

The Lebanon County Junior Golf Program got its start in the summer of 1982. Prior to that the Lebanon County Junior Golf Championship was an event that was run by the Lebanon County Golf Association. The tournament was run as a two day event for Lebanon County high school students. The earliest recorded champion was John Gross in 1978. There was no junior golf program, only a two day county championship event.

In the summer of 1982, inspired by a collaboration between John Witter (ELCO golf coach), Fred Sherk (Cedar Crest golf coach), and Mike Swisher (LCC Head Pro), a junior golf program was born. The program was started as a venue for Lebanon County high school golf team members to compete against each other over the summer months. This way the high school golfers could sharpen their golf skills and should be in top form when the high school golf season begins in the fall. There was between 30 and 45 players in the first program and no consideration was given to recreational or beginning golfers of school age. An All-Star team from Lebanon County competed with All-Star teams from Berks and York counties at Honey Run Golf Course in York, PA.

Somewhere in the mid eighties, a gentleman by the name of Charlie Neil got involved, and the junior program was expanded to include other school children that wanted to play golf and to include younger school aged children that wanted to learn golf as beginners. Charlie Neil ran the program as two divisions, with the Beginners portion of the program at the Bluebird Chip and Putt Golf Course behind the Blue Bird Inn along Cornwall Road in Lebanon. The older kids played at the local county golf courses. Charlie ran these two divisions with some adult help until 1989. He was helped by Jim Witcoskie (Golf Coach at Palmyra High School). When Charlie retired from the program after the 1988 season, Jim took over the next year in 1989. Jim ran the two divisions by himself as well. He did a wonderful job building the junior program with the numbers growing to over 200 each year. Jim ran the program until he retired in 1995.

Dave Suereth first got involved with junior golf during 1994 when Jim Witcoskie still directed the program. Dave helped Jim in 1994 and took over in 1995 when Jim retired. Within Dave's first year, due to increasing numbers, the program was expanded into three divisions: PGA (Advanced) for the older kids that could play eighteen holes, NIKE (Intermediate) for the middle age kids that could play 9 holes on a regulation golf course, and APPRENTICE (Beginners) for the younger kids and all kids that are just starting golf. Dave co-coordinated the program and ran the PGA Division. Lebanon Country Club Asst. Pro Mike Battisteli directed the NIKE Group, and Fairview Pro John Zessiger ran the Beginners Group at South Hills Golf Course at the VA Hospital in Lebanon. In 1996 the program exploded to 302 school aged kids that were all from Lebanon County. Dave Suereth managed the program from 1995 to 2001. Divisions were created within the PGA and NIKE divisions that used both the red and the white tees. The beginners had so many kids (over 100) that they were split into two groups of about 50 each. The beginners rotated between six stations with an instructor at each station. The beginners were taught woods, irons, chipping, putting, sand play, and rules and etiquette. As the kids progressed they were permitted to play a few holes at the South Hills Course and eventually they could move into the NIKE Division. The last beginner's event for the

season was run as a scramble event with parents involved. There was pizza and prizes afterward. Ben Witter was usually there to perform his trick shot demonstration for the enjoyment of the kids and their parents.

The NIKE Group played 9 holes at six different golf courses and started at the red tees or at the 150 yard markers based on their ability. The first five NIKE events were run as a modified Stableford event with one point for a triple bogey, two points for a double bogey, three points for a single bogey, and so on for each hole. The kids were encouraged to pick up if they could not make a triple bogey or better. This kept play moving and made golf more fun for the younger children. Trophies were awarded for the top finishers in these five events. The last event of the six was run as the NIKE Championship and all the strokes were counted in this tournament. Prizes were awarded for this tournament as well.

The PGA Group played eighteen holes at six different courses. Players started at the red tees or the white tees based on their ability. The first five events were also run as a point system and the last event was run as the Lebanon County Junior Golf Championship. The Championship is run as a one day medal play event and trophies are awarded for the league play and for the County Championship. The County Junior Champion has his name engraved on a plaque that was started back in 1978 and played continually for 34 years. The winners names have become a Who's Who List for Lebanon County Golf and include John Gross, Greg Leshner, Mark Ditzler, Tom Kintzer, Ben Witter, Chad Schulze, Dennis Toomey, Mike Kohr, Mike Battistelli, and most recently Charles White of Palmyra. The plaque is currently displayed in the Pro Shop at Fairview Golf Course.

Around 1999 we let our first kid into the program that didn't live in Lebanon County. His name was Brixton Albert and he lived in Lititz. He was taking golf lessons from Mike Swisher at the Lebanon Country Club. Brixton's father, Ed came into the junior program as a helper and ended up directing the NIKE Division that year. After Dave retired from the program in 2001, Ed Albert took over as director for the entire program. Had we not accepted his son, the program may have ended in 2001 because no one from Lebanon County was willing to take charge after Dave's retirement.

Ed Albert ran the program for about 4 or 5 years and one of his assistants; Randy Grove took over after Ed left around 2005. Randy ran the program for 5 or 6 years through the 2010 season. He tried a few innovative ideas, including a match play event for the top 16 players in the program. The winner of the Match Play was awarded the Pepper Zellers Cup, named after a deceased local popular golfer by that name. Randy also started the season ending Parent/Child Tournament. A father, mother, or other relative partners with his or her child and plays a two person scramble for nine holes. Following this tournament a banquet and an awards ceremony is held to present all of the prizes for the season to both the NIKE and PGA Groups.

A few years ago the South Hills Golf Course was closed by the Veterans Administration of the Federal Government. We lost our home for the Beginners Program. This division was run for many years by Eric Bamberger, an assistant pro at the Lebanon Country Club. After the South Hills Facility closed, the Beginners Program rotated between several golf courses, including The Lyn-Lor Facility east of

Myerstown, PA. The beginners needed a home, and it was becoming more and more difficult to find adequate supervision for the junior golfers.

At the end of the 2010 season, Randy Grove retired from the Junior Golf Program. He certainly did a great, innovative job running the program. He also brought us into the modern age by establishing a web site for Lebanon County Junior Golf. When Randy left, none of his assistants stayed on to help with the Junior Golf Program. Running this program has certainly become a complicated, time-consuming process. In the spring of the year, printed schedules and materials have to be distributed to all of the elementary, middle, and high schools in Lebanon County. Orientations have to be arranged for and sign-ups must be co-coordinated. Then, within a seven or eight week period during the summer, 19 events must be scheduled, co-coordinated, and run. Each event lasts between 2 and 6 hours. Clinics must be scheduled for each NIKE and PGA event. Records must be kept and trophies and prizes must be ordered. Funds must be raised for the program and bills must be paid. Adult help and supervision must be arranged for. All of this takes an enormous amount of time and qualified people to pull it off.

When Dave Suereth observed in early April of 2011 that no one was going to step up and take over the Junior Golf Program, he decided to step in and keep it going through the 2011 season. Things finally came together in late April when a few key people volunteered to help run the program. We found a home for the beginners at Lyn-Lor east of Myerstown. Dave volunteered to take charge of the Beginners Level. Scot Brown volunteered to run the NIKE Division, and Ben Brewer took control of the PGA Group. Dave helped to train both Scot and Ben who were both new to the Junior Golf Program. Between the three of them and many other volunteer helpers, they made it through 2011.

What has stayed the same?

1. We still have a competitive program for the high school golfers to compete in.
2. An affordable cost of \$25 total for six eighteen hole rounds of golf.
3. All of the Lebanon County Golf Courses participate in the program.
4. The (3) division format has stayed in effect and seems to be working.
5. The Lebanon County Junior Championship has continued for 34 consecutive years.
6. We still hold clinics for each NIKE and PGA event.  
They are taught by golf course professionals and instructors and include various aspects of the golf game.

What has changed?

1. Our numbers are down. They are approximately one-half of what they used to be. 112 this year. This seems to be a natural trend of golf.
2. We currently allow kids from outside Lebanon County into the program.
3. Adult supervision is harder to find.
4. Many of the Golf Courses have gotten away from the shotgun format and have gone back to regular tee times. This makes for a longer day for supervisors and participants.
5. Several of the better county high school golfers do not participate in the program for various reasons.
6. Kids were once required to have completed 2<sup>nd</sup> grade before they could participate in the program. Now younger kids have been admitted to the junior golf program.