

Arming Kids With Golf Clubs and Self Confidence

The First Tee of Monterey County Puts Kids on Course

BY ALAN SHIPNUCK • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLI ULDALL

On a brisk day several months ago, some 90 students from Barton Elementary School in Salinas could be found enjoying a break from class and learning how to swing a golf club. The activities were hosted by nonprofit group The First Tee of Monterey County, as part of a pilot program in which 12 nearby schools participate in a biweekly two-hour field trip, with The First Tee providing transportation and instruction free of charge. Third and fourth graders from Barton were on the practice putting green at The First Tee's home course in Salinas, Twin Creeks Golf Course, constructing their own mini golf layout with pylons, hula-hoops and other fun items. A First Tee instructor was chaperoning the large group and gently



First Tee golf instructors are role models to local kids, some from at-risk environments, on and off the greens.

offering putting tips. Meanwhile, fifth and sixth graders gathered on the tee box of the downhill 120-yard first hole in two orderly lines, one for boys, one for girls. The kids took turns whacking shots at the green. When a boy with spiky hair whiffed twice, no one snickered or teased, and when he got lucky and launched a shot toward the green, all his classmates cheered, though it was restrained. These kids had already mastered the niceties of the golf clap.

Surveying the scene with the contented look of a doting patriarch was Barry Phillips, the executive director of The First Tee of Monterey County.

"The goal is to have fun, obviously, but we instruct them on the fundamentals and the etiquette of golf at the same time," says Phillips. He is



Students from Martin Luther King Academy (left) and from Jesse Sanchez Elementary (center and right) in Salinas practice golf swings, putting skills and good sportsmanship during a First Tee lesson. The Monterey County chapter started in 2004 and has almost 3,000 members now, ages 4-17.



Older students provide mentorship to the First Tee youth from Jesse Sanchez Elementary, ensuring a respect for peer support, solid golf skills, and a fun-loving atmosphere on the course.



The success of Tiger Woods was an inspiration to the national First Tee program in 1997, and local youth benefit.

not unaware of the perils these kids may face in the real world, but he feels strongly that an exposure to golf can only help arm the kids with some important tools.

"We're not teaching golf so much as self-esteem, confidence, discipline, sportsmanship," says Phillips. "The core values at the heart of the game are something these kids can always carry with them."

The First Tee is a national program created by the World Golf Foundation in November 1997, six months after Tiger Woods' epochal victory at



Executive director Barry Phillips wishes more children could increase self esteem through golf.

the Masters led to renewed efforts to make golf more inclusive. Now there are nearly 700 program locations nationally, serving 2.2 million

kids. The Monterey County chapter was founded in November 2004, and it continues to grow exponentially, from 575 members in 2005 to nearly 3,000 today. By virtue of the school program, some 2,200 Salinas kids have been granted membership, meaning they can come by anytime and get a large bucket of range balls for \$1, or play Twin Creeks' 9-hole par-3 course for \$2. (For comparison: a ticket to the latest Hollywood blockbuster at the Northridge Mall cinemas would cost the same kid \$5.75.) There are numerous clinics taught every Saturday, and

Phillips is currently trying to raise funds for buses that would leave from various elementary schools every afternoon, which could help keep more than a few kids busy after school.

The program is not limited to Salinas children; it is open to all youth in Monterey County, and families can sign up apart from the school system. A second facility is located at Laguna Seca. Programs are designed for kids aged 4-17 years old, and a year membership is only \$95, plus an additional \$20 per sibling, with scholarships available.

The First Tee offers plenty beyond the golf facilities. There is a "kids' clubhouse" with 16 gleaming Sony computers and plenty of workspace to do homework. There are also good role models to be found, whether it's the upbeat instructors, known as life-skills coaches, or older kids who are using golf to better themselves. Two of the facility's regulars, Haley Andreas and Annie Bowsby, competed in last fall's Wal-Mart First Tee Open at Pebble Beach, and for the occasion, 700 Salinas kids were bused over to cheer.

"That was an amazing experience, to see this big-time tournament and the beauty of Pebble Beach through the kids' eyes," says Phillips. "For a lot of them it was the first time they had ever seen the ocean."

Phillips would love to be able to afford additional staff so more school kids could be accommodated. The program currently has more than 100 active volunteers but is always looking for more. "We always hear from potential volunteers, 'But I don't know anything about golf!'" Phillips says. "We'll worry about the golf. All we need is someone who is willing to be a role model and reach out to these kids. There are a lot of lives waiting to be changed."

To learn more about The First Tee of Monterey County, go to www.thefirstteemc.org or call 831/444-7200.