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The development of a 12-hole, par-3 Challenge Course at Monarch Dunes GC in Nipomo, Calif., has proven to be an effective tool in bringing new golfers into the game. Photos courtesy of Monarch Dunes

(business)

An eye on the future

An environment of inclusiveness at California's Monarch Dunes Golf Club powers an innovative learning initiative designed to increase golfing participation worldwide.

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of articles highlighting the important relationship between GCSAA superintendents and PGA of America professionals.

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— Minas Kaloosian,
Monarch Dunes general manager

For several years, Tom Elliott, CGCS at Monarch Dunes Golf Club in Nipomo, Calif., served his local community as coach of the Nipomo High School girls' golf team. Although he enjoyed the responsibilities of his position, he struggled to teach the game to beginning golfers who were members of the team, to the point he sought assistance from nearby golf professionals.

But no PGA professional was able to help him work with newcomers until Jim DeLaby approached him. A professional instructor at Monarch Dunes, DeLaby wanted to spend more time with his daughter, who had just tried out for the team. Elliott was skeptical at first, unsure if DeLaby would be able to work with girls who had just begun playing. His doubts were quickly curtailed, however.

"I never saw a pro have such success with newbies," says Elliott, a GCSAA member for 27 years. "He immediately gained my respect and admiration as he took the raw beginners and showed them the early stages of learning the game, including how to properly hold grips and take quarter backswings."

A relationship was established, as the two began to co-coach the team in 2011. While working together, they began to understand each other's gifts and acquired trust in one another. That level of mutual understanding and trust transferred over to Monarch Dunes, where both men



Tom Elliott, CGCS (left), superintendent at Monarch Dunes GC, and Jim DeLaby, the club's director of instruction, led the implementation of a successful player development program at the California facility.

Known as Learn Golf!, the grow-the-game initiative is the club staff's attempt to introduce the game to nearby residents.

worked. When new owners purchased the golf club and offered DeLaby a new position, as Monarch Dunes Golf Academy's director of instruction, a new general manager, Minas Kaloosian, was hired. He soon understood the potential that DeLaby and Elliott's association as co-coaches with a combined 54 years of experience within the golf industry, presented to the club — a successful PGA professional and superintendent dual partnership.

“A new leadership structure and philosophy was instituted at the club, and the foundation was built for two long-time industry professionals to share their knowledge and experience through collaboration,” says Kaloosian. “Tom and Jim took it upon themselves to meet and discuss what could be done to attract golfers from other courses to come and play at Monarch Dunes, as well as beginners.”

Their solution? Elliott and his team would significantly ease the difficulty of the golf club's under-utilized 12-hole, par-3 Challenge Course so that golfers of all ages and experience levels could enjoy a fun, relatively fast, round of golf. In the meantime, DeLaby, along with event coordinator and marketing manager Holly McGinty and head golf professional Jason Porter, would create a learning program to help new golfers become comfort-

able with the game and learn it properly from the get-go, applying some of the same methods DeLaby used with members of the Nipomo High School girls' golf team.

An open invitation

Prior to the development of Monarch Dunes' “beginners-only” learning program, Elliott and DeLaby drove around the Challenge Course together and studied every aspect of each hole, determining which characteristics of the course beginners likely struggled with the most. Upon further review, the pair decided to cut the course's grass to one length, add 8-inch cups to every green, remove lips from all bunkers, and move all forward tees even farther forward so they would only be 25 yards away from each hole's green.

“Tom knew my 35 years of experience as an instructor, as well as explaining step-by-step how to play golf, could help translate the language of the game for non-golfers,” DeLaby states. “So he based each of the changes to the Challenge Course on my wish list for having perfect teaching grounds, where I could implement my learning program.”

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Tweaks to the Challenge Course to make it better suited as a learning environment for new golfers included a change to a single mowing height, the addition of 8-inch cups to each green and the removal of lips from all bunkers.

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bers are also hoping to develop a marketable program that can easily be duplicated by other facilities to attract new participants and resolve three key issues that have affected golf participation in recent years: cost, the time it takes to play and the difficulty in learning the game.

"We needed to establish an instruction method that would really appeal to beginners who don't understand or love the game the way we, in the industry, understand and love it," Kaloosian says. "The truth is golf doesn't have a honeymoon period, as many new golfers go from first date to divorce all in the same day. The Learn Golf! program provides golfers that honeymoon period so they can understand the game and see its beauty in a fun, interactive way."

When beginners arrive at the Challenge Course to participate in the Learn Golf! program, they're provided with a list of 11 tasks they need to either complete or understand prior to playing their first round of golf, starting with tee time scheduling. After reviewing this list, finishing each task, and receiving clubs, balls and small carry bags, participants begin to take quarter swings on the course's green tees without any instruction. The green

tees, one of the course's set of four tees, are for beginners only. If experienced participants wish, they can take half swings at the course's yellow tees, three-quarter swings at the orange tees or full swings at the black tees instead.

After playing the course for the first time, beginners will then decide to either continue learning the game alone, or ask for professional instruction from DeLaby. If beginners desire to learn the game via a "do-it-yourself" approach, they can visit Monarch Dunes' website and access instructional material whenever they choose, at any pace they aspire to learn. If they prefer professional instruction, DeLaby and his team of instructors are trained to transition beginners from self-led to instructor-led instruction whenever customers decide to change their learning methods. Ultimately, because of the program's vertical integration, beginners can comfortably transition from quarter swings to full swings and from the Challenge Course to the club's 18-hole championship course.

Immediate payoff

As a result of the Learn Golf! program, the total number of rounds played at Monarch Dunes' 12-hole and 18-hole courses rose by

15 percent from 2012 to 2013, a number that is expected to grow an additional 25 percent this year. At the same time, foot traffic has increased in the club's pro shop and restaurant, known as The Butterfly Grille, as merchandise and food and beverage sales are projected to upturn by 20 and 10 percent, respectively, in 2014.

"Within the last eight months, Jim has taught about 400 beginners," states Kaloosian. "The total number of rounds played at the Challenge Course has risen by nearly 4,000, since golfers are now bringing their non-golfer friends and family members with them to the golf club to either play golf or eat at our restaurant."

To maintain this level of success, Elliott and DeLaby attend weekly managers' meetings and monthly managers' strategy sessions to discuss all aspects of the club's day-to-day operations. They also take time out of their personal schedules to decide what is — and what isn't — working with regard to the learning program, the Challenge Course and other aspects of the club.

"We focus on what each of our customer segments (golf courses, ranges, etc.) are saying about our products, how we can continue to improve our products and satisfy the requests

of our customer segments, and how we can balance our customers' expectations with the realities of maintaining a year-round facility," says DeLaby.

Thanks to these meetings, as well as the work they have completed on the Challenge Course and the Learn Golf! program as partners, Elliott and DeLaby are able to respect each other's points of view, understand the issues one another faces as superintendent and PGA professional and recognize what they must do to achieve their goals and grow the game of golf.

"Mutual respect and patience are key to establishing common ground and making progress," Elliott states. "Superintendents and PGA pros must understand each other's point of view, while looking at the 'big picture,' thinking strategically and executing tactically."

He adds, "Each person should be allowed to be an expert at what they do and apply their advice to the situation at hand. Superintendents and PGA pros should be inclusive with one another, rather than exclusive, and open to different points of view."

The team approach

In particular, this inclusiveness at Mon-

arch Dunes has especially increased since the Learn Golf! program was initiated, as each manager of the club has provided input on the learning initiative, working together to ensure its success.

"Prior to Learn Golf!, the club's departments operated autonomously for the most part," says Kaloosian. "Now our culture of inclusion and collaboration allows our experienced and new managers to feed off of each other, blend their strengths and execute their plans together. It has been a true team effort."

DeLaby believes this "team effort" can be applied throughout the golf industry to grow the game for future generations.

"If we as pros, superintendents and managers don't take it upon ourselves to become ambassadors for golf, how can we expect beginners to be excited about learning and falling in love with this beautiful game?" he asks. "It is our responsibility to plant the seeds, tend the new crop and harvest the riches of a new generation of golfers."

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