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Youths get on course, heeding call for players

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Kids arrive in bunches not long after school is dismissed. Why? Golf balls to be struck.

This is the scene recently at McHenry Golf Center, one of several city golf facilities that have signed on with Youth On Course, the golf outreach program sponsored by the Northern California Golf Association Foundation.

The NCGA sought a way to attract young players to offset a nationwide decrease in player participation. Enter Youth On Course, which allows registrants 18 and under to tee it up for as little as \$5 and range balls for as low as \$1 per bucket.

"We've probably had 40 kids a day. It's amazing how many people are learning about golf through this program," said Ken Miller, McHenry owner. "Everyone I've talked to say it's been a home run."

More than 80 participating golf courses and facilities have taken part in the program, which was made possible by a generous gift to the NCGA Foundation from an anonymous Bay Area donor.

Kids can apply either through certification through The First Tee (and its Modesto chapter), or by passing a series of online tests on ncga.org regarding golf rules, etiquette and life skills. Students then must verify their passing through a coach or golf official. The charge is \$2 for First Tee students and no charge for online.

Those who pass the test become NCGA members and receive a Youth On Course sticker on the membership card. They're eligible for reduced rates for golf and range balls. Miller said buckets at McHenry cost only \$1 all year long.

"The economy has had something to do with it. People are just staying closer to home," Miller said.

One of Miller's most devoted students is Modesto High senior Fredrik Palmer, who took part in the Wal-Mart First Tee Open at Pebble Beach last year. Palmer routinely pounds ball after ball, as many as five buckets at a time, through Youth On Course.

"His game has really taken a step up," Miller said. "He has spent a lot of time out here."

Other outreach programs:

- Free clinics are available for NCGA members — it costs \$45 to join with an annual fee of \$35 — at McHenry. They will be held on Thursdays from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., and Saturdays from 1 to 2 p.m., beginning a week from Thursday and lasting through September.
- McHenry instructors Shane Balfour and Dana Ebster lead a series of five one-hour lessons titled "Get Golf Ready" sponsored by the PGA of America. "We're looking for introductory golfers and also those who are coming back to the game. Every aspect of golf will be covered, and we'll also be going to Escalon for on-course instruction," Balfour said. The cost is \$99. Visit getgolffready.com.

THE SHAG BAG — Save Mart has pulled its sponsorship of the two-day Save Mart Shootout, which has brought some of the game's top names to Riverbend near Madera each year since 2002. The event has raised more than \$1.5 million for local charities. Riverbend General Manager Mike Stieler told The Fresno Bee that he expects the tournament, which slumped 20 percent in attendance last fall, to return this fall. ...Spencer Heller of Turlock (82-78-160) tied for fifth in the girls division of the NCGA Junior Tour event this week at Stevinson Ranch. Christine Uhalde of Modesto (83-81-164) tied for 11th, 18 strokes behind winner Bonnie Hu of Fremont. In the boys division, the winner was former Modestan Bryson De Chambeau of Clovis (72-74-146). Daniel Covrig of Modesto (76-79-155) tied for ninth.

HOLES-IN-ONE — Ryan Stephens, Modesto, 143-yard seventh at Saddle Creek, Copperopolis, 7-iron. ...Ben Martinez, Ceres, 94-yard fifth at River Oaks, Ceres, lob wedge. ...John Morshead, Ceres, fifth at River Oaks, sand wedge. ...Landon Azevedo, Patterson, 120-yard 17th at River Oaks, 8-iron. ...Juan Galvan, Jr., Patterson, 136-yard fourth at River Oaks, 8-iron.

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