

# LESSONS LEARNED

## PLAYING JUNIOR AND COLLEGE GOLF

A Practical Guide for Young People  
and Their Parents



My Experiences as a Junior, Collegiate,  
and Competitive Amateur Golfer

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## FOREWORD

Golf has played an outsized role in my life since I took my first swings as a six-year-old junior. In the two decades since that time, I've played more than 2,500 rounds of golf, including some 300 tournament rounds. These include small tournaments hosted by my local park district to prestigious international events played on notable courses in 20 U.S. states plus a couple of Canadian provinces. At no point along the way did it get old for me—I'm as eager to compete now as I've ever been.

Completing my college golf career and earning my degree as a member of the class of 2017 has put bookends on that part of my life. As a result, I'm able to look back on all the interesting paths I went down as a junior and a collegiate player. So many of my richest memories feature long, enjoyable days on the golf course or exciting moments when a win for our team or for me as an individual was within reach.

Golf is the best sport we've got. It mirrors the promising, demanding, and confusing journey known as life and it offers us a never-ending chance to improve. You may have come to that conclusion yourself, if you've picked up this book and begun reading it. Along with all the value golf can bring to a young person's life, it's also a challenging and at times baffling world to navigate even with smart, resourceful parents to help you along.

This book offers thoughts and advice for any young, talented golfer, in the hope that it will make things go smoothly for you. It tells the story of my family and me as we went down that road of competitive junior golf, then high school golf, and, finally, the college game. We made quite a few wrong turns and we needed some lucky breaks, learning the ropes as we went along.

For us, a book like this would have come in handy, which is why I sat down to write it. It started as a simple list of suggestions I have for young players and, over the course of a year, it became more detailed and comprehensive. It even came to include a special element featuring short “Parent to Parent” messages from my father, Tom Prchal, that you’ll find at the end of most chapters.

I hope what we’ve written in these pages is able to significantly help you, as a competitive junior, and your family get the most out of your trip down this exciting and rewarding path.

—*Quinn Prchal*

[www.juniortocollegegolf.com](http://www.juniortocollegegolf.com)

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I apologize to anyone I may have missed who helped me along the way.

Finally, my thanks to my grandparents for taking me to numerous par 3 courses in my youth; my brother for cheerfully accompanying me to golf tournaments and college visits, as well as being my #1 fan; and my mom and dad for supporting my passion and introducing me to a game I can play for the rest of my life.





## 1 IS GOLF THE SPORT YOU CARE ABOUT MOST?

**M**y childhood years in suburban Chicago were organized around school and sports. Athletic competition was part of everyday life. I played soccer and baseball in the spring, switched to golf in the summer, and continued playing through autumn until hockey season started.

One sport would end just as another was beginning. Not specializing in any one activity over the others is now considered by experts to be an advantage. I can see looking back that it was helpful to me. I was never the top athlete in my town, but I had natural ability and I was versatile.

Even my weakest sport, soccer, which I played for four years in the American Youth Soccer Organization, gave me insights into strategy that I wouldn't have learned elsewhere. I remember during my first year of soccer hearing the coach constantly beg our team not to "swarm like bees" around the ball. It was pretty much impossible to do as he asked because to any 8 year-old, that soccer ball is just a magnet. Eventually we did learn the discipline of spreading out to play our positions. Over time, the

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movement of the ball and the players became a set of geometric patterns in my head. I would later translate those mental images to strategic play in golf, visualizing the optimal lines of play from tee to green.

I played hockey for eight years and baseball for six. Baseball was the first sport to go because the season conflicted with golf. Then later I would quit travel hockey, in part because I was somewhat small for my age and took a worse pounding than the average player but also because team practices and games were scheduled at odd times. It was all based on rink availability, which resulted in many a night when I wasn't home until 10:30 or later.

I truly enjoyed both sports and when I wasn't involved anymore, I really missed the team atmosphere. Junior golf was all individual (the PGA Junior League program hadn't been started yet) so it wasn't until high school that I was back experiencing team camaraderie through sports. That was very satisfying.

The more golf I played, the more I understood how hockey and baseball had helped me develop good hand-eye coordination. There's also research that shows how fast-twitch muscle fiber, which can be augmented during youth (but not after that) is a great asset for a golfer. So the other sports I played helped augment my fast-twitch muscles with traits like faster hip turn and greater clubhead speed as the welcome results.

From my personal perspective, it seems best for kids to try as many sports as possible, both to see what they enjoy and to avoid the injuries and burnout associated with specializing too early. This could be a greater debate, but I agree with those

who say young athletes will enhance their performance if they develop a broad skill set.

Most people I know who started golf at a young age were introduced to the game by their parents and enjoyed it as a family activity. Kids spend lots of time playing team sports with others their own age, meanwhile, a young golfer can end up playing quite often with adults. That's an experience and a learning curve different from what you get with pee wee hockey or Little League baseball.

The reason I was introduced to the game is so the four members of my family could have a sport we played together. My parents were also interested in having my brother and I play golf with our grandparents, which we did many times at a nearby par-3 course. I also played regularly with kids my age in the youth program at our local golf club, Glenview Park Golf Club. Having different people to play with always made the game fun for me and differentiated it from other sports. The unique nature of golf—the way it allows all ages to play and compete together—makes it especially suited for later in life. This is aside from the valuable business and personal connections that can be made.

We all know that kids have tons of energy, so it's pretty obvious why they're drawn to sports based on running, jumping, and physical contact. Golf is so calm and slow-paced by comparison that newer kids in a junior program are sometimes surprised by how much they enjoy it. One reason would be golf's relatively simple success formula: You hit good shots, you putt the ball well, you shoot low scores. In that way, you feel a greater sense of control. Playing the other sports, I ended up

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on quite a few teams with losing records, which gradually wore on me. Playing an individual sport, there's no way you can end up on a bad team. That had a lot of value. I liked being solely responsible for my scores, the good ones and the not-so-good. I also found that golf attracted certain personality types I got along with well. For a number of reasons, the game moved up to become my top priority.

There are rounds of golf you play just for fun and there are rounds you play when the competitive juices are flowing. I enjoyed the casual rounds, and I also loved playing in tournaments and competitions. Here's some advice that might be helpful: If you enjoy lots of different sports and you have thoughts of playing just one of them very seriously, look for the one that makes your competitive fires burn hottest. Check to see which sport brings you the biggest high when you win and disappoints you the most when you lose. I didn't exactly set out to do that, but at some point along the way I noticed that golf amped up my competitive spirit more than the other sports did.

Even just playing golf socially, I always felt a challenge to improve. In that sense, every day on the course was a chance to be in competition with myself. The combination of golf's competitive nature and its social nature really pulled me in. It was those two elements that made me love the game from the first time I played it.

One other unique and important difference between golf and team sports involves which competitions a player ends up participating in. With team sports, you get a schedule from the coach, you stick it on the refrigerator, and that's that. Competitive junior golfers, uniquely so, make their own

decisions about where, when, and against whom they will play. Simply pondering those choices and deciding which events to enter or try to qualify for tells you something about yourself, your confidence, and your progress. I'll explain how all that worked for me and offer ideas on how any competitive junior can do a good job of deciding which events to put on their schedule.

Something to bear in mind: Having the opportunity and the responsibility to organize your own tournament schedule means that the amount of family support normally required for you to play competitive sports is that much higher for junior golf. I was fortunate to have my parents and also my grandparents supporting me as I tried out for and competed in the various sports, including golf. It was hectic at times to keep up with all the practices and competitions, but it also brought us together. Some of my fondest memories are of the family being together for all those car rides and tournaments. The support of others helps make your strides forward possible—and in the end, that much sweeter—as you celebrate with the people who were there for you along the way.

The serious junior golfer, as noted, doesn't get a schedule of competitions handed to him or her by a coach. Getting started in junior tournaments is difficult given the lack of a supplied framework. The other tricky part, in the beginning, is not knowing how good you are relative to the fields you'll be part of if you enter one particular event or another. No parent will want to travel out of state or pay large amounts of money for their child to participate in a competition in a sport for which they're not suited.

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In my home state, the Illinois Junior Golf Association (IJGA) holds events for beginning players as well as those who are more experienced. These golf events felt pretty similar to the baseball and hockey leagues I played in. Fortunately for me, they allowed me to learn about tournament golf while competing against players who were doing the same. Without the IJGA, I probably would not have been able to become a tournament golfer. To this day, I feel deep gratitude to the people who developed our competitions and administered them. I certainly encourage you to take a look at the organizations in your area and what they have to offer. In the years since I started out, more and more communities have developed well-run junior programs for serious players, which is great to see. *(See page 104 for a partial list of organizations sponsoring junior golf events.)*



2007 Youth Championship,  
Glenview Park Golf Club (Glenview, IL)

# PARENT TO PARENT

## DEVisING A TOURNAMENT SCHEDULE IS TRICKIER THAN YOU MIGHT THINK

Planning and updating a junior's tournament schedule is a time-consuming task that can, at times, become frustrating. Golf tournament schedules aren't all published at the same time, which leads to some changes of plan on short notice. For that reason, it's important to understand the cancellation policies for each tournament under consideration. Find out if the organization running a particular tournament will allow your golfer to cancel without charge in the event he or she is accepted into a higher-ranked tournament. You'll find that some of the more popular tournaments fill up quickly.

You may also find that simply filling out an entry form is no guarantee of a spot in certain fields. There are prestigious junior events that demand a certain level of playing accomplishments and require submission of an extensive resume to be considered for entry. Drawing up schedules is especially challenging and critical for a golfer from a northern climate where the number of months available to play is limited by the weather. It is important to match the tournament schedule to the golfer's talent level, while also trying to be efficient with time, travel, and the family budget. Tournament schedules should be reviewed at least monthly because new competitions get added as the season rolls on. Then there's the "Horses for Courses"

consideration: Year after year, golfers should emulate pros such as Tiger Woods and make a point of returning to courses where they've had prior success. This will engender a positive frame of mind for the player and eliminate the need to learn a new golf course from scratch.

—Tom Prchal