



Those kids with the numbers on their shirts? That's Cog Hill's seventh-place team in last year's PGA Jr. League National Championship. (Photos: Mike Schoaf, Bill Ibrahim)

Junior Golf is the Sport's Growth Engine

By Dave Lockhart

Flipping the dial on the old TV, sans a remote control back then, is how I discovered the game of golf as a 14-year-old kid on the far northeast side of Chicago in the Rogers Park community. From there I spoke with my parents who had a couple of friends that were avid players, so perhaps they could guide me and show me the finer points of the game.

One of those friends took me out to Evanston Community Golf Course (now it's Canal Shores) and we just went out on the quiet course late in the day where I was taught some of the basics and proceeded to hit a couple of ground balls, pretty straight if I remember correctly. So I was hooked.

From there I started getting golf magazines and instructional books in order to hone my game. Moving onward in my progression was a PE golf class in high school. That consisted of "some instruction" from the teacher and hitting whiffle golf balls off of an AstroTurf mat into the wall of the gym, or just clanging around off the old wooden bleachers. Of course there was no video, so the only real way to see your swing was to look into a mirror! What am I getting at with all this hyperbole is that learning and playing golf as youngster has come a long way in the past forty-plus years.

Now in Chicago, you have a number of top-notch

organizations, including the Illinois Junior Golf Association, The First Tee of Greater Chicago, the American Junior Golf Association, and the team-based PGA Junior League. Plus, nearly every golf course around town has junior group lessons, or a junior program of some sort for boys and girls.

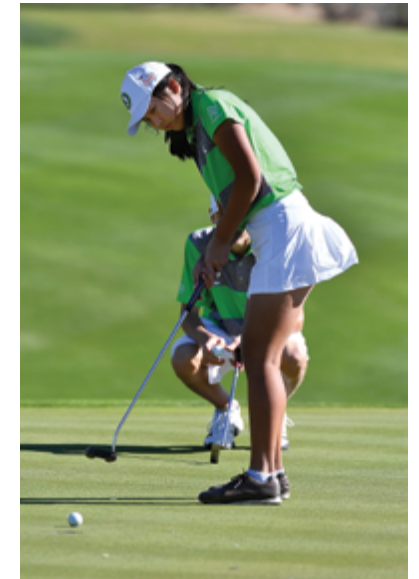
One of the finest programs to look into is The First Tee of Greater Chicago. They facilitate programs at 24 golf course locations throughout the Chicago Metropolitan area. Sessions begin in April and run through October. A key component of the First Tee is offering group lessons for youth ages 7-17, regardless of background and experience.

"Golf is a sport for a lifetime, so having fun and learning the basic fundamentals at an early age will not only prepare them for success on and off the golf course, it will increase the likeliness of them becoming a golfer for life," executive director Lisa Quinn said.

The off-the-course equation is a First Tee key. It focuses on nine principles – core values, the group calls them – to be followed on and off the course, backed by nine healthy habits. In many ways, golf is used as the hook to get children to be better people. And given the pleasant learning environment, they may stay in the game as adults.

Another great place to start getting your children involved





Junior Golf and the Sport's Growth

is the Illinois Junior Golf Association. The IJGA is dedicated to providing playing opportunities for its members ages 8-18, conducting educational clinics and events, and serving as a junior golf information clearinghouse. Each year the IJGA provides and manages over 140 separate events throughout Illinois. These include one-day 9-hole and 18-hole tournaments, and 36-hole and 54-hole major championships.

Jordan Abdel-Haq, the IJGA's executive director, knows it's key to start kids off early in our sport.

"While there are certainly very competitive juniors and events at this level, the Youth Development Program is geared more for development and as such, is less competitive as a whole than our older divisions," Abdel-Haq said. "We believe it is like anything else. The earlier you start, the more reps you are afforded and the comfort level with the pressure of tournament golf (which is much different than a recreational round) is greater as the juniors begin to enter the more competitive events.

"From a social standpoint, it also takes some time for juniors to get comfortable with their peers/fellow competitors and that can sometimes be easier when starting young because everyone else is probably fairly similar in terms of their years of experience in the IJGA."

Golf is the perfect sport for your kid, and the ideal babysitter. The recipe is plain to see – fresh air, exercise, learning the game, meeting new people and making new friends. It's the safest sport there is, keeps the kids out of trouble, off the streets and onto the lush green fairway.

"The First Tee is more than a sports program for youth," Quinn adds. "Its coaches create positive relationships that

inspire young people to discover their individual potential. Plus, golf is unique from other sports because players learn values like honesty and responsibility by calling penalties on themselves and reporting their own score. The sport is the perfect platform for helping kids develop character because just like in life, players experience the highs and lows of the game."

Abdel-Haq believes the values of golf are a terrific platform for kids of all ages.

"Parents should consider entering their kids into the game of golf (not just the IJGA) because of all the qualities and skills that the game teaches a young person," Abdel-Haq said. "Furthermore, the IJGA gives juniors the chance to compete and see how they stack up against their peers. But just as important, it provides an outlet for social interaction and exercise, in what we feel is one of the safest sports available for young juniors.

"Regardless of the level of competition that the junior attains, the ability to play the game of golf can be beneficial beyond junior golf and if nothing else, is an activity that can be enjoyed throughout the entire life span."

The PGA Jr. League, to use the organization's preferred spelling, is another terrific group to look into. The Chicago area currently has more than 20 courses offering open enrollment – families don't have to have an existing relationship with the golf course in order for their kids to participate. Parents can visit www.PGAJrLeague.com and enter their zip code to find nearby courses and register online. This list of courses is expected to grow.

PGA Jr. League is a fun and engaging way for boys and girls ages 13 and under to learn and play golf with expert coaching





The following facilities in the Chicago area are now offering PGA Jr. League open enrollment:

Arrowhead GC, Wheaton
 Cantigny Golf, Wheaton
 Cog Hill G&CC, Palos Park
 Coyote Run GC, Flossmoor
 Deerfield GC, Riverwoods
 The Glen Club, Glenview
 Glenwoodie GC, Glenwood
 Forest Hills CC, Rockford
 Naperbrook GC, Plainfield
 Pine Meadow GC, Mundelein
 Randall Oaks GC, West Dundee
 Redtail GC, Lakewood
 Royal Fox CC, St. Charles
 Royal Hawk CC, St. Charles
 St. Andrews G&CC, West Chicago
 Springbrook GC, Naperville
 Topgolf, Naperville
 Village Greens of Woodridge,
 Woodridge
 Village Links of Glen Ellyn, Glen Ellyn
 Whitetail Ridge GC, Yorkville

from PGA and LPGA Professionals. Some facilities offer 16 and under programs. Kids play in a supportive, two-person scramble format that encourages mentorship, builds confidence and promotes sportsmanship. They also wear team jerseys with numbers. Cog Hill's team has advanced to the national championship the last two years.

Early in March, the Illinois PGA announced an alliance with Junior.Golf, an Austin, Tex.-based marketing company, to use their computer platform to make it easier for players – parents and kids alike, to find and sign up for everything from lessons to leagues.

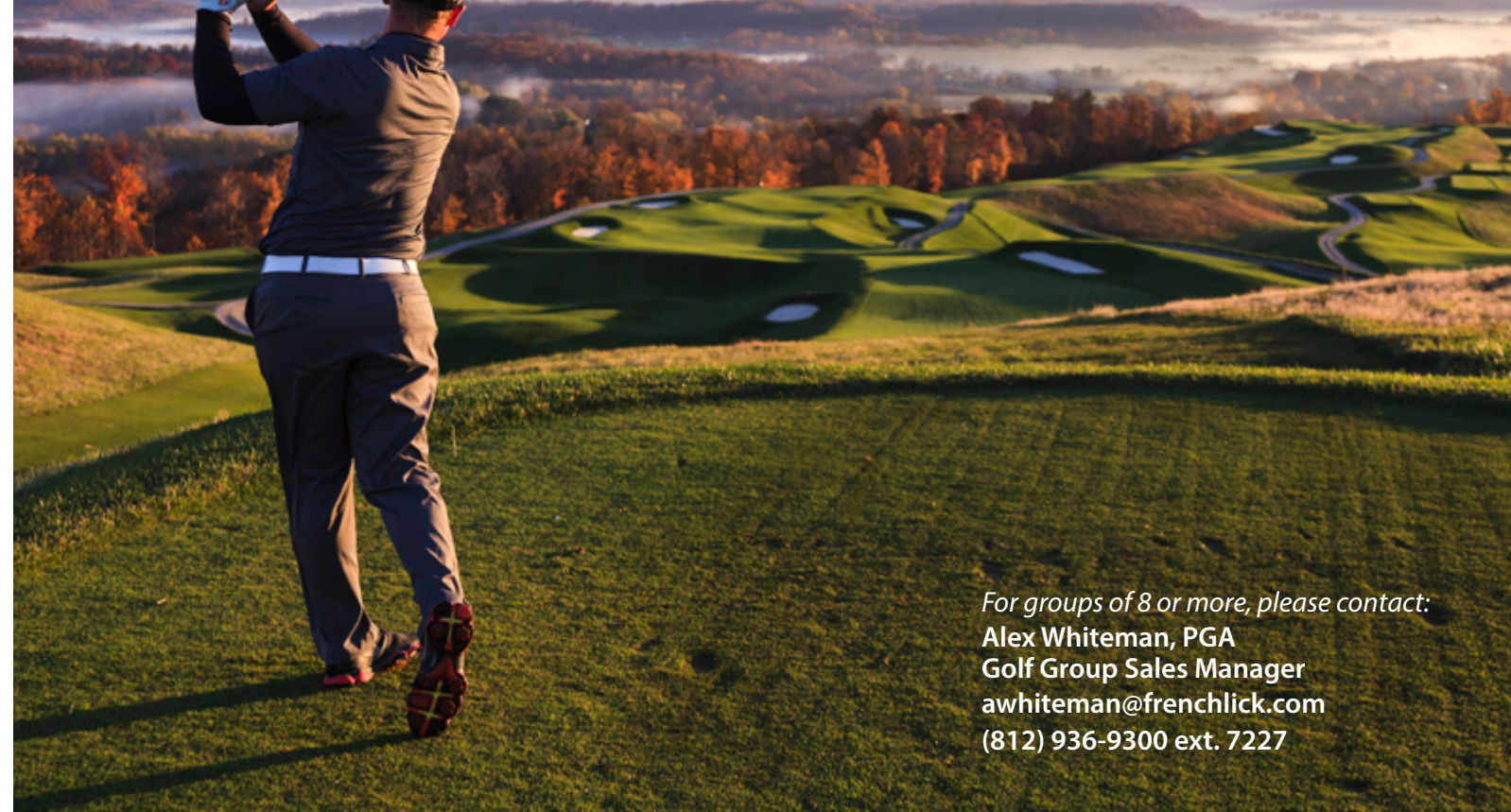
“With the increased influence of technology in the sport, we are committed to supporting Illinois PGA members with tools that give them a competitive advantage to grow their business and increase the number of golfers playing in Illinois,” Illinois PGA executive director Carrie Williams said.

Kids can also learn by watching, so here's another heads up. Harbor Shores Golf Club in Benton Harbor, Mich., will be hosting the Senior PGA Championship from May 22-27. All juniors age 17 and under receive free access with a ticket adult. Bring the entire family to see these living legends up close and personal; visit www.SrPGA.com for more info.

Junior golf opportunities have grown by leaps and bounds since the 1970s. I wouldn't change the way I learned the game, but perhaps if I learned the game through one of these groups I might have been a little better. Instead of always tweaking, it would have been great to learn the game properly with correct fundamentals at an early age.

Yes, opportunities for junior golfers are plentiful to say the least!

PLAY LEGENDARY GOLF



For groups of 8 or more, please contact:
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