

Developing a Great “Short” Game: Kids and Golf

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If you're out on a golf course in Europe on just about any Sunday, you'll notice something that would be highly unusual to see in the U.S. or Asia: Kids playing golf—either with other kids, or with their parents. At a time when folks in the golf business are worried about maintaining a steady stream of players, shouldn't we be working harder to attract children to our great game? While organizations such as the PGA and LPGA and First Tee have developed programs to introduce new devotees to the sport, I think we need to do more to make golf fun and accessible for kids, who will comprise the next generation of club members, resort guests, and municipal players.

When we designed the master plan for our Lubker Golf Resort in Denmark (which won GOLF Magazine's Best New International Course award), we dedicated a fine piece of land close to the clubhouse and practice range to a nine-hole layout with nice greens and a few bunkers. It's exactly the kind of place where Mom and Dad can take the kids to hit a few bad shots without being intimidated, so they can eventually learn to hit a few good shots. Many of the best golf facilities in Europe include a pitch-and-putt course where newcomers, including kids, can test out the game informally and without pressure. This is in keeping with golf's ancient Scottish roots as a public activity open to anyone capable of strolling around the local links with a few clubs in tow.

In the U.S. and Asia, many new golf facilities have been focused on attracting paying customers—particularly corporate golfers—who are willing to fork over greens fees, make purchases in the pro shop and restaurant, and even dole out hefty membership fees and monthly dues. In return, some facilities have tried to make golf convenient, fast, and—unfortunately—overly serious. None of which leaves much room for young players to develop an early interest in the game so that in another decade

they might fork over greens fees and spend their money in the pro shop and restaurant. Now that golf rounds worldwide have slowed and many clubs are facing difficult financial times, we need to engage a new generation by making the game kid-friendly, intriguing, and even cool (which the Tiger phenomenon is certainly helping with). And that involves creating facilities where kids feel welcome and comfortable.

Such a vast worldwide improvement in the “short game” will require owners and developers with longer-term vision. Golf course architects can also help. When we worked on the Legacy Courses at Cragun’s Resort, near Brainerd Minnesota, RTJ II created two excellent full-length championship golf courses with tree-lined fairways, huge lakes, and some rather challenging and intimidating shot requirements. But nearby we also created a reversible nine-hole short course with 12 greens that can be played in opposite directions on different days. One of our intentions was to offer parents a place where they could take the kids—or even comfortably let the kids go out and enjoy the game on their own, without adults, in close proximity to the practice range. That way, the whole family could head out to the golf course and each have their own experience or all share one together.

Nine-hole short courses such as those we created at Lubker and Cragun’s are just one example of the kinds of creative new facilities that architects can design. Given ample resources we can also build three-hole practice loops adjacent to driving ranges, or create 18-hole courses consisting of three six-hole loops. Parents might play an entire round on such a course and meet up with their kids on the last six holes. Or less-serious players could just go out to play for an hour. From a design standpoint, such a course would simply require us to develop a routing that returns to the clubhouse three times during a round rather than two; many sites allow for this if the architect is clever and creative in his routing plan. We can also shape and construct full championship courses with junior tees that set up in the fairways so that kids can play right alongside their parents and see the entire facility that they’ll graduate to some day. In the meantime, they can still enjoy a more manageable experience.

I’m concerned that owners and developers in the U.S. and Asia haven’t more aggressively fostered the global growth of the game among youth. We need to think about where new players are going to come from, and encourage their development. One added benefit of involving kids in

golf earlier is the production of great players. Look at South Korea, for example, which has taken the LPGA TOUR by storm. South Korea should provide a great model for all of Asia: introduce golf to kids at a very young age and train them for competition on the international stage—or just to play a casual Sunday match. I suspect that as golf gains popularity in China and courses become more accessible, that great sporting nation will produce some excellent golfers, too. Even if they don't initially win professional tournaments, they'll become lifelong advocates and players.

At Robert Trent Jones II we recently released our “Green Proclamation,” calling for course architects and others in the golf business to live up to ten tenets of environmentally responsible design. Perhaps it's time for us to release a Youth Proclamation that calls on courses to commit to attracting young players to the fun, cool, exciting, Royal and Ancient game of golf.