

Toad Valley Golf Course Grows the Game One Tadpole at a Time

An innovative junior program in America's heartland grooms the next generation of lifelong golf addicts by simply making the game fun.

BY ALLISON GEORGE



There is a style and level of course for every level of golfer. Look beyond the pristine, exclusive golf facilities to find a convenient, affordable course where the entire family can share time together outdoors and make memories lasting a lifetime.

I started playing golf as soon as I could walk. I would go with my parents and they would let me chip and putt on the greens while they played their evening round. Our family had an elaborate golf league that was played Monday nights when I was

growing up. My uncle had each family member's handicap and they were paired to compete for silly prizes like Grandma's apple pie. It was a rite of passage to be grown enough to participate. Starting young. Late evenings. No pressure. No scorekeeping. Sitting

on my dad's lap while he drove the cart. That's how the love of golf was fostered in me.

Eventually, I had a family of my own. Our family's golf league had long since disbanded, but having grown up on my family's golf course, I knew that I



How do you keep the attention of 5- or 6-year-olds who are learning a sport that frustrates adults? Give them something fun to look forward to after an hour of instruction, such as a marshmallow long-drive contest.



There's just something about a personalized trophy that provides a sense of accomplishment. A trophy is a treasure to children, and it doesn't have to be big and fancy to generate an ear-to-ear grin or the inspiration to continue playing a game they will enjoy, but never really master, for the rest of their lives.

wanted my children to play this lifelong sport. When my son was three, he would sneak over to the golf course and start playing in the No. 10 fairway, which also happened to be our side yard. After our failed attempts at corralling him (we even fenced in our backyard), my husband and I gave up and began taking our children to the course late in the evening. Our daughter was tucked in an infant seat while our two sons played along with us. Tears of frustration (mostly from the children) usually appeared by the fourth hole, so we would call it a night and head home, satisfied with the time we spent together as a family.

Our boys grew and other sports began to take over their lives. The other sports were just so demanding. Practices multiple times a week. Games. Traveling. Every day of the week. Our family golf outings were few and far between.

While I was sitting at my son's baseball game one Saturday morning (in the rain), I looked out at the sea of people. They were on bleachers — umbrellas in hand and covered in blankets — watching their sons. Their son's skill level didn't matter. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, moms, dads, and siblings came to watch for over an hour or more. These were the type of games where, oftentimes, their boy might be up to bat three times or less and quite possibly be picking dandelions in the outfield. His five minutes of play time, however, would not be missed by anyone in the family.

It hit me.

Golf was missing out.

Times had changed. The pace of life had changed. Sports competition level had changed. Yet, my family's golf facility had remained the same.

That summer, I set to work creating a plan that would incorporate every-

thing that I loved about golf from a family perspective and everything my children loved about their other competing sports. First, I introduced a family golf rate. It was an inexpensive rate that took place late in the day for tee times after 6 p.m. Golfers needed to have a minor to get the family rate. I wanted to give to my golfers what my family had enjoyed my entire life — a "no-pressure" round and not too expensive so, even if you play only four holes, you feel like you got your money's worth. This program was welcomed with unimaginable, great success. Finally, moms and dads had a place where they could teach their children to play.

In addition, we made some changes to our Tadpole Junior Golf Program. We moved the lesson time to the evening and included free play afterward so parents could take their children on the course to reinforce what the instructors were teaching. This meant they play golf after 7:30 p.m. You would be surprised how much golf can be played late in the evening!

As an alternative to golfing after the lesson, I wanted to give parents a way to keep their children at the course. Anyone 8 years old or under could participate in our "fun" activity after an hour of instruction. In this department, we "go big or go home." Our goal is to have the children beg their parents to take them to the golf course once their lessons are over. Fun activities include items like a marshmallow long-drive contest, water balloon toss, and even a rocket launch. Everyone, including parents, leaves our place having had a fun time at the golf facility. They are hooked.

The final touch that I added to my Tadpole Junior Golf program was a trophy. Over the years, I watched my children in their final game presentations in other sports. The sports that handed out trophies were also, coincidentally, their favorite to play the following year. Not the certificates. Not the medals. The trophies. If it was personalized, then the chances of the trophy appearing in their bed at night to be slept with (the greatest honor any toy can get from a child) probably quadrupled.

In an effort to provide more opportunities to families who had other time commitments and were unable to participate in our Tadpole Junior Golf Program, I added a Junior Golf League. Known as the "League," it is designed exactly like Little League. The League includes matching team shirts with team names on them like Slicers, Mulligans, Pond Skippers, or Arnie's Army.

Adding the League gave the children something to do with golf yearlong, as weather would permit. From a business perspective, I looked at the times of the year that worked best for me. In the fall, my golf facility slows down, so it was a great time to add the League.

The Junior Golf League is led by volunteer parent coaches. Every season, I am in amazement at the parent dedication to teaching the game. Our golf facility offers practice times, and

coaches can sign up as their schedule permits. Some coaches sign up for three practices a week. The practices are an hour and include half an hour at the driving range and half an hour at the practice green. Each team, which consists of five children and the parent coach, is given tee times at the same time every week to play in a "meet." They all arrive in their matching T-shirts and carry their own bags out to play golf on the course. Tee placement is determined by each team's playing ability. Playing time also is determined by age group. The younger children play for one hour, while the older ones play for two hours.

We also discount cart rentals for parents, grandparents, and other family members who come to watch the meet take place. The carts become personal traveling bleachers for spectators. Our Junior Golf League has surpassed all

of my expectations. The greatest compliment I ever received from parents came when I was told that they had tried for years to find a sport that their son enjoyed. They had all but given up until he tried golf. Johnny fell in love with the game of golf.

Mission accomplished.

Golf is a lifelong sport and should be celebrated as such. It is time that can be spent away from the cares of this world. Enjoying the scenery and company of others. No laundry. No chores. No lawn work. Just golf. Just you, a child, and the golf course. There aren't many things better in life.

ALLISON GEORGE is the "Wizard of Fun" and the general manager of Toad Valley Golf Course in Pleasant Hill, Iowa.



Carts, offered at discounted rates, become the "traveling bleachers" that provide family members an opportunity to watch their children play in the Junior Golf League at Toad Valley Golf Course in Pleasant Hill, Iowa.