

# The Golf Channel

## Article featuring Brad Latimer

“Happy Campers”

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PUEBLO, Colo.

-- Occasionally, I get to cover the match play portions of some of the U.S. Golf

Association championships. It's one of the most pleasant parts of my job. This week, it's the U.S.

Women's Amateur Publinx Championship at Walking Stick Golf Course here.

I like majors, but this is quite a switch from last week's assignment at Winged Foot. Less crowds, less

media, less hype, no badges, no parking shuttle...you get the idea. And some of the big-time

colleagues I meet at the men's majors scoff when I say how much I like the lesser USGA

championships. Senior Women's Open? Amateur Publinx? Don't they shoot, like, a hundred and play six-hour rounds?

Nope. They come to play. They get it done. They don't blame caddies, snarl at photographers, or slam clubs. It's solid, interesting match play golf.

But the main reason I like these events is the kids. I see them everywhere, often girls of 10 or 11 or 12,

following matches, watching in the shade of a tree as the action goes by. Looking intently at form,

function, strategy. Planning their golf careers and wishing.

A 13-year-old and two 14-year-olds made it to match play in this event. They had to start somewhere.

A golf camp, perhaps?

It seems we are a day-camp nation. Once the kids are out of school, we are in a mad rush to keep

them occupied, and for that reason the day camp industry thrives. Science camp, volleyball camp,

basketball, soccer, you name it – three or four hours every morning for a week or two. Line up a few of

those and you can help your kid avoid summer boredom without overscheduling the little tyke. You hope.

There are golf day camps too, and Little Tyke Barr (aka Joseph) was signed up for the one at our

home course, Windermere Country Club, outside Orlando. By the time I dropped him off for the

Wednesday session, he was a couple days into it and having a ball. That morning, there were at least 20 kids of various ages putting and chipping, and many said hello to him.

“O.K., Kiddo, there’s your clubs. Be sure to pay attention to Mr. Brad. Mommy will be here to pick you up.”

“Dad! Don’t go yet! Let me show you how I can chip.”

I smiled. My wife and I are a golf-crazy couple, and we have hoped for a long time that Joseph would make it a golf-nutso family. But we didn’t want to push – after all, he likes basketball and soccer too – and perhaps we have erred on the side of underpromoting.

But apparently, it has worked. He chips pretty well, and his putting is coming along. He’ll beat his Dad in, oh...a few months, right?

Main thing is, he was having a blast. That’s thanks largely to the work of Mr. Brad, Brad Latimer to us big folks. He’s the head pro at our club, and he runs the kids program every summer. Five-year-olds and up can come. And no matter how good a teacher you may be, as a parent you need to just back away sometimes.

“It’s good for the kids to relate to other kids in their age group and actually *play* golf with them, instead of just hitting balls,” Latimer said. “And it’s good for them to see older kids and how they have progressed. The 8-year-olds teach the five-year-olds where to stand, what club to use, and a lot more.”

When choosing a golf camp, parents should look for on-course time, Latimer says, “Until somebody gets on the course and understands why you have to hit a particular shot, the shot just won’t make sense,” Latimer said. “That’s true for adult beginners as well.”

To manage that on-course time and deal with young attention spans, Latimer and his lieutenants keep the kids moving. Fifteen to 20 minutes of short game, perhaps a half hour on the range, then on to the next stop, with course time last in the three-hour daily curriculum. Plenty of water breaks, and drills punctuated with brief, impromptu hitting contests.

But isn’t there a babysitting element to all this? How do you keep it fun while getting some learning in? How do you keep them coming back?

“Keep reminding them of all the positive things they’re doing,” Latimer says, with not a little emphasis.

“If they hit a bad shot, find something positive – the finish, the stance, something they did right. And don’t make it up.”

Who wouldn't want to learn like that?

Of course, there is a safety element too. Latimer and his staff can get through a whole week without a kid catching a clubhead under the chin. That's because there are rules: 10 to 12 feet away when swinging, and only at the designated times. If someone gets wild, Brad chalks a one-foot smiley-face circle onto the turf, and that's where that kid must stay to hit until he settles things down.

"And if anyone backswings at the wrong time or place, I just take his club," Latimer says. "We rarely have any problems after the first day."

Latimer seems to have the perfect personality for this job. Surely he must have had, what, 11 or 12 younger siblings, right?

"Nah," he says. "I'm an only child. It's just that I like kids. Nothing they do seems to bother me."

What would bother him is a kid losing a chance to come to golf -- or come back to it. Coming back led to Brad to a life in the game.

"When I was a kid, I played in a tournament and ran out of balls, so I had to quit," Brad said. "I cried all the way in, and I really didn't play for a long time.

"But seven years later, when someone asked me to play, I had mostly fond memories of the game," he said. "I had been playing other sports, but when I came back to golf, I stayed."

And now it's his career, and a fulfilling one. As for the children he teaches now, Brad is realistic about the many reasons people play the game.

"My goal is not to produce little Tigers, but to create an environment in which junior golfers can learn and have fun," Brad says. "But more than that, I want them to have the tools to become good golfers if they want to. I want them to be able to play together, to root for each other. So even if they go on to other sports -- as so many kids do -- when they get a chance to return to golf, they have the same kind of fond memories I did."

Until Brad's canonization, he'll be continuing with his teaching at Windermere, both kids and adults.

And the kids' day camps, whether at private clubs like Windermere or at First Tee chapters or at muni courses all over North America, will continue to bring kids to the game, one at a time.

Because we all have to start somewhere.

*Adam Barr,*

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