

GOLF AT ITS



PUREST



The next time a duffed bunker shot, missed three-footer or the dreaded shank comes along, it might be prudent to remember just how much harder the game can be for some - and how they love it all the more. By KAREN HARDING

It is said that golf is a game that can be learned but never mastered. That the better you get, the more it will torture you. For most of us, this is certainly true. Yet there is a group of golfers for whom this does not apply. Players who are not tortured by it at all, but exhilarated. Players whose mastery of golf is based on one simple thing – the sheer enjoyment of it all.

These exemplary golfers are a group of youngsters, some with intellectual disability, some with physical disability, who attend clinics designed specifically around their needs at Yarrambat and Keilor golf courses.

The clinics are a joint venture between Golf Victoria, Special Olympics Victoria and Belgravia Leisure, with fundamental support via the Northern Special Schools Sports Assembly. It is an interesting partnership with each body bringing its own expertise to the table. Or, in this case, the golf course.

Belgravia Leisure is an Australian leisure management provider which manages both Yarrambat and Keilor as part of its stadium management portfolio. Its stated purpose is connecting community to leisure, which it does with the aim of creating healthy communities.

The driver of the clinics from Belgravia Leisure is its national disability and diversity manager, Jeff Walkley, who has a PhD in physical education, sport and disability from the University of Virginia. Walkley has extensive experience working with the disabled and approached Special Olympics Victoria with possible program opportunities.

Special Olympics Victoria is part of Special Olympics Australia, a not-for-profit organisation established in 1976, which in turn is the result of the commitment and vision of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, whose sister, Rosemary, had an intellectual disability. Shriver believed that people in a similar position to Rosemary deserved more opportunities than they had and set about providing them.

In 1962, she invited 75 children to her backyard in Rockville, Maryland, offering them the chance to explore their talents and enjoy themselves through sporting activity. Originally called Camp Shriver, this expanded across the United States and now, as the Special Olympics, serves over four million athletes in close to 180 countries, with a volunteer network delivering over 44,000 competitions annually.

Tamara Hyett, adult development officer at Golf Victoria, assisted the Special Olympics National Games held in Melbourne in 2014. Out of this came the realisation that, with only two local representatives out of 35 players in the golf competition, a plan was needed to draw more special needs people to golf. Not only would this bolster the number of Victorians on the team, it would meet one of Golf Victoria's key priorities – to make golf a sport of choice for players of all abilities.

James Quarmbly, sports development manager at Special Olympics Australia, connected Hyett with Walkley, and the clinics were conceived. All that was needed was the kids. ▶

'Great shot.'
Golf Victoria's
Tamara Hyett with
Concord students
Robbie Pocock,
Rhys Taylor,
Jayden Berns,
Hussein Mohammed
and Jayden Matters.

The participants themselves were drawn via the Northern Special Schools Sports Assembly, which makes decisions on program opportunities on behalf of local special schools, which is more expedient than dealing with each school individually.

Six schools were involved, comprising close to 200 children from 13-16 years of age. Clinics are term-based and held each Wednesday for about 90 minutes. With the Term 1 program of seven weeks duration, three schools did three weeks of golf before switching with the other three schools to attend the cricket program (run by Cricket Victoria and its partners).

The clinics at Yarrambat were manned by Hyett, Yarrambat professional Ethan Cowden and manager Rob Sacristani, also a PGA member, while at Keilor, its professional Scott Wearne and manager Terry Travis took charge. Both clinics were supported by staff from the schools and volunteers from the clubs.

At Yarrambat, Hyett and Cowden devised program content which had to address varying degrees of need within the ranks. Safety was also of primary consideration. And above all else, it had to be fun. With those guidelines in place, all set to work. And the kids loved it!

Quarmby: "This program is a new experience for them and we've found that a lot of them have really enjoyed it. We've had students say, how can I play more golf?"

This is exactly what the three bodies want to hear, of course. The primary purpose - to give these young people the chance to learn sports including golf to which they may not have had any exposure to and a pathway to further competition - is achieved. For Belgravia, it's proof that its programs are hitting their targets. For Golf Victoria, it means more golfers. And for Special Olympics, it's more athletes.

The benefit to the young aspiring golfers themselves is manifold.

Walkley notes that many of the barriers often encountered by disabled children are addressed by the program. Cost is one. Participants in these clinics pay an affordable \$3.50 per session each for 90 minutes of coaching and playing. At this stage, there is no government or private funding but it is hoped that, down the line, if the program were to go Victoria-wide, then that could happen.

Another barrier is transport and distance. But for these northern-based schools, local facilities in Yarrambat and Keilor take care of that too.

The health benefit to the kids is very important. Quarmby mentions that obesity amongst disabled youngsters is an issue, as is a struggle with high aerobic requirement in sports such as basketball. Golf is ideal. It's a leisurely walk and also something that fits in well with their needs.

Hyett: "Being a repetitive movement, it's not a new skill that they have to learn each week, it's honing the same skill."

The social benefits to participants are high too. The chance to meet new friends and interact with them in fun activities has enormous value. As does the effect on self-esteem.

"Seeing the change in a child from their first day in Special Olympics to even three weeks in, is unbelievable, just the confidence they get," says Quarmby.

Not surprisingly, the benefits are not confined to just the participants. Hyett, Quarmby and Walkley each speak of the reward they derive themselves, both professionally and personally - but mostly personally.



Hyett: "Professionally, this is definitely an area where we can do more work, link these participants through different clubs as well, create programs through clubs. It's an area which needs more resources and effort to integrate.

"But personally, I get more out of it than what I give. It's just sport in its purest form, the joy from just being out there. It's beautiful. I'm trying to get more of the staff out to just witness it."

Quarmby feels the same. "Every participant is just so positive, they love it, they just want to meet you. It is definitely sport in its purest form. I sometimes feel a bit selfish in this role. The athletes are getting a lot out of it but I think I'm getting a fair bit more."

From Cowden: "The most rewarding thing for me is seeing all the kids. What they are going through on a daily basis, to have the best sense of humour that they have, is just incredible. Some of the stuff they come up with, they know they're trying to be funny and when they pull it off, you can just see them lighten up. To see you laughing as well, that's what they're trying to get out of you. It's just fantastic to see them having so much fun. To see numbers increasing in this area of golf would be awesome."

And Walkley, who has seen a lot of this reaction over the years, notes: "One of the things that happens is that there is a real sense of contribution and personal fulfillment. It brings out the best in people. I've been doing it for years and I really enjoy it."

Then there's the enthusiasm and ongoing support of club volunteers, which speaks volumes in itself.

Going forward, there are plans for more clinics in other areas of Victoria and, locally, a proposed golf academy at Yarrambat for golfers who wish to compete via the Special Olympics pathway from regional events right up to its international Summer and Winter Games.

For those of us who get frustrated by golf and our struggles to play it as we would ideally like, there is a lesson to be learned out of all this. Perhaps that lesson is best described by Cowden, who, as a professional, has grown up with his sport, has excelled at it, but now has a different perspective on it entirely.

"I would suggest that for a lot of club golfers, just average golfers, come along

and see what these kids have to do on a daily basis and then put it into their own games. Even an average golfer has all the opportunities in the world and sometimes we're really hard on ourselves, really disappointed when we hit a bad shot, whereas these kids are hitting 10, 20 bad shots in a row, air swings, and then they hit one, maybe a metre, and you can just see on their faces how delighted they are."

So we should all be trying to play golf at its purest, like these youngsters?

Yes indeed. ■

Photography: Paul Shire

For further information on
Special Olympics, go to
www.specialolympics.com.au/vic



Greensborough College students Kaylah Murray, Mal Condello and Adam Ioannidis with assisting teacher Steve Dean (second from the left) and Yarrambat GC volunteers Tom Finch and Paul Read (third from the right and right respectively).