

Beating the bogey-man: Program aims to reduce ‘intimidation factor’ for golf beginners

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Ferncroft Country Club thinks it's found a way for novice golfers to get over the initial embarrassment of playing veterans at local business and charity golf tournaments.

The private Middleton course earlier this year launched a new Golf Academy for beginners and chronic hacks to learn, or brush up on, the game's rules, techniques, etiquette and other matters. The logic is that playing — and behaving — well might come in handy at golf outings, where business clients, colleagues and competitors might be lurking, watching and judging one's play and conduct.

And by lessening the “intimidation factor” of the game, the academy's backers figure, they will attract new customers at the same time. They say the Ferncroft program is a first of its kind and designed to help nervous sportsmen perform better on and off the courses.

This isn't your standard one-on-one series of golf lessons, which often entail hitting buckets and buckets of balls from a driving range.

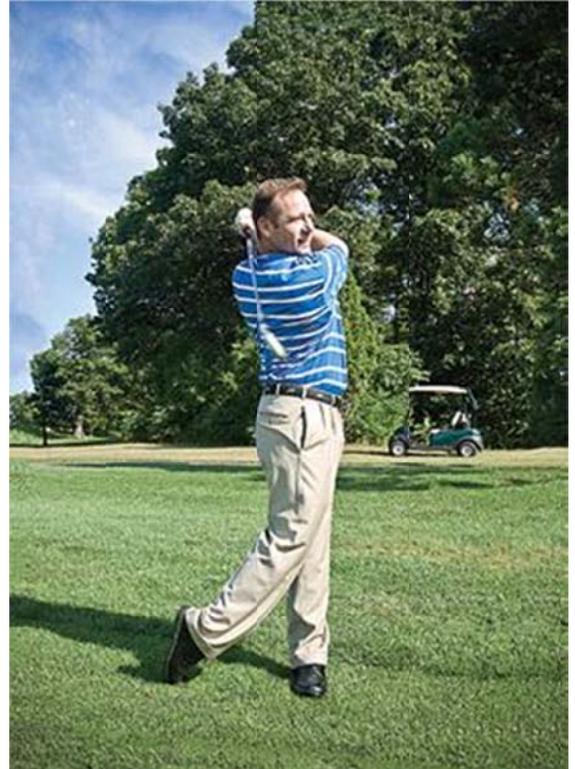
It's about getting intense, season-long instructions on all matters of the game, practicing over and over again on Ferncroft's second seven-hole “beginner's course,” in addition to separate sessions on club-owned practice putting greens and driving ranges. The “academy” also has classroom-like instructions (actually, sessions are conducted in the club's bar and grille) to complement the on-course sessions.

“If you pick golf up as an adult, it can be sort of nerve wracking,” said **Damon DeVito**, managing director of Affinity Management, which owns the Ferncroft Country Club. “When you're a kid, you don't think so much when learning things. We're trying to make it easier for adults to learn how to play.”

Ferncroft's new “academy” is primarily targeting business people who want to learn how to play the game, understand its rules and customs — and not embarrass themselves next time they're invited to a charity golf tournament to play with business associates.

The cost is \$1,250, plus an additional \$1,250 to join Ferncroft as a member. Six people are currently participating in the first-year academy program.

One is **Rebecca Boudreau**, a customer-service representative at a local travel and tourism company.



Boudreau, 24, never played golf until last year, when her family started to get passionately involved with the game. She later became worried she might become a social and business outcast if she didn't learn the ins and outs of the sport.

"I'd hate to join a group of more experienced players and not know what to do," said Boudreau, who signed up for the academy earlier this year. "(The academy) is so much different from just hitting balls off of ranges. It offers more instruction programs and really tries to teach you the game."

She noted that the program even includes weekly email news alerts about what's happening in the professional golf world — part of an effort to educate clients about this industry and to let them come across as knowledgeable about the game when talking to friends and business colleagues.

Phil Leiss, head golf pro at Ferncroft, said a main goal of the academy is "to remove the intimidation factor" of playing golf.

After years of giving one-on-one golf lessons to beginners, Leiss said he's "pulled all together" everything he's ever learned about golf instructions and put it in the academy program. He said he'd one day like to have as many as 100 people attending the academy.

Ferncroft's program isn't just an altruistic effort to help nervous business executives avoid embarrassment on the course. It's also an effort to build up a client base.

In recent years, participation in golf has actually been stagnant across the nation, forcing many regional and national courses to close, due to oversupply.

The Ferncroft, which used to be part of a hotel-chain complex, was purchased in 2006 by Affinity Management for \$13.1 million.

After millions of dollars in upgrades and renovations, the club today includes the original 18-hole "Championship Course," designed by **Robert Trent Jones Sr.**, the seven-hole "Executive Course" for beginners and practice greens and ranges.

Virginia-based Affinity Management is a management and consulting firm specializing in private clubs, country clubs, golf courses and equestrian centers.

DeVito, Affinity's managing director, said the golf industry can learn a lot from sports that have long provided intense programs to help adults learn their sports in later years.

"We've tried to model our (academy) program on what they're doing in skiing and tennis," said DeVito.

Golf has to go beyond just giving lessons to adult beginners, he said "Not a lot of golf courses have the facilities that we have here for beginners," said Leiss. "Here, people can practice every aspect of the game, privately and at their own speed, without being embarrassed."