

Robert Thompson's Going For The Green

Thoughts and writing on the world of golf and golf course architecture.

**Friday, June 03,
2005**

Helping Kids Find the Green

Today's National Post Golf column:

**Helping kids find the green
National Post**

Friday, June 3, 2005

Robert Thompson Column: On Golf

In a time when golf participation is flatlining, Kingsley Rowe may have seen the way forward, helping the game while helping those in need.

Rowe, who came to Canada from his native Jamaica 30 years ago, is the force behind the National Junior Golf Academy. Though the title makes the organization sound like any of a dozen Canadian teaching facilities that operate like miniature country clubs, Rowe's creation is very different.

In the late 1990s, Rowe looked at the state of Toronto's downtrodden Jane and Finch corridor and felt he needed to make a difference. Already a successful businessman who ran travel and trucking businesses, Rowe believed he could take his passion for golf and bring it to the kids of the area, helping teach them life skills by instructing them in the game.

"I've played a lot of golf and felt there was great value in the foundations of the game. It teaches etiquette, integrity, honesty," he said.

More than 300 area children up to the age of 18 have participated in the program, often working in the Driftwood Community Centre with the occasional trip to a nearby range or course. The kids come once a week after school throughout the year.

The program found early success when one of its students, Dominique Claxton, who was 14 when he joined, was chosen to represent the organization and head to Alabama to take a quick lesson from Tiger Woods. Claxton, now 19, still volunteers at the facility when he can find time to break away from college.

"I learned from the program that you can't cheat in life," Claxton says. "Life, like golf, is something that you have to work at."

Programs like Rowe's could well be the future of golf in Canada. In the U.S., the well-regarded First Tee program has tried a similar approach by offering affordable golf to youth who would otherwise likely never participate in the game. The Royal Canadian Golf Association also runs its successful Future Links program, attracting more than 77,000 children last year.

Though he has had support from the RCGA and various Toronto businesses, that doesn't mean Rowe's program has been accepted with open arms. Rowe says he has overheard members of the Board of Trade, a Toronto private golf club that has supported the program and given children in the academy access to its facilities, muttering about the fact that "these kids" don't belong on a golf course. These are also the same people who probably would have had a problem admitting Rowe to their club in the first place.

"There's still an old boys' network out there that thinks certain people shouldn't have access to the game," he says.

But others, including Nike and Angus Glen general manager Kevin Thistle, have stepped up to support the idea. The Canadian Professional Golf Tour, which is struggling in its own right, has also teamed up with Rowe's organization.

"I think inner-city kids deserve a chance, and for some of them, this is it," says Thistle.

This weekend the organization will hold its annual fundraising tournament in Markham at Angus Glen's south course. Raising cash for the operation has been tough, Rowe admits, and the lack of money is making it difficult to expand into other parts of Toronto and other Canadian cities. Rowe has already spent \$50,000 out of his pocket to keep the program going.

"We have really been trying to help ourselves by holding tournaments and other fundraising," he explains. "We need big help because the program is working, but you can only do so much with the resources we have."