

Filling the Fall Youth Sports Gap with PGA Jr. League

Offering the program — and specifically 17u teams — is an untapped opportunity for PGA Professionals

By Hayley Wilson

School looks vastly different for kids this fall, and with those changes comes a shift in the landscape of youth team sports. Youngsters are missing out on crucial mental, physical and emotional development that results from practicing and playing on teams as a result.

In the golf industry, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have ranged from catastrophic closings to record-breaking sales. Some PGA Jr. League Captains have had to cancel their programs all together, whereas others are expanding their teams to accommodate the growing number of beginners.

For PGA Professionals who have been coaching 17u teams, the opportunity to seize the moment is especially apparent.

Kevin Edwards, the PGA Director of Golf at Olde Homestead Golf Club in New Tripoli, Pennsylvania, is in his third year offering both 13u and 17u PGA Jr. League teams at his facility. He intermixes his 17u players with his 13u players on game days, but keeps practices separate to get more technical with the older kids.

"I had people signing up through the beginning of June because they were waiting to see what was going on," says Edwards. "There were a lot of new faces this year. Most of that is coming from word of mouth and kids from other clubs that aren't running PGA Jr. League this year."

Similarly, PGA Teaching Professional and 2017 New Jersey PGA Youth Player Development Award winner Mike Andrusin is also in his third year coaching 17u and 13u players at Flinders Valley Golf Course. Last year's new fall season he tackled onto his summer programming resulted in an additional \$2,500 in registration revenue.

"Having no high school sports transfers down to recreational sports, too," Andrusin says. "I think we have an oppor-

tunity to play longer into the fall. My son's older high school friends who've played all sports except golf have even called me for lessons."

Brandon Stransky is one of three PGA Assistant Professionals at Tualatin Country Club in Oregon. He's seen surges in activity similar to Andrusin, hitting record numbers each month and seeing lots of new faces.

Being only eight-to-10 years older than their 17u players, Stransky and his fellow assistants have seen the positive impact they have had with the juniors. In fact, one PGA Jr. Leaguer is following in Stransky's footsteps, beginning the PGA Golf Management program at the University of Idaho this fall.

"It really prepares them for their future in golf," Stransky says of PGA Jr. League. "We have nine playing together competing on a 17u team, and it's helping them build their confidence. They get to familiarize themselves with tournament golf, and it's fun because they get to be with their friends."

Stransky and fellow Coaches spent the first practice solely talking guidelines — everything from physical distancing to coughing into your elbow. It's just part of life now and, unfortunately, so are the downsides of losing out on social connection at this age.

"I've been talking to some of the parents and they're seeing the differences in their kids not being able to socialize with their friends," he says. "PGA Jr. League gets them outside. It helps build those communication and teamwork skills when they can't be in the classroom and play other team sports."

The range in skill level, sport participation and ages within his teams is proof of the pandemic-driven trend toward golf. Two girls on Tualatin's 17u teams are volleyball and soccer players who've only played golf a few times with their grandparents, but they turned to PGA Jr. League for a new team sport option.

"This is our future membership," Stransky says. "We want them to keep coming back each year and encourage their friends to join. We opened our PGA Jr. League registration to the public so that kids could invite their non-member friends. Within two weeks, three of our PGA Jr. League families joined that were previously just public players."

The stretch into fall seems natural this year, just like the important step-up of creating 17u team opportunities for those aging out of 13u.

"It's a natural progression for kids," Edwards says. "If you have successful 13u programs, you don't want to lose that momentum of those kids and families being around your club. It's a missed opportunity if you don't keep them involved." ■

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The fall PGA Jr. League uniform offerings give players and Captains a fresh look on the course.