

BUILDING SUCCESSFUL

JUNIOR GOLFFERS



BY J A S O N B I R N B A U M



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ABOUT JASON BIRNBAUM

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Jason Birnbaum is currently the golf teaching professional at Alpine Country Club in Demarest, New Jersey, where he spends the spring, summer and fall months. During the winter he is director of Golf Instruction at the Manhattan Athletic Club in New York City. Prior to teaching at Alpine Country Club, Birnbaum worked alongside GOLF Magazine Top 100 Teacher Mitchell Spearman at Manhattan Woods Golf Club in West Nyack, New York, where he was director of the Mitchell Spearman Junior Golf Program from 2003 through 2007. The highly successful Spearman program became well known in the Metropolitan New York area, and Birnbaum oversaw the opening and operation at several sites throughout the Northeast.

A resident of Oradell, New Jersey, Birnbaum has taught professionals on the PGA, European PGA, Nationwide, and Canadian Tours, as well as golfers of all levels and abilities. After years of working with juniors, and after competing on the junior golf stage himself for over a decade – including four years of high school golf and four years of Division I college golf – Jason has developed a deep and extensive understanding of how to help juniors improve their game and get to the next level.

For the past two seasons, Jason has been recognized by U.S. Kids Golf Top 50 Kids Teachers for the work that he does with juniors.

“When I moved to New Jersey from Chicago after my freshman year in high school, I figured my golf game would be crushed in the process. Jason Birnbaum not only prevented that from happening, he took my game to the next level quicker than I could have imagined. Between his keen knowledge of video analysis and innovative hands-on training drills, there is no way a player, especially juniors who are really driven to become the best they can be, can’t become better by working with him. I’m especially appreciative of his passion towards my development as a better competitor at the varsity high school level.” — Michael Rosengart, 17-year old junior golfer

“As I was approaching my freshman year in high school I was struggling with my golf game and would have had a tough time making my school team, which was very important to me. That all changed when I met Jason and began working with him. Not only did he help me to make the necessary swing changes that I needed to make, he gave me the confidence that I was lacking, which made all the difference. After several years of working with him, he still keeps our lessons fresh and exciting and constantly has new thoughts and ideas that will help me to improve. I am looking forward to playing college golf with Jason’s continued assistance.” — Michael Davis, 16-year old junior golfer

“Since working with Jason for the past year, I have learned more about my golf swing than in my previous eight years in golf combined. His teaching has enabled me to implement changes in my golf swing much more efficiently, which has helped me become more competitive in the northeast region.” — Matt Wilson, Long Island University Men’s Golf Team



INTRODUCTION

Teaching golf is fun for me. There are few things more exciting than getting a kid hooked on the game I love. When I was growing up in New Jersey, a variety of professionals in the golf industry helped me learn how to play, and now I can give back to the game and help it grow. Getting a junior golfer on the right path and seeing them get better is incredibly rewarding. I hope this manual serves as a starting point for that path.

If you are new to junior golf, here are some statistics to consider. According to information compiled by the PGA Junior Golf Committee and published in the July 2009 issue of PGA Magazine:

- ***There are almost four million juniors interested in golf who have never played the game.***
- ***60 percent of juniors introduced to golf in a structured program become active golfers, but only 10 percent of all juniors are brought into the game in this fashion.***
- ***Juniors who begin playing regularly at ages 8-10 play the most rounds as an adult.***

Managing expectations is critical when it comes to junior golf. For every PGA Tour winner, there are thousands more who enjoy the game but never reach the top competitive levels. Highly respected Canadian golf instructor Henry Brunton, author of *Journey to Excellence: The Young Golfer's Complete Guide to Achievement and Personal Growth*, (www.henrybrunton.com) has compiled some eye-opening statistics in that regard worth keeping in mind:

- ***The average starting age for the best golfers in the world was 8.3 for males and 9.1 for females***
- ***Only 1 in about 5,104 high school golfers make it to the PGA Tour***
- ***10,000 hours of deliberate practice are required to attain world-class level of expertise***

Parents are a key component of their child's golf career. "I don't think there is a manual for parents," Naree Song, an American Junior Golf Association All American and LPGA Tour player, told GolfWorld magazine. "They do whatever they think is good and most of the time that is more of everything. More practice, more food, more training. And that leads to less rest, less fun for the kid. There are so many young players we have grown up with and now they just have regular jobs. They've really grown burned out on the game."

Instant success, world rankings, and major championships are the dreams, but reality is a junior who, through proper instruction, will learn the basics and have the tools to enjoy the game for the rest of his or her life.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

My teaching philosophy for working with kids revolves a lot around having a plan. You have to have a plan, and it has to be balanced. By balance, I am referring to helping kids to improve and grow in all areas of the game. These include the full swing, short game, on-course strategy (such as golf course management/pre-shot routine/the art of scoring), physical fitness, sport psychology, and finding the proper equipment. My philosophy is to stress the importance of all of these areas, and to work with my students on putting together a plan to attack each area. My goal is to create well-rounded junior golfers that can excel at all levels. These philosophical thoughts hold true even when I am teaching adults – however, they are even more important for kids.



Kids also have to be having fun. I know that from my own experience as a junior golfer and from teaching hundreds of them over the past decade. If they're not, then they will not be going anywhere with the game. Golf can get boring pretty quickly because success does not happen instantly. Most nine-year olds for instance, if they are fit and healthy, are pretty good athletes. They are often talented baseball and basketball players, where they have more natural ability than they would in golf. It does have a little bit to do with natural ability, but just because a kid has good hand-eye coordination and can shoot a basketball or throw a baseball does not necessarily translate to hitting good golf shots. I've seen a lot of good junior athletes who have had success in other sports come to golf. In the first hour of hitting balls they do not have a good experience – when that happens, most don't come back.

That's why I believe it's important to put kids in a learning environment where they will have fun. That could mean starting with a focus on the short game because it's a bit easier to grasp, or perhaps trying some kind of target game, or being in a group environment – like at the Jason Birnbaum Junior Golf Camp – with their friends. It all depends on each child. But the fun aspect is key to my teaching philosophy. If a 15-year old who has been playing for eight years comes to me, then we'll likely work more on technique. It comes down to what level each junior is at, from both an age and ability standpoint.

From a technique standpoint, the quicker a junior golfer gets the basics down – grip, stance, posture, and alignment – the better off they will be. Those are areas I work on with all levels of golfer, from beginners of all ages to Tour players. **The quicker you can build a foundation with those basics and make it fun doing so** – maybe using molded grips that kids can wrap their hands around, thereby learning technique while getting a kick out of it – the quicker you can give purpose to their practice.

With new students, I always watch them hit balls first, unless they have never played before. In that case we work on posture, swing, and grip before they hit one ball. I'll show them pictures of good grips – **kids soak information up like sponges and are great imitators; the more demonstration and pictures I use, the quicker they can see how things are done.** I'll give them as much confidence as possible before they even hit a ball. I don't give them a chance to fail early on.

Another key part of my teaching philosophy is the use of video. My goal is not to get kids to swing exactly like the best players in the world. But I'll show them their swing on video and pull up PGA Tour player swings, and then point out similarities in certain swing positions. They think it's cool. And I'll show them differences where he or she can improve their swing. Having that tool helps me communicate with kids and keeps them coming back and learning more. I put myself in their shoes and keep things fairly simple without complex language

The bottom line is this: I want kids to have fun while learning the game.



FINDING AN INSTRUCTOR

There's too many things going on in a golf swing, and too many parts of the game to master, that you can't do it all entirely on your own no matter your age. You need someone with expertise in all areas of the game. **Remember**, the very best players in the world today work with instructors on their swing all of the time. And those teachers have become brand names in their own right – people like Butch Harmon, Hank Haney, and Dave Pelz are better known than the 20th best player in the world these days. But how do you find the right instructor for your child?

Here are a few methods:

Word of Mouth – Search out the better junior players in your area and find out which instructor they are working with

Top Teacher lists – The major industry magazines (*GOLF and Golf Digest*) publish annual lists of the country's top teachers. Many of the bigger names are not in the metropolitan New York area, but check for state-by-state lists just in case. Keep in mind that the very best teachers are the most expensive, and you likely will have limited access to them. But most, if not all, of these top teachers have assistants who may be more available and less expensive when it comes to lessons.

Look Local – Take a look at your local newspaper (i.e., the *Bergen Record*) and state golf association magazines (i.e., the New Jersey State Golf Association magazine, and *The Met Golfer* from the Metropolitan Golf Association) for instructional articles from local instructors.

Country clubs – High-end facilities often have good teaching staffs for their memberships, and most allow for the teaching of non-members, although usually with restrictions on available times.



WHAT TO ASK

POTENTIAL INSTRUCTORS

Choosing the best instructor for your child involves some key factors, including meeting him or her in person and asking the following questions:

- ***What are your fees/rates?***
- ***Can you explain your teaching philosophy?***
(Be careful with method teachers who emphasize one particular style of golf swing.)
- ***What is your lesson schedule and availability from April to October?*** ***(The latter is prime golf season in metropolitan New York; ideally lessons would be taken once a week or twice a month.)***
- ***Do you use video?*** ***(It's an effective tool that kids today are very familiar with.)***
- ***Do you teach individuals only or groups?***
(Both are good for kids, but find out what size the groups will be.)
- ***Do you offer packages of multiple lessons?*** ***(This is usually the best way to go and often involves pricing discounts.)***

You know your child better than anyone – in 10 minutes you should have good idea if your child will get along with a particular teacher.

Frequency and length of lessons often depends on the teacher's philosophy – there are a lot of areas to cover (i.e., full swing, short game, practice range, on the course). I can make three hours fly by with anyone. You might consider scheduling a 30-minute lesson to start (usually for 12 years old or younger), then an hour lesson, and then some longer ones. If the teacher chooses to focus solely on the full swing by hitting balls on the practice range – which is sometimes required – then the lesson really shouldn't last more than 45 minutes for kids under age 12, or more than a hour for kids under age 16. But if you are using video, there could be 15 minutes of downtime within that hour, so keep that in mind. If at the end of a lesson I can take the junior out on the course and play two holes, that's great. It all depends on what we are working on.

Any instructor has to be able to relate to each student on his or her own terms. Trust and communication are critically important to the success of such a relationship, and good ones can last for years. I started doing summer golf camps almost eight years ago and still have students from that first camp doing well and working with me.



LESSON EXPECTATIONS

Expectations are natural but also the worst thing you can have. Parents ask when their child will be at a certain level, and there is no easy answer to that question; it could be a week, a month, or a year. Putting time limits on things doesn't make sense. I've been around a kid who was beating Tiger Woods in junior golf, and now struggles to make a living playing the game. On the other side, I have taught kids who did not win any college tournaments, or attend high-profile golf schools, and now they are playing on the Nationwide Tour. There's no rhyme or reason to their success rate based on what they were doing as kids. Rudy Duran, Tiger's first instructor, has said, "It does no good for a child to be peaking at age nine."

Everyone wants to be good right now, but no one remembers or cares what you were doing when you were nine years old. That's when a child should be learning and getting as good as he or she can be without restrictions. To guess where your child will get to is useless. Can they make the high school team in six months? I have no idea. They just have to keep working.

Parents who aren't knowledgeable about golf don't really know if their child is getting a useful lesson or if the instructor is working on things that are not in the child's best interests. Those parents really need to get as educated as much as possible on the game and/or ask other parents for information and advice.

At the lessons themselves, I advise parents to stay and watch the first one, and then leave once you trust the instructor. If you do stay, you can't put in your two cents. Let the instructor do his or her job, even if you know a fair bit about the game. It's okay afterward to ask the instructor what he/she is working on with your child, just as it's okay for the instructor to approach you with the same information.

After the lesson, parents should ask their child what they learned. This is not a babysitting situation: kids are there to learn about what they need to do to improve. They should be able to show you what a good grip looks like, what a poor grip looks like, and explain to you what they learned in detail. So many times when a kid comes to me after lessons elsewhere, I ask them what they learned from that teacher. Almost 90 percent of the time their answer is "I don't know," or "I don't remember what I was doing." Sometimes the child is at fault, but if an instructor is really communicating well and making an impression, the kid should be able to tell you exactly what happened during each lesson. And most importantly, whether they had fun or not.

You should always follow up with the instructor (although he or she should do that with you as well). At my summer camp we send progress reports to parents at the midpoint covering what the kids are working on, what drills they are doing, and what they can do on their own after the camp ends. That should be the kind of important information you request from an instructor perhaps a couple of times a year: the overall plan in the beginning of the year, an update in the middle to see if things are on track, and finally a summary of progress made and future plans (which is especially important in the Northeast due to winter weather – you're looking for things that will continue your child's growth, like practicing indoors).

As an instructor I emphasize the basics of the set up position. Those apply to all juniors and focus on three areas: grip, posture, and alignment.

THE GRIP

Your hands are the only connection with the golf club. How you place the grip in your left hand is the most important key – the right hand simply follows the left when taking a grip. It's hard to hit good shots with a bad grip. There are various types of grips you might hear instructors refer to, including strong, weak, interlocking, overlapping, Vardon, and 10-finger baseball grip. With adults, it's more difficult and a slower process in changing their grip since habits have been formed. But with juniors, it's a bit different since they haven't played for long and are not particularly used to a specific grip. I want them to develop good grip habits.

I'm not a fan of the interlocking grip (although Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods use it). With kids, it gets their hands much too involved, and they have a hard time controlling the wrist hinge at the top of their swing, leading to over swinging. The 10-finger baseball grip is great for kids – not permanently, but to further their growth. Later on they may change to a more orthodox grip. Many are already used to using it on a baseball bat. It's also a good way to control what is happening with the clubface and helps keep the swing short and compact. It also helps promote a proper wrist hinge as well as holding the angle (or lag) coming into the ball.



A more conventional grip, like the Vardon or overlapping, is great for the middle and older teenage years. Both of those grips are formed by having the club sit diagonally across the fingers of the left hand (the opposite for lefthanders) — from the base of the pinkie to the middle of the index finger and thumb just off center (if the left hand is in proper position, the right hand will fall into place correctly). If you look down you should see one to two knuckles on the left hand, and the thumb and forefinger of both hands should be pointing to right shoulder. The leading edge of the clubface must also be square to the ball.



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Grips don't often change much, so it's important to get it right. The ideal grip pressure, for both juniors and adults, is roughly 4/5 on a scale of 1-10, from barely holding the club to a tight grip.

It's very helpful for juniors to go through a specific procedure (see photo on left) in order to consistently repeat a good grip: hold the club out in front of you with your right hand, place the club diagonally along the fingers of your left hand (from the base of your pinkie to the middle of your index finger) and then slide the right hand down on it.

Check that grip in the mirror. There are also molded grips already built onto clubs that can be used as an excellent training tool.

SWING TECHNIQUES

For Juniors Cont.

POSTURE

How you stand next to the ball (also known as the address position) is very important to the overall swing. Tense arms lead to a tight grip. Straight, stiff knees don't allow the body to rotate properly. Hunched over shoulders inhibit the full turn that helps generate power. A proper posture looks like this:



- *A little flex in knees*
- *Bending over at waist*
- *Pretty straight spine angle (no roundness or hunch over)*
- *Arms hang down naturally underneath shoulders*
- *Ball position just front of center*
- *Right shoulder slightly lower than the left*
- *Most of weight on right side behind the ball*
- *Spine tilt slightly away from target*

Physical fitness experts will say that certain postures depend upon physical growth and age at the time – junior golfers change tremendously during their growing period, as will their posture. Growth spurts between ages 8 and 12, or between ages 12 and 16, often include dramatic physical change. Your instructor should monitor (ideally using video) your child's posture throughout the year to ensure a consistent swing that is appropriate for their body.

The bottom line is no golfer should hurt themselves or become especially uncomfortable in attempt to get into a “proper” posture. You are better off staying with a posture that comes naturally and working from there. The key is finding the ideal posture that will allow a good swing to take place.

ALIGNMENT

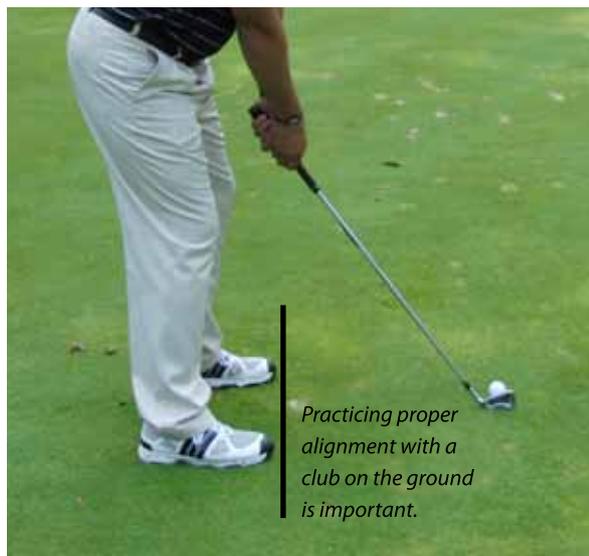
Your grip and posture are individual to each golfer. However, proper alignment is the same for every golfer. Parallel left alignment is the biggest area I see kids – and golfers of all ages – having trouble with. They get their body aimed directly at the target and then the club is aimed right of the target.

My students go through a whole routine when addressing the ball to line up the clubface with the target first. That should be the only thing aiming at the target. The body should have square lines in terms of feet, knees, shoulders, hips and forearms all facing the same direction (see page 10, left photo)

A point I emphasize is to always approach the ball and target from directly behind the ball for a proper perspective.



That forms a straight line with you, the ball, and the target. Most kids will put their feet in place first. However setting the clubface at the target should be the first step in addressing the ball.



Think of standing on railroad tracks – your body will be on the rail facing left of the target while the clubface and ball will be on the rail facing the target.

Alignment can be changed when hitting draws (where the ball moves from right to left on purpose for right-handers) and fades (where the ball moves from left to right for right-handers), but shaping shots should not be a concern for junior golfers until high school. At that stage they are growing and their swing is changing. Everyone has a natural shot shape that reveals itself over time, and few people hit perfectly straight shots. But just because the ball may naturally move right to left at age 12 does not mean that will be happening at age 16.



PLAYING IN TOURNAMENTS

When To Play

When it comes to tournaments, it's important for kids not to play in events that are really beyond their skill level or experience. As a young teenager, I played in several state open tournaments. It was fun, but I had no chance of winning or even making the cut. While it was good playing with better, older players, I was almost expecting to fail. Juniors are much better off playing in events where they can play well with their peers. If they are a low handicap golfer in high school, then they can play in state tournaments. But when you are first starting out, you have to play in events at your level. Tiger Woods won at every single level, but then there's Michelle Wie, who won only one national tournament as a junior despite being a great phenom. Kids in general should play in the right age groups at tournaments. They, and parents, have to be realistic.

How Often To Play

The amount of events to play in often depends on age and ability. You also don't want to take a winter break and go somewhere warm to play in events for a week after months of not playing – that's usually a recipe for failure, unless the junior is part of a strong, consistent winter program.

If your child is somewhat new to competitive golf, or just wants to get a taste of competition, I suggest trying two to three events over the course of a summer. They can play different courses, learn about sportsmanship and etiquette, and get a feel for what it's like to compete.

More experienced kids should be playing either once a week, or every other week in the summer. If they play more than once a week, then there's even less time to compare results or judge progress. It becomes more of a job, just going from event to event.

Signs To Watch For

Look for whether your child is enjoying the competitive experience. As I look back on my own playing career, I'd enjoy preparing for tournaments, but the actual event itself was stressful due to the pressure I put on myself, and then I would not play well.

But you're also looking for signs of improvement: did your child start out shooting 100 and cut some strokes off in subsequent events; did the scores go up; or are they all over the board?

You should also try to find out if they are hitting a better quality of shots, and gauge their interest in the next event and their preparation (i.e., practice rounds, lessons, range work). I often ask the juniors I teach about their next tournament. If they don't know when it is, or what course they are playing, their interest level is not what it should be. The ones who know that information, and express a goal of playing better, show the needed focus.



WHERE TO PLAY

There are a variety of junior tournaments in the metropolitan New York area and around the country. You are looking for well-run tournaments (speak with tournament administrators or parents of former participants) with good players that are held on decent courses. Here are multiple options for junior tournament information:

- **Pioneer Tour (<http://www.co.bergen.nj.us/bergengolf/PioneerHighLights.html>)**
Recognized by Golf Digest in 2000 as the best municipal junior golf program in the country, this effort started in 1993 and offers events and clinics at multiple Bergen County (NJ) courses for kids ages 8-18. Participants do not have to be Bergen County residents to play in these events.
- **US Kids Golf (www.uskidsgolf.com)**
Started in 1997, this organization offers instruction, equipment and events (in Arizona, California, Louisiana, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Texas) for kids.
- **International Junior Golf Tour (www.ijgt.com)**
Beginning its 15th year, this tour conducts more than 70 events around the country, including in New Jersey.
- **American Junior Golf Association (www.ajga.org)**
This Georgia-based organization has been running national junior events since 1978. Alumni have won more than 350 times on the PGA and LPGA Tours.
- **United States Golf Association (www.usga.org)**
The governing body of golf in this country runs two national championships for juniors each year: the U.S. Junior Amateur and the U.S. Junior Girl's Amateur.
- **State junior events (NY/NJ/CT -www.mgagolf.org;
NJ - www.njsga.org)**
Both the New Jersey State Golf Association and the Metropolitan Golf Association run various championships each year for juniors.
- **Club championships**
Country clubs usually conduct numerous events for junior golfers throughout the year.



PLAYING HIGH SCHOOL GOLF

Things To Know

- Usually there are 10-12 kids on a high school team; only five play in each tournament, and the four best scores each round count toward the team total
- Many schools are top heavy with three or four good players; some have a qualifying round for the entire team, and players with the lowest scores become the starting lineup that week while the others do not play at all in the event.
- The only team effort is when they compete together as a team; there's not much practice together, and most coaches are not as hands on at this level as they would be in college.
- **High schools in the Northeast usually play only during the spring season, so most kids are coming off winter with little play; they will be playing in tough conditions that are cold, wet, and windy. That creates the need for a winter program of practice to be ready (as well as the need for proper clothing).**
- Be up front with an instructor on your child's goal of playing high school golf; speak with the school's coach about requirements and scoring history of the team to help gauge the talent level.



PLAYING COLLEGE GOLF

College golf requires a whole new level of commitment. Students have to balance practice, travel, study, and competition without the help of parents. Some of the benefits of playing college golf include scholarship money that can cover tuition; more career opportunities through teammates, coaches and alumni; learning time management skills; and becoming a more well rounded student/athlete. However, it does not guarantee professional success, as Henry Brunton points out in these statistics:

About 1 in 386 college golfers make it to the PGA Tour

- About 1 in 1,139 golfers make the jump from Division I to the PGA Tour the year after graduation
- About 1 in 100 Division I golfers make it to the PGA Tour at some point in their career
- About 1 in 3 Division I All-Americans make it to the PGA Tour
- About 1 in 4,416 golfers make the jump from all levels of NCAA Golf and Junior College Golf teams to the PGA Tour the year after graduation

Things To Consider

- College is more team oriented than high school; everything is done as a team, including practice, travel and competition.
- Earning actual playing time in tournaments is much more intense, with both scholarship recipients and walk-ons competing against each other.
- Usually there are seven to 12 kids on a college team; only five play in each tournament, and the four best scores each round count toward a team total.
- Much more time is spent juggling priorities, including travel, exams, practice, tournaments, and rest; there's also pressure to get good grades and perform on course.
- Meet the head coach in person; do not rely on opinions or gossip.
- Look into the school's geographical location and climate (not all the top programs are in California, Texas, Florida or Arizona; for example Northwestern University in Chicago has a great indoor practice facility).
- Take into account the level of play (Division I, II, III).
- Check out the playing opportunity – go somewhere you will play, not just be on team. It's better off to be playing each week at a less well-known school than being the eighth player at a high profile school. Research statistics of returning players to see where your potential scores might fit.
- Know the NCAA recruiting rules (go to <http://www.ncaa.org> for official information on this topic).
- Be proactive when it comes college golf; put together information about your child's playing career and results (i.e., newspaper clippings, swing video) with a professional presentation to share with college coaches. Also refer to the PING American College Golf Guide (www.collegegolf.com) for more information.



PLAYING PROFESSIONAL GOLF

It's a dream of many juniors to someday play with the best golfers in the world. But reality says the odds are very much against that happening. Take a look at some more statistics compiled by Henry Brunton:

- ***The odds of making it to the PGA Tour are even, IF you can win the U.S. Amateur and the NCAA Individual Championship in the same year – a feat accomplished only by Jack Nicklaus (1961); Phil Mickelson (1990); Tiger Woods (1996); and Ryan Moore (2004)***
- ***About 1 in 101 American Junior Golf Association (AJGA) players make it to the PGA Tour***
- ***About 1 in 6 AJGA All-Americans make it to the PGA Tour***
- ***About 1 in 3 USGA Junior Champions make it to the PGA Tour***

Reaching the very top of any profession requires talent, dedication, commitment and hard work. Golf is no different. Encourage your child to try his or her best while maintaining realistic expectations based on their playing results.

"To get to this level you've got to work hard," LPGA golfer Aree Song, who won the U.S. Girl's Junior championship at age 13, told GolfWorld magazine "There's no way around it, there are a lot of sacrifices. But you really have to enjoy the process. Take it slow. There is no rush. There will always be tours to play on and tournaments to play in."



CLUB FITTING

Club fitting is important for everyone, but especially for juniors in the developmental stage looking to improve. The body adjusts to the clubs you are playing with. There are ways that the clubs can either help or hurt your chances of improving technique. John Daly's famous swing became so long because as a junior he played with clubs that were too heavy for him. He's the rare situation of succeeding despite not having the proper clubs. Most golfers have a much better chance to succeed with proper club fitting. In the past, it was an old guy in the pro shop who put clubs together as a hobby. These days technology has dramatically improved both the process and speed with which clubs can be built and altered. While there are a variety of companies that provide this service, I can recommend Fuzion Golf (www.fuziongolf.com), a Florida-based company with a facility in New York City. Company founder Chris Dempsey offers the following information on the club fitting process and what you need to know.

How does your process work?

We use the exact same process for juniors as we do for the Tour professionals we work with. An initial fitting of driver through wedges takes approximately two and a half hours. For every golfer, we start with an analysis of their current equipment. That includes measuring the length, loft, and lie of all clubs (just because a driver may say 10.5 degrees on it, doesn't mean that is technically true). We then enter that data into our proprietary computer system. We'll go through all of the clubs and discuss what matches and what doesn't. From that data alone, our fitters will largely know a person's shot tendencies and technique flaws.

Then the golfer will warm up hitting shots and talk to our fitter about their individual playing goals (hitting it straighter, longer, etc.). We take them through a series of questions, and we want to get their instructor involved to help us get a better understanding of how to accomplish those goals. In about 40 percent of the golfers we see, the set-up process has the biggest impact on ball flight. The rest involve the swing itself.

At our indoor facility we use simulators and TrackMan™ technology to monitor various factors (including accurate ball flight results). Our fitters watch each golfer hit balls with different clubs and then adjust the clubs accordingly with results. We have approximately 1,000 test clubs to use, with different shafts, weights, and heads to meet each golfer's needs.



CLUB FITTING CONT.

How do you select the proper clubs for golfers? We'll try to figure out what shaft is best to create a weighting profile, and then we select a clubhead that will spin the ball the way a golfer wants. Junior golfers today are researching equipment online and know what the top pros are using – they want what the best players use and have a good idea of what they like. That can be good or bad. Equipment manufacturers do a tremendous job of building brand loyalty, but you get kids who want one brand that may not have the proper clubhead for them. We'll show them different options and the numbers, explaining what will work best for their individual swing and game.

How often should my child's clubs be looked at? All club fitting for juniors is done knowing that they are going to change, grow, and get stronger, which likely means new shafts for their clubs a few years down the road. That's an important and valuable investment. A junior's clubs should be reevaluated at least twice a year. That could mean changing the length or swing weight to adjust to their body and strength level. In some cases, it could mean a whole new set of clubs, but in most cases, we change the shaft – often making it firmer, heavier, or stiffer because they are getting stronger. The body changes and the swing follows.

What should I ask potential club fitters? You do need to be careful of snake oil sales people out there – many companies will just sell you something without doing all of the necessary research into your child's swing or overall playing goals. An important question you should ask prior to making the investment is whether or not the company is a developmental club fitter. Are they fitting juniors for the way they are swinging right now, or fitting them in the direction juniors are trying to move with their technique? Even accomplished junior golfers may still be in the developmental phase, although somewhat more advanced. You have to make sure they're not being put in clubs that will hold them back.

Should my child's instructor be involved in the club fitting process? Yes, because another important part of the process is communication with the instructor. If Jason is trying to get a junior's swing plane a bit flatter, he will go to a club fitter and mark that player's club toward the toe to get the swing more shallow. But the club fitter may fit the club more upright, so he marks the center of the club. The change that Jason is working on will never happen successfully because he will not be there all the time. The player will then change his or her swing just to get the ball in the air. So communication with the instructor on individual goals for each player is important.

Are there fittings for putters as well? Yes. A fitting for this club is also important, since up to 50 percent of your score comes from strokes on the greens. Putter fitting works just like a full swing fitting. Ideally we can harness a junior's natural putting stroke and build a putter around that. There are even ball fittings, which usually occur after a junior has used a new set of clubs for a few weeks.



PHYSICAL FITNESS

Your child may have boundless energy, but golf still requires a level of physical fitness that can only be acquired through specific training. Gary Player, winner of nine major championships, was well ahead of his time with a strong commitment to fitness, while top golfers today make fitness training an important part of their routine. Think about it – golf courses are longer and require more walking, which in turn leads to an emphasis on conditioning needed for multi-day tournaments. In many junior events, players carry their own bag, requiring even more stamina and endurance.

Anthony Sbarbaro, co-owner and fitness director at Metro Golf & Fitness (www.metrogolfandfitness.com) in Tenafly, New Jersey, speaks about what you need to know about physical fitness training for junior golfers.

What is your training process for golfers?

We use an approach targeting the entire core, which basically covers from the hips up to the shoulders. Those muscles are extremely important because they are the foundation of the body – the arms and legs build off that foundation. A weak foundation means other components will not function effectively. Very complex core muscles require extensive evaluation and training. Once properly trained, athletes can yield tremendous benefits. We do all training on site at our Tenafly location. The controlled environment, which includes state-of-the-art equipment, helps people stay focused.

What type of training is best for junior golfers?

Junior golfers should be involved in a complete program with a focus on neuromuscular training. This type of training allows nerves to work with muscles more efficiently, yielding stability, coordination, and strength. By increasing efficiency they will develop a better motor pattern that in turn leads to better more consistent play. Kids are still a little clumsy when they are younger because they do not yet have the motor skills that adults have. That's the primary focus of training for junior golfers.

At what age should juniors start golf-specific training?

It can really begin at any age. We work on all components of the body that are necessary for the golf swing. It's about achieving good rotational movement, core strength, and shoulder stability – all things that can be worked on at any age. The only difference with kids would be the type of equipment we use. There wouldn't be a lot of heavy weights or resistance. It would just be teaching stability, balance, and coordination primarily using their own body weight. We can help them improve in those categories with exercises specifically designed to help the golf swing.



PHYSICAL FITNESS CONT.

How often should juniors work out?

That depends on the individual and what they are trying to achieve. A very motivated young adult who is looking to make golf a large part of their life can benefit from daily workouts. It's a matter of how many days a week can someone put into golf, and then we design a program based on that. There's certain design features that we would want to see happen depending on the frequency. You don't want to do the exact same things on a daily basis. You want to alternate certain types of training on different days. If it's just two or three days a week, you are probably going to work on all aspects of training in each workout.

Should a trainer consult with the golf instructor?

We will speak to a junior's instructor but our program is really based on our own evaluation. Each person is different with their own needs. Depending on the evaluation we will determine whether the issues are flexibility, strength, balance, or coordination, and then we will design a custom program to address those needs. We can work with kids on a group level where we give them a more generic program that benefits the entire group. But if we are really trying to get the most out of a specific athlete, an evaluation is really the key to figuring out what are the important things we need to work on.

Questions to Ask Potential Trainers

- *Can you communicate with and relate to kids?* Some instructors are a little bit dry and don't really have that ability to connect with junior golfers. It takes a certain level of understanding – a lot of kids won't be able to focus 100 percent of the time, and you have to be willing to deal with that while training.
- *What are your professional credentials?* Make sure the instructor is certified with a nationally recognized certification in fitness. Those can include ACSM (American College of Sports Medicine), NSCA (National Strength Conditioning Association), and NASM (National Academy of Sports Medicine). Golf-specific certifications include TPI (Titleist Performance Institute), which takes general fitness and incorporates that into a more golf-specific program.
- *How long have you been a physical fitness trainer?*
- *Have you worked with junior golfers before?*

In-season vs. Off-season Training

In-season and off-season training are different in several respects. Both workout schedules would vary in type, length, and frequency. Access to a facility and instructor could also play a role in training schedules. To really get a minimum benefit during the off-season, I like to see someone come in two or three days a week. Ideally schedules would permit three to five times a week.

In-season training brings a different goal: to maintain the level of strength and conditioning juniors had built during offseason and to prevent injury. The frequency then should be more of a one to three days a week regimen, depending on how much involvement they have in their sport.

PHYSICAL FITNESS

Exercises

The specific exercises we use with juniors are determined by the individual evaluation, but the biggest focus is coordination and core strength, including stability, balance and flexibility.

Stability - This comes from strength and neuromuscular efficiency. Planks are an example of a simple and effective core strengthening exercise.

Balance - This category involves more of a neuromuscular reaction with the brain and muscles. Exercises that challenge balance are the focus. Single leg standing, or standing on soft surfaces, are simple ways to do this.

Flexibility – Flexibility is a very important component, primarily in adults. Spinal and shoulder flexibility are of utmost importance. Trunk rotations (lying on back and rolling hips side to side) can help address the former, while arm movements on foam rollers can help improve shoulder mobility.

For more information about golf specific exercises, go to www.mytpi.com.

Signs of Physical Burnout

These signs are typically the same for juniors and adults and are pretty apparent.

- *Excessive fatigue*
- *Lack of interest (attendance or participation at practice may decline)*
- *Modern to severe muscle soreness on a regular basis*
- *Joint or muscular pain*
- *Poor sleeping and eating habits*
- *Lack of interest in other parts of life (lose sense of caring about things, grades decline, etc.)*

Even though they are young and may think of themselves as invincible, kids still need rest – probably more so than adults, since they are so active and their bodies are still going through tremendous changes and growth.



GAMES, TRAINING AIDS & DRILLS

Aside from stressing the importance of having fun during practice sessions, another critical aspect to ensuring that kids are in a productive learning environment is to offer a variety of different games, drills, and training aids that will make these sessions interesting, and not as monotonous as standing on a practice range beating balls for several hours. Kids have short attention spans and will improve at a much higher rate if they are focused and enthusiastic about the task at hand.

When it comes to games, training aids, and drills, there are so many to choose from in each category. However, what might be a good drill or training aid for one junior golfer might not necessarily hold true for another. Speak to the instructor to find out what would be best for particular swing faults and tendencies. Each of these categories can help kids (and golfers of all ages and abilities) to feel particular positions and sensations that will allow them to adapt to swing improvements at a much faster rate. This is a lot harder to achieve just by hitting balls on the range.

Here are my favorite options that fall under each category for junior golfers. Remember, there are hundreds of options out there, but these are ones I use the most frequently and successfully.

GAMES: When it comes to games, I like to stick with those that pertain mainly to the short game. Putting, chipping, and pitching are by far the most important shots during a round of golf when it comes to scoring, and have always been an overlooked area when it comes to practice and improvement, especially for kids. It's easy to get a lot of satisfaction out of standing on the practice range hitting the ball as hard and far as you can, and the short game does not supply kids with this same thrill. That's where a fun game can make all the difference.

One I like in particular is called "Up & Down," using a sand wedge right off the side of the green. The goal of this game is to chip the ball onto the green and then putt the ball into the hole while using a sand wedge (no putter allowed). This is a productive game for several reasons. Firstly, your best chance at getting the ball up and down is to chip it close to the hole because you do not have the benefit of using a putter once on the green. Then, once you are on the green, getting the ball to roll end-over-end correctly with a sand wedge is very good practice for all levels of golfers. Putting with a sand wedge is a drill that Nick Faldo wrote about several years ago in his book, "A Swing for Life." It requires a good deal of focus and skill to use the leading edge of the club to "blade" the middle of the ball for perfect contact, and can only help your putting stroke. The goal of the game is to see how many times in a row you can get the ball up and down.

TRAINING AIDS: Pre-formed grips are wonderful training aids to take advantage of at a young age. As stated previously in this manual, the grip is one of, if not the most important aspect of a golf swing. It is your only connection to the club, and can make the biggest difference between good and bad shots. Pre-formed grips can be used in a variety of ways. They can be put on any golf club as a practice aid to both make swings and to hit balls with. Training aids that I like the most are the ones in which you can actually hit balls with, and at the same time can be used indoors, even without a ball. By going through the process of feeling the correct grip over and over again, juniors are more likely to place their hands on the club in the correct way when gripping a regular club. These grips can also be used without even putting on a club. Simply sitting on the couch and watching television while holding a pre-formed grip can be helpful.

These grips can be found online and in most golf stores, however be sure to get the smaller "junior version" for the proper fit. Visit www.golfaroundtheworld.com to view hundreds of training aids that are available to golfers.

DRILLS: Many of the world's best golf instructors would argue that the most important area of the golf swing is the impact position. It has often times been referred to as the "moment of truth." A good impact position cannot always be taught. It is usually a product of the swing being in the correct areas leading up to that point. With that being said, there is a great drill for improving your impact position in conjunction with the rest of your swing, and that is hitting an impact bag. It's really just a large bag made of canvas that is stuffed with towels. It absorbs the blow at impact and encourages your hands and the club to be in the perfect position at the moment the ball is contacted. The best way for kids to use this drill is to turn a mid-iron upside down (gripping the club just below the clubhead) and strike the impact bag with the grip end of the club, stopping and holding this position at impact. Holding the club upside down is important because it makes the club lighter and allows kids to create more speed and gives you a more accurate feeling of what this position should feel like. If done correctly this will produce a very loud sound at impact, which most kids get a kick out of. Impact bags can be found online and in most golf stores. Visit www.golfaroundtheworld.com.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do I know if my child is good enough to play competitively?

Consistently shooting certain scores is important. Most kids who break 100, no matter what age group, can play in tournaments. Playing for score and getting the ball in the hole – rather than just fooling around or dropping two balls on a hole and playing – is a great indicator that they are ready for events.

How long will it take for my child to improve?

This is one of the most asked questions, but there is no right answer. It's unknown because every child is different. There is no set rate of improvement, nor are there any guarantees or schedule. All you can do is put them on the right road. If they don't have any physical limitation holding them back, and they're trying, they will get better. Some get a little better quickly, some get a lot better quickly. The goal that I try to get through to each junior is if they work and put the time in, they will get there. It doesn't matter when they get there – it could be next week, next month, or next year – I don't care. As long as they get there. Let them get there at their own pace.

How do I make sure I am making the right decisions for my child?

The best way to do that is to get professional input and not do it on your own. Even if parents are golfers, they are simply not educated enough in terms of who they should be working with, where, and when to play – find someone you can relate to and trust, ask parents of other good players for recommendations, and do research. You can also ask junior tournament directors and high school coaches for their feedback.

Should I be sending my child to a year-round golf academy?

You have to use your judgment with your child. In my experience it's usually not the right thing to do. There is too much overload on golf, with too many kids and not enough teachers. They're not becoming well-rounded individuals if they are doing something 24-7. I would not do it for a young person. If a teenager has the commitment level and they show signs with results, it could be worth it. The top five national programs are very expensive, costing close to \$50,000 a year. However, most of those programs also offer weekly schools in summer, so your child can try those out to experience the academy environment. I would lean toward the latter option.

Should I encourage my child to participate in other sports?

During golf season, it's great to work solely on golf. But then I encourage parents and juniors to back off the game and do other things. To grow physically, build overall agility and coordination, and develop certain muscles, you need to play other sports, like soccer, baseball, etc. Before starting high school, kids should play other sports. Once they get to high school, I'd recommend not playing more than one other sport (maybe a winter/spring combination) because to be good you have to give one sport a certain amount of time, depending upon how serious you are.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS CONT.

Should I be helping to coach my child?

Not directly. You should be managing the operation, like an athlete's agent would. You're providing transportation, scheduling tournaments, overseeing equipment, etc. They are not at an age intellectually to figure all of that out. Try not to be overbearing, but you can mention certain events to play in, ways of getting them there, and what they are learning from coaching sessions. You need a back seat driver mentality, trying not to be too hands on in one area, and just overseeing everything. It's a fine line but one worth observing.

What should I be doing to help my child improve?

Monitor their progress and always be encouraging.

What should we be doing in the offseason?

Look to the instructor you are working with for help setting up a winter program (which can include nutrition, fitness, equipment, weekly camps elsewhere).

Do we need to join a private country club?

No, you absolutely do not. You do, however, need to find a decent golf facility. To me the practice area is even more important than the course. Preferably it will have grass hitting areas, decent golf balls, and room to practice all types of shots at a green/chipping area. Regarding the course itself, look for one that is not overbearing for a child – not too many hills, not tough to walk (one where kids can carry their own bag), with simple rather than heavily contoured greens. That said, if joining a private club is within your means financially, it can usually help.

Can my child skip the basics because he/she is “beyond that”?

I break down my summer golf camp into weekly segments to focus on certain skills. Skipping the basics is simply wrong. You can never skip the basics. When I work with touring professionals, I actually do the most work on the basics. They have such good swings they're usually off in little things like posture and grip. Even accomplished golfers need to work on those areas.

How often should my child be taking lessons?

Either once a week during the summer or once every other week. That frequency is determined by the child's age, interest, commitment, talent, physical ability, and tournament schedule. Ideally each week they play an event, take a lesson, take a day off, and practice the other days. During the off-season, maybe once a month. This is where parents have to oversee the operation. You don't want a child taking a lesson on a Sunday and playing a tournament the next day. Your role is spread things out between events and practice.



JASON BIRNBAUM

Junior Golf Camp

Alpine Country Club teaching professional Jason Birnbaum has been offering junior golf camps and clinics for the past eight seasons in Bergen County. This year he will direct his junior golf camp in River Vale, New Jersey. "The mission of my camp is to provide the finest instruction to serious junior golfers in the tri-state area," says Birnbaum. "We want to offer junior golfers a special learning environment using state-of-the-art video and computer technology that is usually only offered to the best players in the world, and give them every chance to improve to the best of their abilities."

Under the guidance of Birnbaum and his trained staff of teaching professionals, students spend time working on each area of the game, from full-swing and short-game instruction, to on-course playing lessons. Students will receive merchandise and equipment as part of a sponsorship with Taylor Made-adidas Golf, along with take-home computer software enabling them to obtain instant feedback on their learning progress.

Unlike more expensive golf academies that require travel to far away locations, participants in the Jason Birnbaum Junior Golf Camp can commute to the camp each day, return home each night, and still receive high caliber golf instruction. The camp's group aspect is another benefit – when it comes to teaching kids, relying only on individual instruction is not always the best way to improve. Spending time with peers in a camp environment helps to speed up improvement and growth drastically.

The size of our camp groups is limited to no more than 12 students per week, and there are always three to four instructors on site every day. Every camper receives personalized attention from Jason Birnbaum, who spends six to eight hours each week at the camp. Junior golfers and parents also have access to him after the camp ends for important follow up discussions.

The Jason Birnbaum Junior Golf Camp is also one of the few in the country to use state-of-the-art technology (i.e., launch monitors and putting cameras) that in the past was available only to Tour professionals. Special guests also make appearances at the camp each year, from trick shot artists to PGA Tour professionals who perform clinics. There is also a special emphasis on golf etiquette, with students learning how to conduct themselves properly on the course. Each student also receives a copy of the Rules of Golf and participates in a fun rules quiz.

The camp's four-week schedule includes sessions Mondays through Thursdays, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Some of the topics covered are included on the next page under weekly themes. Participants have the option of enrolling for as many weeks as they would like; however enrollment is limited. Special discounts are available for early enrollment before the month of April.





JASON BIRNBAUM

Junior Golf Camp Cont.



WEEK ONE: Basics of the setup position: grip, posture, and alignment

WEEK TWO: Personalized in-depth video analysis

WEEK THREE: Importance of body motion, swing plane, and clubface position

WEEK FOUR: Golf course competitions, review and planning for future success

Here is what some parents have said recently about their experiences with the Jason Birnbaum Junior Golf Program:

"Hi Jason, hope all is well. I would like to thank you and your staff for improving Naseeb's game. He is very excited and I saw drastic improvements while playing with him." -Hazrat Ally

"Hi Jason, Cole had a wonderful camp experience. He loved every part, and is addicted already. Thank you so much." -In Jin Jun

"The 2009 Jason Birnbaum Junior Golf Program was a huge success for my son. It took his game to a different level and he is enjoying the game more now than ever before. Thank you so much for your efforts. We can't wait until next summer!" -Sam Davis

For additional information please contact Jason Birnbaum Golf at (201) 655-0704 or visit his website at: www.jb-golf.com. You can also follow Jason on Twitter at: www.twitter.com/birnbaumgolf



INFORMATION RESOURCES

- ***In Every Kid There Lurks A Tiger*** (Rudy Duran with Rick Lipsey, 2003, Hyperion)
- ***Journey to Excellence: The Young Golfer's Complete Guide to Achievement and Personal Growth*** (Henry Brunton with Michael Grange, 2009; Sea Script Company)
<http://www.henrybrunton.com/index.php>
- ***Golf Parents For the Future*** (Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott, 2005; www.vision54.com)
- ***Driven: Teen Phenoms, Mad Parents, Swing Science, and the Future of Golf*** (Kevin Cook, 2008, Gotham)
- ***PING American College Golf Guide***
www.collegegolf.com
- www.juniorlinks.com



CONTRIBUTORS

Chris Dempsey – After more than seven years on the PGA Tour building equipment for the world’s best players, Chris founded FuZion Golf. Equipment fit and built by him has proven itself with six victories in major championships (one Masters, three U.S. Opens, and two British Opens) as well as over 20 regular season wins on the PGA Tour, LPGA Tour and Senior PGA Tour. For more information, go to www.fuziongolf.com or call 561-743-4470

Anthony Sbarbaro – Anthony is co-owner and fitness director at MetroGolf & Fitness in Tenafly, New Jersey, a full-service facility that opened in 2007. He has been a fitness trainer for over 10 years. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Exercise Physiology from William Paterson University, is CSCS certified by the National Strength & Conditioning Association, and is a certified FMS (Functional Movement Screen) evaluator. The latter is key to proper biomechanical screening and assessment of an individual in order to design a corrective exercise program. For more information call 201-871-4653, or go to www.metrogolfandfitness.com.

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