

# Golf for the Differentlyabled

BY HOLLY FRANZ, M.S., CPRP & RITA YERKES, ED.D., CPRP

Before the turn of the 21st century, the National Golf Foundation predicted that 30 million Americans would take up golf before 2000. Now, in 2005, the nation's courses host many more than 30 million. Perhaps, one of the leading causes of this increased golf participation is society's understanding and awareness of the benefits of golf for players of all ages and abilities: Golf isn't just for the Tiger Woods and Annika Sorenstams of the world. Its numerous health benefits and "fun" appeal to all ages and ability levels.

## Golf Benefits Everyone

Researchers have conducted studies that show that able-bodied individuals who participate in golf experienced positive health, sociological and psychological benefits. A study of middle-aged golfers (average age of 55 years) published in 2000 in the *American Journal of Medicine* found that the walking associated with playing golf significantly increased aerobic performance, trunk muscle endurance and reduced weight, abdominal skin fold thickness, and waist circumference. In 1990, E.H. Hargreaves and E.A. Palank of the New Hampshire Heart Institute found that middle-aged and senior male golfers (average age of 61 years) who walked the golf course three times per week lowered their total cholesterol. They also decreased their low-density lipoprotein cholesterol and significantly lessened their risk of developing coronary heart disease. (However, researchers have also noted that these benefits wear off unless the golfer remains active year-round.)

Other studies have shown that youth and teenagers receive some of these same health, sociological and psychological benefits through golf participation. For example, Greg Bach reported that golf benefits young people in the "challenge leagues" (a competitive youth golf league run by the Hook-A-Kid-On-Golf Program). Bach states, "The team-oriented play benefits youngsters in so many ways...they're learning to work together with their partners in choosing what shot to play, selecting [the] proper club, discussing strategy on how they want to play a particular hole, and helping each other read greens."

In addition, The First Tee, an initiative of the United States Golf Association, has taken great strides in promoting the sociological and psychological benefits of golf for young people through its junior golf program. The First Tee Program exposes young people to golf's positive values through The First Tee Life Skills Experience Program. According to information posted on The First Tee web site in 2002, the Life Skills Experience Program allows its participants "to learn value lessons about the importance of maintaining a positive attitude; how to make deci-



In 2004, youth at risk from Aurora and Chicago were selected to participate in a golf and adventure-based outdoor program at the Aurora University-George Williams campus. The program, a collaboration of the Aurora and Chicago First Tee Chapters of the USGA and the School of Experiential Leadership at the Aurora University-George Williams Campus, will be offered again this summer.

sions by thinking about the possible consequences; how to define and set goals; and how to transfer values such as responsibility, honesty, integrity, respect, confidence and sportsmanship from the golf course to everyday life."

These life lessons are taught through golf-related exercises designed with the main goal of having fun. The First Tee Program has also established and incorporated into its program Nine Core Values that are inherent in the game of golf:

1. Honesty
2. Integrity
3. Sportsmanship
4. Respect
5. Confidence
6. Responsibility
7. Perseverance
8. Courtesy
9. Judgment

This program is still in the experimental stage. However, is this program just for those who may be gifted enough to become tomorrow's Tiger, or can others benefit as well?

Research has shown that golf is beneficial for individuals with disabilities, specifically for middle-aged adults or adults that are in need of rehabilitation services. In 2002, Get Up and Golf, Inc.'s (now defunct) web site touted the benefits of golf for adults (40 and over) with disabilities: "[Golf] can help you have more sustainable energy, more zest for life, and [an] increased ability to retire, work, volunteer, unleash, travel, save, party, sing, whatever. In our research and our experience, we have discovered that sports are not ends in themselves, but rather the means to vitality, vigor, and, yes, even rehabilitation."

Other adapted golf organizations and programs include the Association of Disabled American Golfers, the National Amputee Golf Association, the United States Blind Golfer Association, the Physically Challenged Golfers Association, Project FORE and the Physically Limited Golfers Association. These organizations have been created with the sole purpose of promoting and providing benefits that are inherent to participation in golf for their membership.

### Programs for the Differently Abled

In addition to the above-mentioned organizations and associations for golfers with disabilities, many therapeutic programs in community and private settings have established golf programs as well. An excellent example is the Therapeutic Golf Program at the Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital in Wheaton, Illinois. That program is an excellent model for other organizations and agencies desiring to begin a golf program for individuals with physical disabilities. The hospital's program, which started in 2000, involves clinicians, such as therapeutic recreation and physical therapists and Professional Golf Association professionals.

Running primarily through the summer months, the Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital program offers golf clinics, tournaments and a four-day camp for youth ages 6 – 17 with physical disabilities. Clinics and tournaments are operated independently of the camp. The camp staff teaches golf etiquette and rules, proper warm-up exercises and the

basics of the golf swing during the first day. Individual camper modifications are then made during the remainder of the camp based on the youths' ability levels. The last day of camp provides an opportunity for the youth to play on a "real course" and to therefore apply what they have learned during the previous days of camp. The clinics, tournaments and the camp are funded through a variety of philanthropic sources including grants, fundraising and donations from several professional golf organizations.

According to Donna Strum, Marianjoy director of therapeutic sports and recreation, the Therapeutic Golf Youth Program emphasizes the "fun" aspect of golf, not its therapeutic benefits. "The program staff believes that if kids are having fun while participating in golf, the therapeutic benefits will become apparent inadvertently." She adds that the program provides three major benefits for youth with disabilities:

1. Increased mobility and socialization,
2. Assistance in mainstreaming, and
3. Therapy without the realization of being in therapy.

Thus far, Marianjoy's Therapeutic Golf Youth Program is a relatively new and "up-and-coming" golf program for youth with physical disabilities. According to Strum the 2004 (four-day) camp served 362 children and adults. However, these numbers will continue to grow in the future due to the benefits that are inherent in participating in the program and its strong financial support and leadership.

Another innovative youth golf program began in the summer of 2004. The Aurora and Chicago First Tee Chapters of the USGA teamed up with the School of Experiential Leadership at the Aurora University-George Williams Campus to pilot a new youth golf program. Youth at risk from Aurora and Chicago were selected to participate in a combined First Tee golf and adventure-based outdoor program at the campus. Aurora First Tee Director, Jim David, along with Aurora University faculty, staff and graduate students in recreation administration designed the program concentrating on the First Tee Nine Core Values. The adventure-based and recreation programs provided to the youth off of the golf course reinforced the core values of honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, respect, confidence,

responsibility, perseverance, courtesy and judgment. The combined program was a great success and will be offered again in the summer of 2005. According to Rita Yerkes, dean of the School of Experiential Leadership, "The youth commented in their final evaluations that the combined golf and adventure education program had given them an experience they would never forget and that they wanted to share the skills that they had learned with their communities."

### How to Start a Golf Program

An organization or agency wishing to begin a golf program for differently abled individuals should consider the following helpful tips during program planning.

- **Select staff** knowledgeable about golf and about providing recreation to individuals with disabilities.
- **Obtain input** from the community regarding key programming elements (i.e. time, dates, etc.) that may affect participants' willingness to register for the program.
- **Ensure that the program stresses** the benefits of golf in a fun manner. The benefits of golf participation will naturally become apparent if golf is perceived as a fun activity.
- **Create goals** for the program that are obtainable, that relate to the benefits of golf and to the program's evaluation system.
- **Create effective summative and formative program evaluations** for the participants as well as the staff, and use these evaluations to improve the program.
- **Do your research** on the latest adaptive golf devices. The therapeutic golf industry now offers a wide variety of adaptive golf devices that can be used in golf programs for individuals with disabilities. (Please visit the United States Adaptive Golf Association at [www.usagas.org](http://www.usagas.org) for a complete listing of adaptive golf cart and equipment companies as well as facilities, organizations and programs.)

### Opening Your Fairways to Everyone

Golf is not just for the Tigers and Annikas in our society. Differently challenged individu-

als can also experience the benefits that able-bodied individuals experience through golf participation. The health, sociological and psychological benefits of golf for participants are apparent in the sport's growing popularity with the general public. Park and recreation agencies and program directors may want to consider how to meet the needs of their communities by making their golf programs accessible to all of their residents. Programs like those of Aurora University-George Williams Campus, Hook a Kid on Golf, Marianjoy's Therapeutic Youth Golf and the USGA First Tee programs may help chart the way.

Why not offer the benefits of this popular sport to all of the recreation participants at your agency?

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(Please note that the Get Up and Golf web site is no longer available as of fall, 2004 and the organization is now defunct.)
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