

BUILDING SUCCESSFUL

JUNIOR GOLFER



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 freshmen 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).