

Courts & Courses

Local golf pros mentor aspiring youth players

RANDY KAMBIK CORRESPONDENT

When it comes to our links, our area is much more than a world-wide destination for golfers.

A longstanding collaboration between Florida Gulf Coast University and golf pros also transforms it into many "green classrooms" for students.

Early September marked the launch of the ninth year of the FGCU PGA Management Program including its facet of pairing many pros and students in mentorship and internship capacities.

The program — part of the Lutgert College of Business and School of Resort & Hospitality and Management and one of only 18 schools accredited by the PGA nationally and the largest in Florida — is also a vivid expression of how many of our area pros volunteer tremendous amounts of time to giving back to the game they love.

Freshmen and other first-year students in the program have been paired with 30 area pros who will serve as mentors to afford what's for many of them their first behind-the-scenes look at golf club operations and management.

"We stress the importance of gathering and analysis of data in our curriculum, and students seem to grasp it easier and easier with each year due to their tremendous computer skills," said Program Director Tara McKenna. "Their expertise in the area helps them to sometimes offer ideas to pros in using information. More and more, there's a synergy with our program and local clubs."

In matching students with pros, Assistant Director and Internship Coordinator Marty Hall takes into account the students' career aspirations whenever possible.

"If the student is interested in general management, I'll try to pair them with a PGA general manager — golf instruction with a teaching pro," Hall said.

The 30 area pros serving as mentors this school year include Justin DeFont, Audubon Country Club; Steve Waugh, Old Collier Golf Club; Jason Miller, Copperleaf Golf Club; Tim Harris, Pelican Sound Golf & River Club; Chris Evans, Vasari Golf Club; Dan Gawronski, Pelican's Nest Golf Club at Pelican Landing; Ed Weber, Colony Golf and Country Club; Mike Dero, Quail Creek Country Club; Jeff Carter, Spring Run Golf Club; John Gardner, Raptor Bay Golf Club; and Garrett Thompson, a program graduate with Pelican's Nest.

Gawronski, Gardner and Weber also serve as members of the FGCU Advisory Council. In addition, many pros also venture to the campus to help students in other ways.

DeFont has been a guest speaker for seniors on professional development and served last semester on an expert panel that helped evaluate business plan projects prepared by seniors.

"They presented many different projects including business models. We evaluated, graded, asked them questions. It was very interesting," he said. "They did a great job."

As he graduated in 2004 with a business and professional golf management degree from Methodist University, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, he thoroughly understands the FGCU program.

"I couldn't give back to that program due to relocating here, so I jumped at being able to help this one," said DeFont. "Tara and Marty do an exceptional job."

As mentors, pros provide students tours of their clubs, assistance in preparing resumes, observe and receive golf lessons and play the course. Students that later become interns work in club pro shops, learn merchandising and inventory procedures, help run tournaments and more.

Many graduates of the four and one-half year bachelor's program have launched their careers at 100-plus U.S. and foreign clubs (including in Japan). Area graduates include Kastania Toomalatai at Quail West Country Club, Stephanie Koke Rayburn at Wildcat Run Golf & Country Club, Kurt Stegle at Pelican Sound and Charles Dannewitz at Copperleaf.

Dannewitz, one of Copperleaf's first interns and a 2010 FGCU program graduate, is the club's lead assistant pro.

He has helped many other students that the program has brought to the club and also spoke at a mentor kickoff event a few years ago.

"It's like going full circle," he said, adding that pros that have helped him including Ken McMaster of Miromar Lakes Beach & Golf Club take their role seriously as they are "representing the PGA brand. To get the advice this program facilitates is amazing."



Students of the FGCU PGA Management Program learn pro shop operations and merchandising and more from Audubon Country Club head golf pro Justin DeFont and many other pros. PHOTOS BY RANDY KAMBIK/CORRESPONDENT

Calendar & Notes

» The seventh annual Estero Chamber of Commerce golf tournament for the Meg Judge Scholarship fund for Estero students will tee off at Spring Run on Oct. 5. Call 239-948-7990 or visit esterochamber.org.

» The fifth annual DryZone Water Ball Classic golf tournament supporting the Harry Chapin Food Bank will be at West Bay Beach & Golf Club, Oct. 13. Call 239-643-1990.

» The 15th annual Sneaky Pete's golf tournament to benefit Café of Life is set for Oct. 14 at Spanish Wells Country Club. Call 239-498-8887.

» The 26th annual Founder's Cup Golf Tournament for the FGCU Foundation will be held at Quail West Country Club on Oct. 20. Call 239-560-1016.

» The Raptor Bay Golf Club will host the annual Bonita Springs Area Chamber of Commerce Golf Tournament on Nov. 3. Call 239-992-2943 or visit bonitaspringschamber.com.

» Tom Wallace, formerly with the Country Club of Virginia, in Richmond, is now director of tennis at The Landings Yacht, Golf & Tennis Club.



FGCU PGA Management Program Assistant Director and Internship Coordinator Marty Ryan and Director Tara McKenna are assisted by Jeff Raimier, director of golf, West Bay Beach & Golf Club, Ed Weber, general manager and pro at Colony Golf & Country Club.

