach them.

Clifton Jordan

Age: 15 **Handicap:** 5

Years active in First

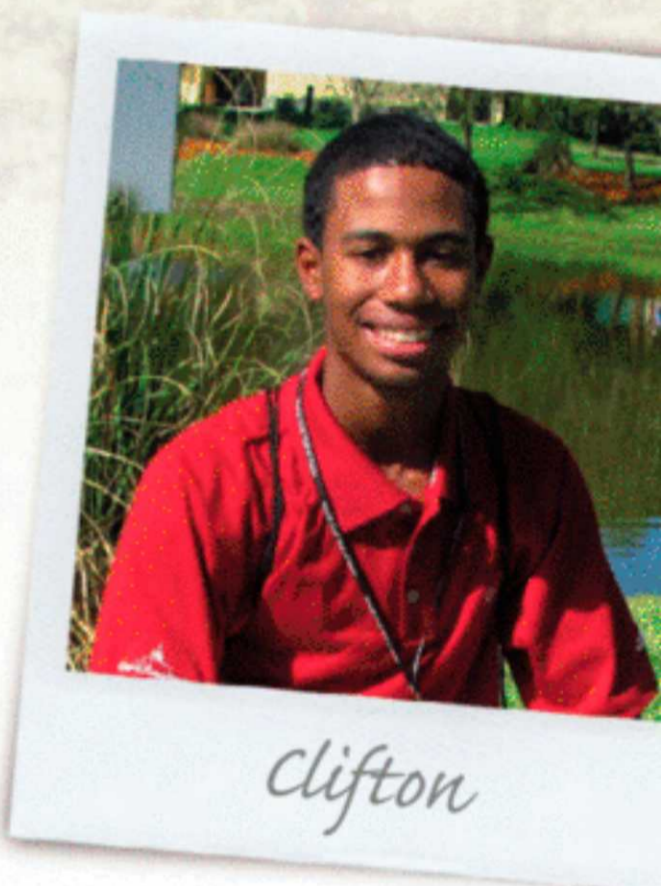
Tee: Five

Clifton Jordan of Memphis began going to the golf course with his grandfather at a young age. He quickly learned that he had some natural ability, but what kept him coming back was spending time with his grandfather, a support system he still savors.

“If you look at great athletes and other successful people, they have a great family support system, and that’s crucial for growing the game,” Jordan says. “Those bonds start early, and they can start early for golf.”

Jordan says shorter and more family-oriented courses can encourage families to play more golf together. Let’s face it: 7,000-yard tracks are fun for good golfers, but they are discouraging for beginners and poor golfers. More importantly than scoring, it’s crucial that beginners feel like they are improving.

“Golf is a game you can always get better at, and that’s what keeps you coming back,” Jordan says.



Clifton

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Valeria Defex

Age: 17 Handicap: 6

Years active in The First Tee: Four

The First Tee was more than an activity for Columbia, South America, native Valeria Defex. The Dallas chapter was her lifeblood when the shy, intimidated 12-year-old moved to a foreign land.

“My coach says [the people at The First Tee] brought me out of my cocoon, and then I turned into a butterfly,” she says. “And it’s more about bringing my personality into how I interact with people than it is about playing golf.”

Defex says her friends in The First Tee have a lot of fun, above all, which is crucial for recruiting

more high school kids to golf. Golf can seem stuffy, and Defex agrees more emphasis needs to be placed on the personal bonds the sport can create so more teenagers consider it an option.

Defex says teaching The First Tee participants to become mentors is another way to grow the game. “Teach us to teach,” she adds. “Give us equipment and teach us how to be leaders so we can teach others.”

Michael Hughes

Age: 16 Handicap: 30

Years active in The First Tee: Six

Michael Hughes’ father introduced him to golf. But it was when his mom discovered The First Tee program in Cary, N.C., that Hughes began to thrive not as a player, but as a community pillar and leader.

As a little person, the deck is stacked against Hughes in many other sports, especially traditional team sports. Golf gives him an activity that he can partake without feeling like he’s disadvantaged. And that reality has

proved to him that he can do far more than chase a white ball around a golf course.

“I have learned that any person can do anything,” Hughes says. “I might not have a future playing golf, but it’s the life skills that I carry through everyday life, and I get to keep those skills forever.”

Hughes says he will always play golf, but he will pursue biomedical engineering as a career so that he can help other people like him.

In the meantime, he says he’d like to help with fund raisers that create more access to the game, which he says will help grow the game among middle-class families.

Eddie Bolden

Age: 17 Handicap: 9.5

Years active in The First Tee: Four

Eddie Bolden, a member of The First Tee of St. Louis, says he was lucky to be introduced to golf at 9. If he had waited until he was a teenager, Bolden says he might never have started playing because “golf is not a well-recognized sport in the African-American community.”

Although Bolden says he’s fortunate to have been introduced to the game, he considers himself even more fortunate to be able to afford it because of programs like The First Tee. Golf can be expensive, which can detour many young people from playing, Bolden says.

Bolden also prefers golf over other sports because it brands itself as a gentleman’s game.

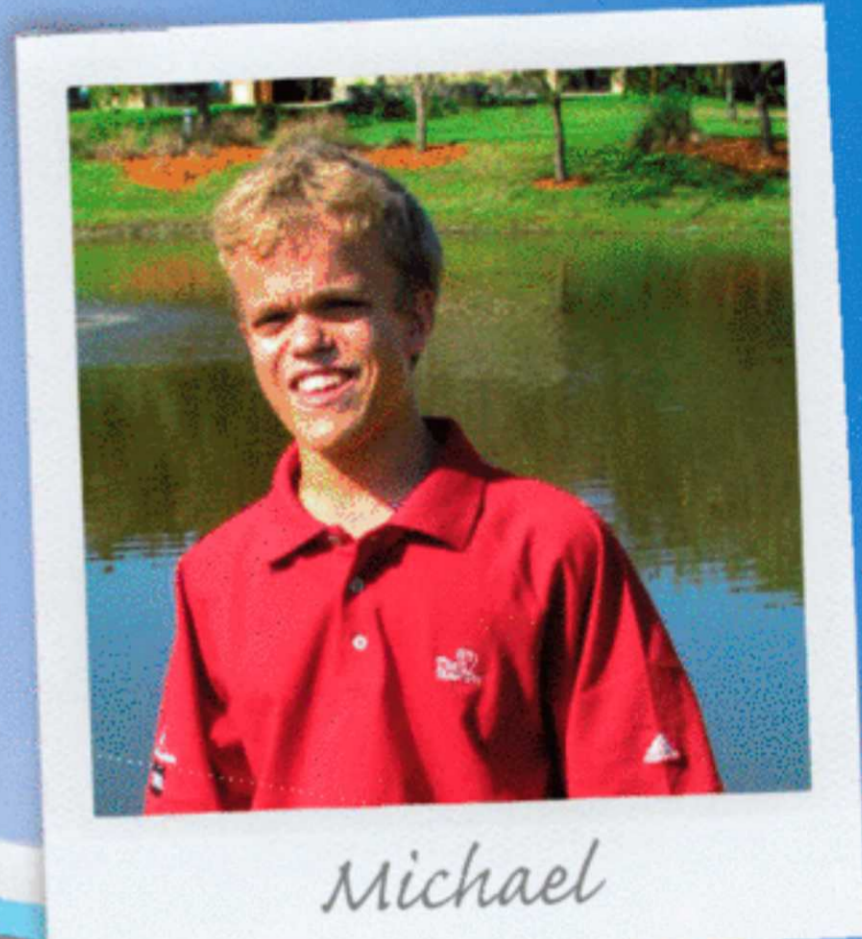
“Golf is about honesty; it’s about core values that are more important than winning,” he says.

One of those core values is mentorship, which is an important element of The First Tee. That’s crucial to growing the game because the earlier people start, the more likely they are to continue.

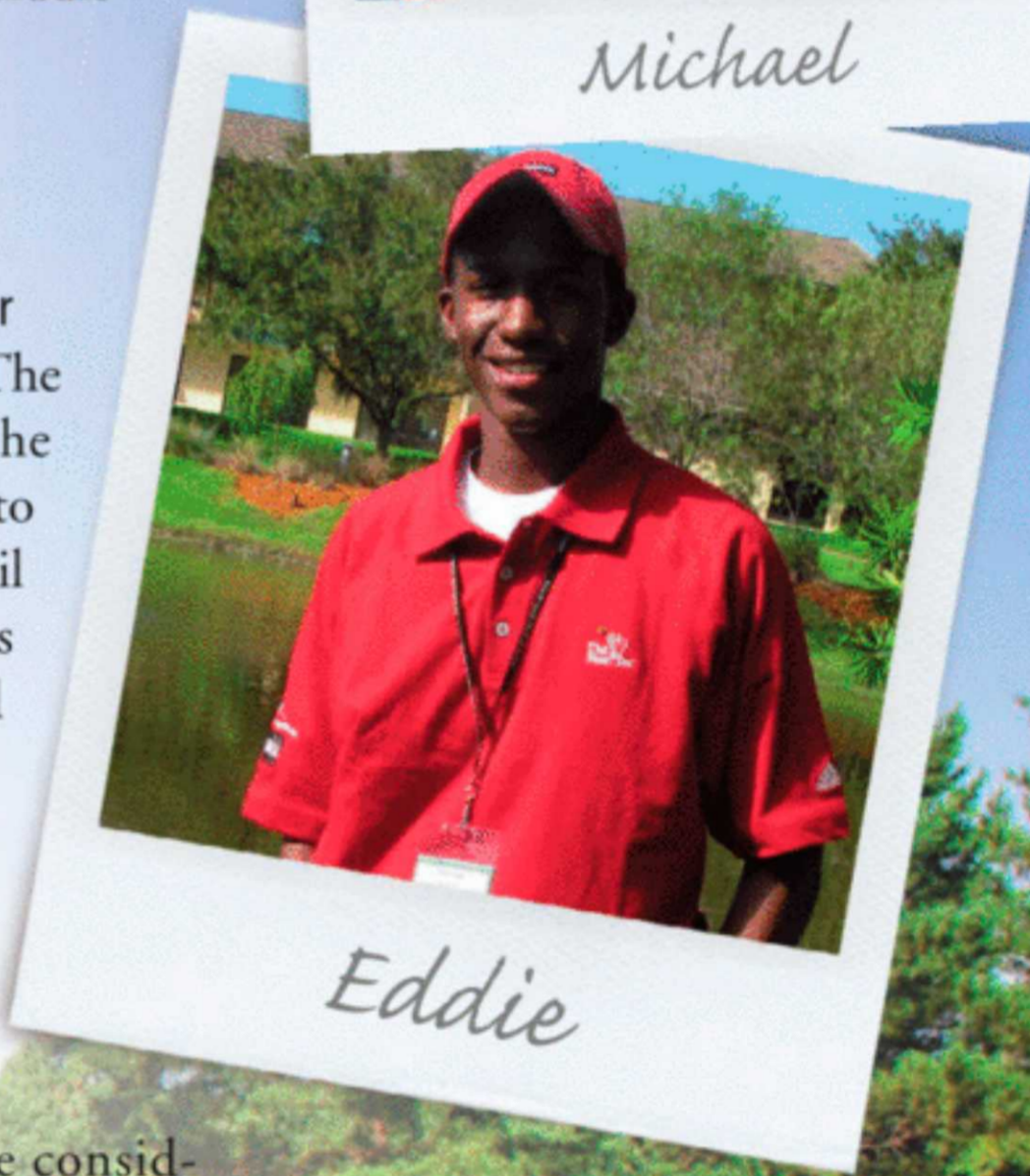
“Everyone who plays golf ends up saying the same thing: ‘I wish I would have started playing when I was younger,’” Bolden says. ■



Valeria



Michael



Eddie