

Golf Pro to Begin 'First Tee' Chapter in Hershey

Fifteen year-old Daryll "DJ" Watts drags the golf club back along a slight inside arc, gets it to the top of his backswing with a full shoulder turn, slams the face of the club back down on a rubber mat and sends the make-shift indoor golf ball sailing up against the back wall of the gym. He ends with a Hogan-like pose as if he's looking down the 18th fairway at Merion watching his ball fly like a cannon-shot to the green. When asked how he does it, DJ explains that he just follows the line on the mat, a painted-on arc that shows the proper direction, or plane, of the club face as he takes it back, and then hinges his wrists. For DJ, it's that simple.

DJ practices at the Harrisburg Berry Hill Street Boys and Girls Club in his off-season, and – are you ready for this? -- this is his first off-season. He started playing golf just last Fall.

If everyone swung a club like DJ, Jim Reed, the head golf pro at Hershey Country Club, would be the loneliest man in central Pennsylvania. Instead, the golfers' laments never end. "What can't I hit it straight?" "Why is it so hard to hit?" And the impossible to kill: "What am I doing wrong?"

Beyond offering a silent prayer of thanks that DJ's of the world aren't born every day, or perhaps even every decade, Reed and DJ have another connection. They participate in the 'First Tee Program', a PGA Tour sponsored program that teaches kids not only the mechanics of the golf swing, but the emotional, mental, and etiquette skills it takes to succeed on a golf course, or anywhere in life.

"If you can say this about anyone in golf – and I'm not sure you can – DJ is a natural," Reed said. "Not only with the swing but the other skills we teach him. He soaks it all up."

That the 'Life Skills', as the First Tee Program calls them, and the golf instruction lessons match up so well is no accident. For Reed, they're inseparable. One of the attributes needed to play golf, and one of the core values of the First Tee, is honesty. Honesty is more than claiming the ball you found after hitting your tee shot deeper in the woods than a Robert Frost poem is really the one you hit off the tee, and not the extra one you carry around in your pocket.

It's also about being honest with yourself.

"I see it all the time where a player convinces himself that he's figured out what he's doing wrong and the reason he keeps hitting bad shots is because of

something else that crept into his swing," Reed says. "And that usually resorts to some cliché, like I'm coming out of my swing or not keeping my head down. Instead of saying the ball keeps going in the same wrong direction so I must be doing the same thing wrong, and I haven't figured it out yet."

Reed approaches the instructional part of the game the same way. He avoids confusing, overly intricate theories of the swing, and has an aversion to clichés. For him, it's all about getting to the area of impact, where the club face meets the ball, along the right path. It's about the basics, the grip, stance, keeping your arms connected to your body properly through the swing, and also about teaching the common golfer to be honest with himself and maybe sneak in some of the other Life Skills. They're not just for kids, he says.

He gives an example. He says the most frequent fault in the swing is often referred to as "over-the-top", which is a commonly used phrase that actually describes a club face moving across the ball from out to in, from a line that would be too far outside the ball-to-target line before striking the ball on the downswing and too far inside that line during the follow through. The shot usually results in a slice. To overcome it, most players strengthen their grips, which for a right handed player means moving the right hand so that the palm tends the face the sky and the left hand that palm faces more toward the ground. (A purely neutral grip is where the palms face one another with the grip of the club in between.) The new stronger, grip will tend to close the club face at impact and override the glancing out-to-in swing...if only briefly.

"The grip change might work for a while, but the underlying problem remains in the swing," Reed said. "Eventually, the problem will dominate the swing again, and the slices will return. You can kid yourself as long as you like, but the results never lie."

Following will be a series of golf instruction articles from Jim Reed, a discussion of the 'Life Skills' taught by the 'First Tee', and reports on the burgeoning careers of DJ Watts and other future Hogans, who can't wait to move out of the Boys and Girls Club and hit golf balls where an old brick wall won't get in the way.