

On How a Kids' Golf Tournament Could Have Better
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

Recently, my eleven-year-old daughter, Dee, as I'll call her here, played in a kids' golf tournament near Portland. The course was a championship level course and in the past has hosted the U.S. Women's Open and a U.S. Amateur championship won by Tiger Woods. The tournament was eighteen holes each on Saturday and Sunday. Dee was in the girls' eleven-to-thirteen age bracket. I was highly impressed by the caliber of Dee's and the other girls' play. Dee finished third in her category and was pleased with her play, as were her mother and I. We have two pictures I'm sure we will cherish in the years ahead: one of Dee with the first and second place winners, and another of her holding her trophy standing in front of a huge photo on the wall of Tiger when he won the amateur championship.

In general, the tournament was nicely organized. Still, I was left with the impression that the tournament could have been set up to be even better than it was. Here, I'll sketch out ways I think it could have been a richer, more productive, experience for Dee and the other young golfers.

To do that, it helps if I set out the frame of reference that is the basis for my recommendations:

As her parent, I'm concerned about Dee's overall development, or growth, as a person. I hope golf and all the other things she does--her schoolwork, her relationship with her mother and me, everything--contribute to her healthy maturation. Development, growth, healthy maturation, whatever best to call it, is a multidimensional phenomenon, more than I can get into in this thought, so I'll focus on aspects I consider particularly crucial to Dee's, yet another way to put it, growing up well.

I find it vitally important that Dee's becomes sure of herself, confident, that she comes to view herself as masterful, in contrast to ineffectual. I hope her involvement in her world leads her to conclude that when she puts her mind and best effort to getting something done, she indeed gets it done, and done well; she's a doer, she makes good things happen, that's her perception of herself.

More, I want Dee to come to see really hard work toward the achievement of self-chosen, positive ends as a good time. Work isn't one thing and play something else, with work being something you endure and get out of the way so you can play and have fun. Giving all you have in you to achieving something that is true to who you are and that matters to you—playing golf excellently, writing a top rank story, solving a really tough math problem, whatever it is—is better, more satisfying in a lasting way, than any party or movie you could go to; it's fun in a really good, personally gratifying, way.

As for golf in particular, I see it as a complex, demanding, highly rewarding, and classy lifetime sport. I hope Dee has positive experiences with golf and wants to keep playing and honing her golfing talents—which in my estimate are exceptional—these years, and that she continues with the game into adulthood.

I believe a key to all of this happening is Dee's experience of *success* in her endeavors. With anything—golf, schoolwork, whatever it is—the best thing for children is for them to take on challenges at the outer edge of their current capability, and to work thoughtfully, analytically, and hard, and to attain successful outcomes. Success doesn't have to mean achieving perfection, winning the championship, being number one in the class, and the like, but rather that the result of the endeavor is viewed by them and those around them as a success rather than a failure; it's a win, not a loss.

It's vitally important that those close to children let them know they saw, and feel good about, their efforts and accomplishments—"Good for you," "I'm proud of you," is the message. It's also important that the children note and put words to their achievements—"I did a good job with [my putting, the literature test in school, the omelet I made for breakfast, etc]." Occasions of this sort contribute to children's increasingly positive conceptions, images, of themselves and the desire, the motivation, the drive, to do more of whatever brought such good experiences and to do them excellently.

Indeed, there are lessons children can learn from failure—namely, where they need to improve. But we have to be careful not to go too far with that. In the main, failure, unsatisfactory results—and this is true for adults too—leads to negative self-perceptions, discouragement, and avoidance of an activity. Don't look for someone to be enthused about and want to do more of something that hasn't turned out well for them in the past. If a child gets low grades on math tests, don't expect them to love math.

Thus the task for anyone involved in setting up experiences for children—parents, teachers, golf tournament organizers—is to rig success, as it were. To set things up such that if a child works really hard he or she will be successful at whatever it is, and then to make a big deal of that success: "I'm proud of you, and you should be proud of yourself." Success can be a child doing his or her best and being better than before, even if it is but a slight improvement and other kids did better with it. "I saw how hard you worked, and I saw your improvement [being specific on the nature of the improvement—chipping from just off the green, for example]. Yes!" It should be kept in mind that doing one's best, absent a tangible positive outcome, is a very important success in itself: "You didn't get a better score this time, but you did your very

best, and that's all any of us can do. I'm proud of you for that."

With what I just sketched out as a backdrop, as good as it was in many ways, I believe the Portland tournament could have been a more uplifting and encouraging experience for the young competitors. That is to say, it could have been better rigged for success.

The course was simply too long and too tough for Dee and the other children. Dee hits her drives 130-150 yards compared to adult Tiger Woods' 300 yards. This fact left Dee slogging along hitting an abundance of fairway woods getting to the greens, which except for the par three holes seemed a mile away, the par fives especially. As a championship course, it was laden with obstacles--narrow fairways, grown-out rough, twists and turns, gullies, lakes, and bunkers, undulating greens, and so on. There was no way Dee, any of the children, could shoot a good score on this course. Kids know that a good score in golf is somewhere between 70 and 85; that is the standard of success in golf. The best round any of the young competitors in this tournament shot--and these kids were really good, that was obvious--was a 97, and typical were scores around 120. Win or lose, it is hard to get excited about a 97, much less the 113 that was the best Dee could manage over the two days (that 113, on Sunday, was a twenty stroke improvement from Saturday's round, and her mother and I made sure to point out that improvement).

Also, because the threesomes Dee played in were hitting shot after shot after shot, it was a long, arduous occasion for them. It took them close to five hours to complete eighteen holes. For these six graders, two-a-half hours, or perhaps three, of an activity is plenty. Dee and the other girls, a good ways from full grown, pre-

adolescents, were barely able to swing their clubs after four hours and well over one hundred shots.

It would have been better to simplify and scale things down for the younger competitors. An easy par three course, with each of the holes being a par four for them. That would have more closely approximated what an older teenager, say sixteen or eighteen, or an adult golfer does: a drive, an iron to the green, and two putts for a par. Nine holes each day, par 36; or eighteen holes, par 72. The result would have been scores within the range of conventional success in golf. Dee shoots 36-40 for nine holes on typical par three courses. And with nine holes rather than eighteen, or in any case fewer shots—it wouldn't have been, as it was, an 11:00 a.m. tee time, and there the girls were, still on the course, their swings getting more constricted with each drive and iron, at 4:00 in the afternoon.

One last thing, I think allowing *do-overs* would have been a good idea for these youngsters. It was painful for me to watch these eleven-year-olds pay a big, and irretrievable, price for mistakes they won't make when they are older. I mean things like accidentally tapping the ball off the tee when they are setting up to drive and hitting chips just off the green that carried but a few inches. I have no idea how it happened, but one of Dee's iron shots actually went backwards; she's not going to do that later on. It's tough not to be discouraged when you lose a stroke for accidentally touching your ball when you are addressing a putt.

What about giving junior golfers a limited number of do-overs, perhaps five per nine holes? They could take that number of bad shots back and do them over. This would give them the opportunity to learn from what went wrong and try it again, and this time, we can hope, be more successful. It seems to me that's better than, as happened to Dee, spraying a drive essentially sideways into

some trees and underbrush and expending four shots trying to get it back on the fairway. It was tough for Dee (and truth be told, me) to stay upbeat and have a positive experience with that going on. That sideways-drive could have been one of Dee's do-overs—no penalty, hit another drive.

Much more to be said, but it comes down to asking ourselves with regard to anything we arrange for children, golf or whatever else: what's the best we can do to make this a challenging but ultimately successful experience for them? And once things are set up, rather than focusing on catching children doing something wrong, focus on catching them doing specific, tangible, things right and celebrating them. Offering this is not to contend that criticisms and corrections have no place—they most certainly do, they are necessary, this is not an either-or argument. Rather, it is to assert that pointing out and dealing with what needs to be improved should be done within a basic context of YES to a child (you are capable, you're accomplished, I'm with you in this, I believe in you), not NO.