

Touching Lives



Every year, more than 5,000 young people compete in official Optimist Junior Golf qualifying tournaments. The best of those golfers, along with international golfers from around the globe, advance to the Optimist International Junior Golf Championships. While not every golfer is able to come out at the top of the leaderboard, each participant benefits from the opportunity to participate in top-level tournament golf, meet new friends and have a great deal of fun.

Here are a few stories about how this innovative program has impacted the lives of junior golfers.

Dear Optimists,

My twelve-year-old son, Wyatt Iles, has competed in past Optimist Junior Golf tournaments held in California. I would like to share his story. I find it most spectacular and hope you might as well.



At the age of two, Wyatt was diagnosed with autism and was severely affected by his disability. Between the ages of two and four, Wyatt did not speak a single word. It was as if he was in his own isolated world. When he was four years old, I turned on the television for some children's educational programming. I was pushing the 'channel up' button and the Golf Channel appeared on TV. Upon seeing it, Wyatt quickly

asked out loud, "What's that?" As these were the first words he had spoken to me ever, I left the TV on the Golf Channel and began explaining what little I knew about golf. From that point on, the TV had to be on the Golf Channel when Wyatt watched television or he would have autistic tantrum-type behaviors.

I decided since he liked watching golf so much on TV, I would buy him a junior set of golf clubs and take him to a local golf

course to play on the putting green and driving range. Wyatt quickly fell in love with playing golf. I then decided to incorporate his passion for playing golf as a "reward system" for having good behavior and meeting educational goals during his autism therapy sessions. This "reward system" worked perfectly. Wyatt became much more alert and attentive to his autism therapies. This pretty much pulled him out of his severely autistic traits.

Wyatt is now out of special education classes and in regular classes at school. Wyatt is also getting straight A's. I attribute Wyatt's academic success to his passion for golf, as it was the one motivating factor that compelled him to attend and concentrate on his autism interventions.

Wyatt's golfing ability is also quite unique for an individual with autism. Although he does enjoy competing in Special Olympics tournaments with friends he has made and maintained over the years, Wyatt has competed in numerous local junior golf tournaments with the SCPGA Junior Tour, and Optimist Junior Tour golf tournaments in California. Wyatt was especially excited this past summer, as he was one of only eighteen junior golf enthusiasts, out of a thousand applicants nationally, to be accepted to the Tiger Woods Foundation National Junior Golf Team. As a member of this team, Wyatt earned an exemption to compete in the Callaway Junior Golf World Championship Tournament, held annually in San Diego, California.

Most Respectfully,

Luther Iles

