

# All Teed Up

At the First Tee kids learn to succeed—on and off the links.

BY MICHAEL NOER



Long drives and high hopes: First Tee golfers Jessica Sawyer and Kevin Berrios march down a Fenway fairway.

**THE 510-YARD PAR-5** third hole at Fenway Golf Club in Scarsdale, N.Y. is a challenging one on the 1924, A.W. Tillinghast-designed course, and Jessica Sawyer is not happy with her third shot. From 180 yards out she had launched a hybrid 5-iron approach

directly at the pin. It fell short, leaving her ball deeply embedded in a steep bank protecting the elevated green.

“Do you know how to do this shot?” asks her coach, Todd Bordonaro, who works with the First Tee, a youth golf program supported by a host of profes-

sional organizations, including the PGA Tour and a Who’s Who of The Forbes 400, on its board of trustees.

“I’ve practiced it, but I don’t think I’ve ever hit it in a round,” admits the 14-year-old Sawyer. Under Bordonaro’s gentle instruction—play the ball well

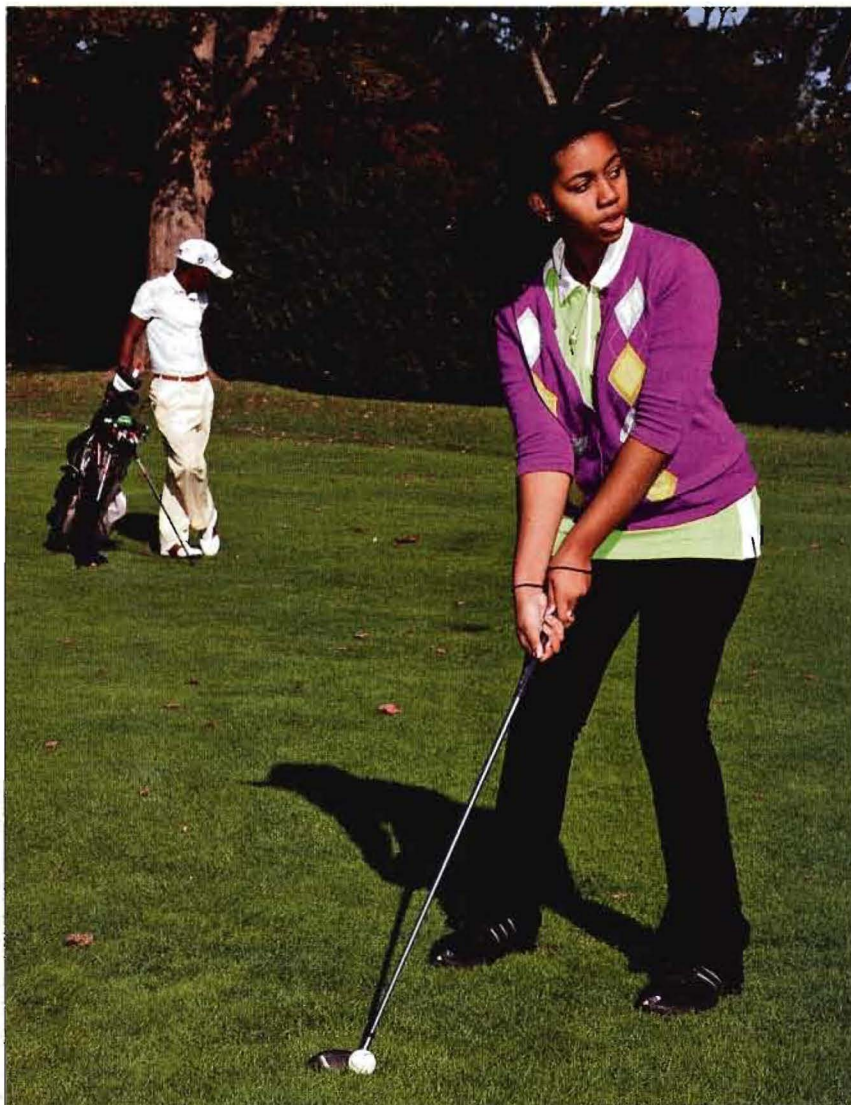
back in your stance, take into account the right-to-left ball movement imparted by the severe uphill lie—Sawyer pulls off the devilish chip, then one-putts to save par, eliciting cheers from Bordonaro and the rest of the four-some, 12-year-old Kevin Berrios of Yonkers, N.Y. and 18-year-old Kyle Jones, who grew up in the Bronx and is a sophomore at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn.

It's an impressive performance but not nearly as impressive as the fact that these teenagers are playing golf at all. Sawyer lives in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. When asked what her parents do for a living, she shuffles her feet and says, "We are in kind of a tight spot right now." She commutes up to three hours via subway and bus to attend Manhattan's High School of Art & Design and hopes to become a sports photographer one day, if her dream of being one of the few African-Americans to play on the LPGA Tour doesn't pan out. (With her current 5 handicap off the men's tees she has a legitimate shot.)

For the past 14 years the First Tee has been dedicated to exposing kids—especially, but not exclusively, economically disadvantaged kids—to the game of golf. Through its 198 chapters across the country, the First Tee provides low-cost access to courses and driving ranges, free clubs, summer camps and a highly structured system of golf, etiquette and life-skill lessons designed for kids as young as 5 and as old as 18. About 360,000 kids were actively involved last year, a number that balloons to 2.4 million if you add the elementary school students who were taught golf in a First Tee-designed gym class.

"We want to provide access to young people who would not otherwise have access to the game," says the First Tee's CEO, Joe Louis Barrow Jr.

Inevitably some of the participants—like Jessica Sawyer—become



Well played! Sawyer and Jones congratulate each other as coach Todd Bordonaro looks on.

excellent golfers, but the mission of the First Tee is not to groom the next Tiger Woods. The underlying idea is to use golf as a character-building vehicle that will encourage kids to make healthy choices and to inculcate values like honesty and dedication.

Does it work? Research on the program is largely sponsored by the First Tee itself, but the available data suggest that it is effective, particularly in developing the ability of participants to manage their emotions, set goals and resolve conflicts. Nearly three-quarters stated that the program gave them skills to succeed in the classroom, no small benefit given that 25% of American public high school students drop out before graduation. And reams of research prove that kids who play sports do in fact fare better academically than nonathlete students and are more likely to stay out of trouble.

The idea that golf—a game of strict etiquette and sportsmanship—might be particularly effective at instilling values also makes sense on a gut level. This is a sport for applauding—not trash-talking—your opponent. Most important: You are your own scorekeeper and referee. “In basketball,” notes Barry McLaughlin, executive director of the First Tee of Metropolitan New York, “you might try and fool an official, but here if you move the ball a little or miss it, you are supposed to give yourself a stroke. The responsibility is on you.”

In February George W. Bush succeeded his father, George H.W. Bush, as the honorary chair of the organization, just in time for the launch of the ambitious, if awkwardly named, Campaign for 10 Million Young People. In an effort to reach 10 million new participants by 2017 the First Tee is going all out in an effort to raise \$100 million by the end of 2012.

“We want to be a partner in a societal change,” says Barrow. “We

## Get in the Game

The First Tee is not the only organization that uses sports to teach life lessons. Dozens of youth sports development programs exist around the country, many focused on sports that have relatively low participation rates compared with scholarship opportunities. All five of these are 501(c3) nonprofits and donor supported.

### After-School All-Stars

Focused on giving the kids “who didn’t make the team” a chance to play. Of the 81,000 kids in the program 87% are in the low-income free-lunch program.

[WWW.AFTERSCHOOLALLSTARS.ORG](http://WWW.AFTERSCHOOLALLSTARS.ORG)

### America SCORES

A unique blend of soccer, poetry (reading, writing and performing) and community service, this New York-based program reaches about 7,500 underprivileged elementary and middle-school students through 150 schools around the country.

[WWW.AMERICASCORES.ORG](http://WWW.AMERICASCORES.ORG)

### National Urban Squash & Education Association

Run by Greg Zaff, formerly the world’s number-two-ranked pro squash player, this umbrella group oversees programs in ten cities, reaching nearly 1,000 kids, including SquashBusters in Boston and StreetSquash in New York City.

[WWW.NATIONALURBANSQUASH.ORG](http://WWW.NATIONALURBANSQUASH.ORG)

### Playworks

Provides full-time coaches to 300 schools in low-income areas in 22 cities across the U.S. The coaches organize inclusive games and sports during recess and before and after school. Nearly 130,000 kids participate every school day.

[WWW.PLAYWORKS.ORG](http://WWW.PLAYWORKS.ORG)

### Stoked

The X Games of the group uses surfing, skateboarding and snowboarding as ways of introducing inner-city youth to new environments and building confidence. Offices in New York City and L.A.

[WWW.STOKED.ORG](http://WWW.STOKED.ORG)

want to double the number of people we reach in half the time.”

The First Tee aims for the majority of that \$100 million to come in chunks of \$1 million or more. Individuals who donate at that level become First Tee Trustees—and will have the opportunity to play three rounds of golf, including one at Augusta National, with the former Presidents and their fellow trustees, who also include Forbes 400 members Jim Clark, Charles Schwab, George Roberts, H. Wayne Huizenga,

Herbert Kohler and Jerry Yang, and a smattering of celebrities like Jack Nicklaus and Rush Limbaugh.

Barrow, the son of legendary boxer Joe Louis, gave up a business career to head the First Tee. “I have been driven from time to time by understanding the amount of impact that one man—like my father—can have in one society,” he says. “I thought the idea of the First Tee was an opportunity that I could pursue and have a great impact. It was the greatest decision I ever made.”