

GROUP GIVES DISABLED KIDS CHANCE TO TAKE SWING AT GOLF

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As students from the Children's Golf Foundation prepare to tee off at a hole at the Lakeview Golf Club, Lakeview general manager Peter Doolittle stands nearby offering words of encouragement.

The Delray Beach club hosted the inaugural Golf for All Golf Classic on Jan. 22, an event organized to give the foundation's handicapped kids an opportunity to play on an 18-hole golf course. "Eventually what we want to do is roll this program out to all of the public and semi-private golf courses in Palm Beach County, so these kids can get a chance to experience multiple golf courses and really just feel comfortable playing (them)," Doolittle said. He was among a number of adults and club professionals teamed up with the 18 kids during the one-day, 9-hole tournament.

Children's Golf Foundation President Keith Stuhler said one of the goals of his West Palm Beach-based teaching and learning center is to build the self-esteem of kids with disabilities.

"To teach them that they can do something that they previously had no idea they could do. And that the avenues are open for them to do so," Stuhler said. He said another goal is to increase awareness about providing access to public golf courses to people with disabilities.

Stuhler said the Golf for All event began after Brahm Dubin, the owner of the JCD Sports Group, formed a committee for the Palm Beach County Sports Commission to study special needs for the disabled population. "There has to be accessibility and that goes back to the Americans with Disabilities Act in (1990)," Stuhler said. "Golf courses, which are public, must provide access to the disabled, and that's been very slow in happening. Thanks to people like Brahm Dubin and Pete Doolittle, the Children's Golf Foundation and events like this, we are attempting to speed up that process."

Stuhler designed and built the first combination golf course in the nation, specifically for teaching physically and mentally handicapped children. The combination golf course and practice center with four greens and no permanent tees is in West Palm Beach, where participants learn the game's rules and etiquette. But the Delray event provided the first opportunity for several of the kids to play on a regular golf course. "It takes the fear out of what a conventional golf course is. They know that they've done it before and they can do it again," Stuhler said.

The day's top prize went to Chris Sapp and his niece Menna, who teamed with Bill Kriews and Ronnie Dunayer to shoot a combined five-under-par. Stuhler declared all of the kids winners during an awards ceremony, in which all of them received medals.

"It was a lot of fun. It was very exciting," said Tony Sapp, the winner of the putting contest, and the twin brother of Chris. "The Children's Golf Foundation has been so wonderful. They've fitted them with special clubs," Patty Sapp, Tony and Chris' mother. "They really enjoy getting up early on Saturdays. It's early on Saturday, and I thought they want to sleep in or watch TV. But they're always ready before I am, ready to go out the door."