

First Tee Fever

The rapid expansion of First Tee programs around the Met Area has brought golf, and hope, to thousands of kids

BY MERRELL NODEN

Maurice Hill is a study in concentration as he lines up a short putt on the practice green at Fairchild Wheeler Golf Course in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Maurice is 10 years old and still very much a beginning golfer, but he knows what to do when his ball rolls straight to the hole and miraculously tumbles in: He thrusts both hands in the air and launches into the speech he's been waiting to give all his short life: "I want to thank my mother, my sister, my brother – all my siblings," he announces with a huge grin.

Maurice may be clowning around, but serious thanks are certainly due to the many people and supporters who have made The First Tee of Metropolitan New York such an incredible success. The First Tee, which five years ago lacked even a toehold in the golf-rich New York Metropolitan Area, is now thriving. Fairchild Wheeler is one of five facilities now under the banner of The First Tee of Metropolitan New York, a collaboration of the MGA Foundation, Metropolitan PGA, and now several regional partners as well.

The first facility to open, in November of 2001, was Mosholu Golf Course, in the Bronx, which continues to serve as headquarters for the Metropolitan chapter; next came Eisenhower Park, on Long Island; then Chelsea Piers in Manhattan, which serves as a winter practice facility; Bridgeport, which after two seasons of programming was officially added as a First Tee facility in May and operates in collaboration with the First Tee of Connecticut; and Newark, N.J., where an ingeniously designed practice facility opened this summer at Weequahic Park as The First Tee of Essex County.

Kids can now enjoy newly lush surroundings at First Tee facilities in Newark (main photo) and also in Bridgeport, Connecticut (inset).





The MGA Foundation and The First Tee: Perfect Partners

The four Metropolitan Area First Tee sites listed below outline the various relationships that exist between the MGA Foundation and its First Tee Partners – a true cooperative effort among the local golf community to bring affordable and accessible golf and its values to a new generation.

THE FIRST TEE OF METROPOLITAN NEW YORK

The First Tee of
Metropolitan NY at Mosholu



MGA Foundation and Metropolitan PGA



The First Tee of
Nassau County at Eisenhower Park



The
First Tee
at Chelsea
Piers (NYC)



The First Tee at
Fairchild Wheeler GC



MGA Foundation
Metropolitan PGA
The First Tee of CT



The First Tee of
Essex County at Weequahic Park



MGA Foundation
New Jersey PGA
New Jersey State GA



The result of this astounding growth is that tens of thousands of Met Area kids who might otherwise never have played golf are now getting at least a taste of the game, and many are getting much more than that. Through the First Tee's emphasis on life skills, and its multitude of scholarship and mentoring programs, many of these kids are learning to be the responsible adults the First Tee aims to turn out.

The MGA and Metropolitan PGA have always been leaders in junior golf, but both organizations knew they could do more, especially if they could build or acquire facilities that would be dedicated to teaching juniors. "We had visions of First Tee-style programs before there was a First Tee organization," says Lowell Schulman, an MGA Foundation and

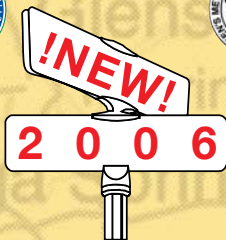
First Tee board member, and a principal benefactor. "We wanted to create a facility that the kids have as their own – their club, their golf course, where they feel comfortable. We searched all over for the right kind of property, and then found Mosholu. It is a great story and has become the ideal model for First Tee programs around the country."

The concept of reaching kids on many levels particularly excites the people who are involved on a day-to-day basis with the First Tee facilities through the area. "Initially, a lot of what the First Tee was about was golf," says Barry McLaughlin, Executive Director of the Met chapter. "That's no longer so. What the First Tee is really all about is [producing] better people, better citizens. Of course we want them to do well at golf and enjoy it. But we're not making that the priority."

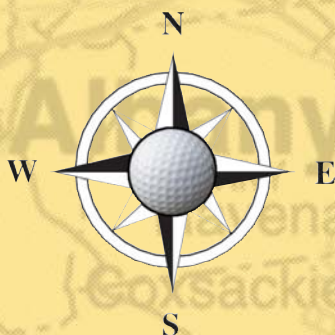
Though you'd never know it from McLaughlin's boundless energy and optimism, the last few years have been trying ones at Mosholu. A few hundred yards from the practice green gapes a huge construction pit, the result of the city's decision to build a massive water filtration plant on the Mosholu driving range – or, more accurately, under it. The project will take seven more years to complete, but there is an upside. "We'll have our clubhouse on Jerome Avenue again, closer to the No. 4 train," says the Met PGA's Executive Director, Charlie Robson, a man capable of finding the silver lining in any cloud. "That was always one of our biggest selling points."

LPGA Tour star Paula Creamer has been one of the biggest draws at First Tee events throughout the Met Area.





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Another is sure to be the golf course itself. If you played the dusty old, bunkerless Mosholu nine-holer before its recent 18-month overhaul, you'll be amazed at what a lovely green oasis it has become. As re-designed by the architecture team of Stephen Kay and Doug Smith and built by Sam DiPasquale, the revitalized Mosholu has a new irrigation system, and 18 brand new bunkers, a much-improved golf experience.

Equally impressive is the Lew Rudin Youth Golf Center at Mosholu, with its 11-station artificial turf driving range, putting green, and chipping area. Smith also had the brilliant idea of situating a mound near the practice green to create stadium seating on a kid scale. At the the U.S. Open Junior Golf Day in early June, the grassy slope was teeming with parents and siblings who'd come to watch the roughly 300 kids who took part in the outing.

The Youth Golf Center is indeed a worthy memorial to Mr. Rudin, whose \$1 million gift to the First Tee stipulated that half of it be used to start a chapter in the Met Area. The First Tee has many invaluable friends, but none better than the Rudin family: Lew's son Bill has continued to support The First Tee through golf outing fundraisers, and the family also awards an annual NYU

scholarship to select First Tee graduates, one being Mosholu's own Kelly Leung (see sidebar, below). Such generosity often comes full circle: Leung, in a way that is typical of First Tee grads, now give back by helping out at Mosholu and Chelsea Piers.

In fact, older kids play an increasingly large role in The First Tee as part of a new mentoring program sponsored by the Royal Bank of Scotland and focused on Bridgeport and New York. There are roughly 50 kids involved at present, 20 in Bridgeport and 30 in New York. They meet with their mentors for two hours on alternate Wednesday evenings, from April through October, and build the First Tee's life skills program into their golf lessons.

Another First Tee program that's worked brilliantly is the "Play Day" concept dreamed up by Jason Monroe, a serious amateur golfer and member of Fenway Golf Club in Scarsdale. Monroe had approached McLaughlin about helping the First Tee in some way, perhaps through teaching. McLaughlin mentioned that while the local PGA pros were incredibly generous with their time, there was no real link between the First Tee and the private club community. When Monroe wondered aloud about the possibility of his club hosting an afternoon-long outing for

First Tee Success Story: Kelly Leung

"The 46 to the E, to the R, to the 4." As she reels off the names of the bus and three trains she has been taking for years to get to Mosholu from her home in Jamaica, Queens, Kelly Leung sounds like a football quarterback, and no wonder: It was quite a hike.

Kelly is a charter member of the First Tee of Metropolitan New York. Her mom signed her up five years ago, when Kelly was about to enter the Bronx High School of Science, where she would later captain both the tennis and golf teams. Since then, she has taken advantage of just about everything the First Tee has to offer, winning a treasured Rudin Scholarship to NYU and participating in the Royal Bank of Scotland's



mentoring program. A sophomore at NYU's Stern School of Business, Kelly already knows how to strike a bargain: She agreed to help her RBS mentor, Maria Merrill, with her golf game in exchange for Merrill's teaching her about the world

of business, which Kelly hopes to enter one day, maybe as an investment banker. This summer she is working as a First Tee intern at Mosholu.

Kelly recently earned one more honor: She was invited to describe her First Tee experiences at a Congressional breakfast. Speaking for all First Tee grads, she told the gathered representatives, "The First Tee has ingrained in me the tools I will use to succeed in life."



Youngsters not only receive golf instruction but are educated about nine “core values.”

First Tee Success: Jonathan Rafael

Jonathan Rafael, a senior at Bullard-Havens High School in Bridgeport, has had to shoulder more responsibility than most teenagers. His mom, who’s a nurse, relies on him to help clean the house, cook, and take care of his younger brother. “He’s the one who’s always depended on,” says Jan Schechter, the program coordinator for Bridgeport.

This is hardly the dream life of a 16-year-old boy, but Jonathan does these extra chores without complaint.

This summer he will be following in Randy Taylor’s footsteps by working at Brooklawn Country Club, a job he gained through the MGA Foundation’s GOLFWORKS program. After graduating from high school next year, he plans to study finance or accounting in college. “He’s one of those kids who wants to succeed,” says Schechter. “And he’s such a nice kid, you really root for him.”

a group of First Tee kids, the leadership at Fenway jumped at the idea.

The club’s first Play Day took place in June of 2004 and included about 50 youngsters who had lunch, worked through four golf “stations” manned by local pros recruited by

Fenway’s head pro, Heath Wassem, and ended with a banquet. Among the treasure trove of gifts each participant received was a disposable camera, which meant that all the kids went home with their own record of their great day. The Fenway volunteers went home with more than that.

“When you see the kids get off their big yellow school bus at this incredible facility, after they’ve settled in and gotten over their initial intimidation, the look on their faces all day is just so powerful,” says Monroe. “After every event we all say we get more out of it than the kids do.” Monroe has helped other clubs, like Whipoorwill, Brae Burn and Metropolis, organize similar Play Days. Several clubs on Long Island have also started Play Day initiatives, and the hopes are that other Met Area clubs will follow suit.

With facilities operating in so much of the MGA Foundation’s area, the only real gap was New Jersey, where finding a suitable site for effective

programming posed the usual challenges. Until this year, that is. The lucky young golfers of Newark now have their own First Tee facility, and the city is a great place for the First Tee since it already has a proud tradition of youth golf to build on, led by two very successful programs. Newark Youth Golf, which was founded in 1980 and focuses on young beginning golfers, has over 2,000 kids registered and this year its summer camp had over 500 applications. Renaissance Youth Golf, which is 12 years old and caters to older kids, has 53 kids at present and over the years has helped develop a number of accomplished junior players. Both programs use golf in the same way the First Tee does: to teach life values.

“Golf is an excellent teaching tool. It’s based on a person’s individual honesty,” notes Newark Youth Golf director Rudi Rudolph, adding that one reason Newark is such a hotbed for youth golf is that Weequahic Park was the first public course in the state and for a time the only one that allowed people of color to play. “You literally have kids, parents, and parents’ parents that took up golf and played the game here,” says Rudolph.

What children will find at Weequahic Park is a facility dedicated entirely to and always available to kids, and what a lovely little site it is: Covering two and a half acres on the side of a hill next to the Weequahic clubhouse, it has three Field-Turf greens, three tees, a driving range and several bunkers.

The transformation of the Weequahic site was a great example of teamwork. As recently as April of this year, the acreage was unsightly and used for little more than dumping leaves that were collected from the golf course. Just a little more than three months later it is a sparkling, landscaped oasis. The driving force behind this metamorphosis has been Mike Morris of Morris Associates, one of the area’s top golf course construction firms. With help from architects Kay and Smith, area clubs and superintendents, tree work from Rob Finnesey of Tree Tech, The First Tee’s on-site point person Ed Brockner and a host of other friends of golf, the project was completed at a fraction of what it would normally cost.

The other notable aspect of the site in Newark is that the Youth Learning Center and ongoing First Tee programs there will be a cooperative effort of the New Jersey PGA, the New Jersey State Golf Association’s Youth Foundation and the MGA Foundation, all under the First Tee banner. The project has also benefited from the financial generosity of the Frank S. and Patricia F. Russo Family

Fund, the Beth and Leonard Wilf Family Foundation, and the USGA. The USGA Foundation's "Good of the Game" grants program, which has given away 50 million dollars over the past decade, has been the major supporter of First Tee programs across the country.

"This site provides a fun and versatile facility for kids to learn the game," says Brockner, who spends most of his days at Weequahic Park. "It's also an important part of the ongoing effort to revitalize the park for area residents."

With the Weequahic facility now open, The First Tee will take on new challenges. A facility in Brooklyn down the road is one major goal, but for now the priority is to strengthen the programs already in place.

The program has a higher percentage of kids returning than ever before, a result, he believes, of the First Tee coaching clinics, which everyone at Mosholu has gone through. So has Mike Wade, who runs the booming program out at Eisenhower Park. Wade, expects to have over a thousand kids at Eisenhower Park this summer. He is grateful for the MGA Foundations's eight GOLFWORKS student interns who will help him.

Randy Taylor, 23, is the director of the First Tee program at Fairchild Wheeler and is himself a graduate of Bridgeport's Cardinal Sheehan Center, which is still sending kids to the course. Indeed, Maurice Hill is a Sheehan kid, and when Taylor looks out at the kids standing on the putting green, he has no trouble seeing himself just 10 years ago.

Growing up in a tough part of east Bridgeport, Taylor, who played some football and has the linebacker's shoulders to prove it, discovered golf through an after-school program that combined academics and golf. Neither of Taylor's parents played themselves, but they could see the positive effect that golf was having on their son, who in the summer would spend entire days, dawn to dusk, at Fairchild Wheeler.

Taylor learned firsthand how much a caring mentor means to a child. He was lucky to meet Brooklawn pro Brad Worthington through the MGA's GOLFWORKS program. Worthington trusted him to do virtually every job at Brooklawn and even though it meant losing a stellar employee, encouraged him to take the First Tee job. Taylor works from eight to eight, seven days a week, and loves every minute of it. In

the winters Taylor teaches in public school gym classes across Fairfield County and in the summers runs a Fairchild Wheeler golf team with varsity and JV divisions, which has grown from 8 to 15 to 60 kids in its third year. To the grateful kids, "Coach" Randy is a real inspiration.


On the same June day when Maurice sunk his putt, Taylor ran 23 kids through four golf stations. After going over golf terminology and the parts of a golf course, he stresses three keys to having fun on the golf course – Be patient, be positive, and ask for help – before taking them out to putt and hit on the driving range.

The session ends with a spirited game of golf baseball. When the game is finally over and it's time to head for the bus and home, they all troop along behind Coach Randy, their own pied piper, across the field to the parking lot. Suddenly, with no apparent effort, he reaches over and slings one laughing kid across his broad shoulders, demonstrating what he and the other First Tee coaches know so well: a little help goes a long way. ■

Merrell Noden is a freelance writer based in Princeton, New Jersey.



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