



ROBERTO WESTERDORF (SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT)

Leigh Lancaon, 13, lines up her putt as Seben Griffin, 13, looks on at First Tee in Virginia Beach.

TEENS TAKE TO THE GREEN FOR TEE TIME

On any given day, adults can be found on the golf courses of Hampton Roads.

But that doesn't mean it's a sport without youth. First Tee of Hampton Roads YMCA is a year-round program "where you learn about yourself and people and life skills and especially how to play golf," according to Trip Bose, 14, a student at Norfolk Christian Schools.

First Tee is a program that is open to those age 5 to 17; teens are encouraged to join. Started in 2001, the program caters to a "very diverse group of people," says Kristal Swen, First Tee's director of golf operations. There is no typical student, only "a blend of all races and ethnicities and male/female." The program, with its approximate \$550,000 budget, has more than 2,000 local participants.

Trip says golf is an up-and-coming sport. Golf started in Scotland, he says, and has been around far longer than baseball.

Seben Griffin, 13, a student at Kempsville Middle School in Virginia Beach, points out that there are golfing tours throughout the world and that everyone recognizes the name Tiger Woods.

In Virginia Beach, First Tee is offered at a 55-acre facility off Princess Anne

want to go?

To find out more about First Tee, call (757) 563-8990 or visit www.thefirstteehr.org

By KEITH ZIRKLE
Teen Correspondent

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Tyler Putnam, 11, and Wilian Duplessis, 11, walk the golf course at First Tee in Virginia Beach.

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Road. Classes are once a week for six weeks and are offered after school and on Saturdays. There are tournaments every Friday during the summer and one year-end tournament in the fall. Any First Tee member is eligible to sign up for the tournaments.

First Tee golfers came to the game in many ways.

Some have relatives who play golf. Some have only been playing for a few months. Others have been playing since they were 3.

Trip is the latter. He vividly remembers how he became interested in golf when he was 3 and was watching Mickey Mouse. He started using Lego's to pretend-play. Later, a relative gave him a set of clubs meant for those with smaller hands and stature. In 1999 he started going to golf clinics. He has now been at it for more than six years. Some afternoons when he doesn't have classes, he shows up to volunteer at First Tee.

"I'm not very talkative at all, except on the golf course," he says.

Golf has affected his life in places other than on the golf course. Before attending Norfolk Christian Schools, he was home-schooled. Golf has helped him open up to his peers. "It has helped me be-

come more friendly with other people."

First Tee not only teaches golf skills but also life skills, Swen says. "We want the kids to learn these life skills and be able to use them on the golf course and at home and in school."

Tyler Putnam, 11, of Tallwood Elementary School, echoes that message: "It teaches me respect and self-control."

Seben says that sometimes when he's "real upset, I come out to play golf, and it calms me down, relaxes me."

Patience is one of golf's virtues.

Isaac Brehm says, "I've learned to be patient with people, and when somebody loses it on the course, I tell them not to tear up the course."

For other teens, golf has helped them meet people and make friends. Aidan Bergfeld, 11, of Brandon Middle School, testifies to that. Aidan is a teen who has liked golf his entire life. He wanted to start playing, and when he attended the First Tee, he "really liked the place."

Swen describes First Tee as a place where "you can see a kid that comes in the first day, doesn't want to make eye contact, doesn't want to shake your hand." By week's end, the same kid is shaking your hand and telling you that they

had a good time, she says.

First Tee golfers attest to the good times, and also dispel some of the myths surrounding the game.

Isaac says, "Most of my friends think it's weird."

"(People) think it's only for people that are all fancy and that," Tyler says.

Swen points out that golf is "a lot more challenging than you think."

The players agree. Their opinions about the game have changed as they have played.

"I think of it now as a game of learning," Tyler says. "It's a game of enjoyment. People will enjoy it if they try it."

For Seben, golf is "good for me, good for exercise." It "takes worry away from school, parents, friends."

And while First Tee might take the worry out of school and life, it also could help a teen's future. There are a range of merit-based scholarships offered by the program.

A few of the active First Tee participants are interested.

"I want to" apply, says Trip, but he knows he has a few years of school ahead of him.

Seben has a scholarship in mind, too.

"In the long run, if I keep practicing," he says, golf "can be something that's more than entertainment ... a little inspiration for me when I'm older."

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