

GOLF JOURNAL by John Paul Newport

# Really Mini Golf

*With visions of Tiger, more parents are hiring swing doctors for 2-year-olds. But does it work?*



**THE ASIAN EDITION** of The Wall Street Journal this weekend is running a story about a new trend in that part of the world: organized golf programs for kids as young as 2. In Singapore, a chain of eight schools called KinderGolf gets tots swinging clubs in brightly colored storefront locations. The instructors, all women chosen for their nurturing qualities, don't force the toddlers to train, but the walls are lined with mirrors and giant photographs of golf greats like Ben Hogan and Ernie Els. By age 7, the most advanced golfers are regularly playing in nine-hole tournaments.

The article, by John Krich, cites similar programs in China, Japan and South Korea. Parents give many reasons for enrolling their tykes, from improving their concentration to developing a regard for etiquette.

But clearly, in the back of almost everyone's mind is the possibility of creating another Tiger Woods or Michelle Wie. Andy Tan, 38, the head of a recruiting firm in Singapore, started his 10-year-old daughter at KinderGolf when she was 4. She has since won trophies in SuperJunior tournaments around Asia, plus a medal in the U.S., and plans to spend some time in Southern California for more advanced training. "Without KinderGolf, she would have had to wait until 13, which is too late to start on the world scene," Mr. Tan said.

My first reaction to these stories, frankly, was, "No! No! No!" They conjured visions of overweening stage parents, childhoods ruined by the actuarially foolish pursuit of sports stardom, and legions of embittered ex-would-be prodigies estranged from golf. I thought of PGA Tour player Sean O'Hair, who now won't even

speak to his father, who aggressively pushed him to train as a boy.

But then I thought: Lots of parents everywhere enroll their young kids in activities from ballet to gymnastics—and certainly some secretly dream those kids will someday grow up to become a prima ballerina or win a medal at the Olympics. Why should golf be any different?

In this country, super-young golfers are not unheard of. This summer, a 2½-year-old Colorado toddler named Brayden Bozak demonstrated his prowess hitting balls for Diane Sawyer on ABC's "Good Morning America," and Tiger Woods imitators with nicknames like Tiny Tiger, Tiger Cub and Tiger Adams surface regularly. But in formal teaching programs in the U.S., preschoolers are rare.

Mike Raschko has taught kids in Southern California since 1990 and can count on one hand the number of students younger than 4 that he has tutored. "Generally at that age they can't really take instruction. Even the lightest clubs made specifically for kids are too heavy for them to swing properly, and their ability to concentrate is just not there yet," he says.

But there was an exception. One girl who started at 3½ is now 5 and playing in tournaments. And it's cases like hers that seem to motivate parents with big aspirations for their young offspring. Mr. Woods, of course, began imitating his father's swing in the family garage when he was 6 months old. Other prodigies who went on to become stars include a pair of LPGA players who began playing at 4: Ms. Wie of Hawaii, now 17, and Ai Miyazato, 21, a national hero in Japan.

Developmentally, a more logical time to start kids in golf might be 6. That is usually about when hand-eye coordination starts to develop and when kids are physically strong enough to control a club. Poor concentration is still an issue, but special equipment, such as a system that starts youngsters off hitting balls at waist height, makes the job easier.

It's not until around 10, however, that most golfers—even those who later become professional standouts—are able to get really serious about the game. Retief Goosen and Mark O'Meara are among the many stars who didn't pick up the game until they were 11 or older. Se Ri Pak of South Korea, who won four majors by age 23, didn't start until she was 14, and Greg



**The Lowdown:** South Korea's Hong Seo Yeon, 5, is making headlines for her putting.

Norman didn't start until he was 15.

I also discussed the issue with Phil Mickelson Sr., whose namesake son and former prodigy has done quite well for himself, thank you. As most golf fans know, Phil Jr., a natural right-hander who plays lefty because he began by imitating his father's swing, face-to-face as if in a mirror, when he was 18 months old. By 5, he was winning tournaments.

"There's no reason at all not to start someone off very young with the correct fundamentals," Mr. Mickelson Sr. says. One risk, however, is that a young player could learn bad fundamentals, which Mr. Mickelson insists can just as easily be caused by poorly fit clubs as by poor instruction. "He's going to have to relearn everything he knows," he says.

In Mr. Mickelson's mind, at least part of the reason that his son continued to excel as he got older was that he experienced the "feel of success" at such an early age, and that bred extra desire and confidence—something that can be more elusive for late starters.

The opposite might have happened, of course, if Phil had experienced failures. "The key concept for young golfers is to make things fun," Mr. Mickelson Sr. says. "A lot of programs run the kids into the ground trying to extract every last ounce of instructional value, but that is a very big mistake."

John Paul Newport is editor at large at Travel+Leisure Golf. Email him at [golfjournal@wsj.com](mailto:golfjournal@wsj.com).

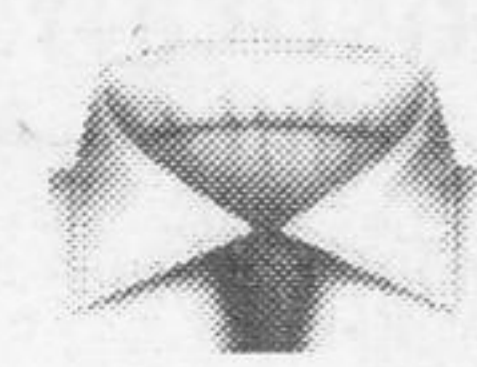


**Online Today:** WSJ.com subscribers can read the Wall Street Journal Asia article on kids and golf at [WSJ.com/WeekendandLeisure](http://WSJ.com/WeekendandLeisure).



## CUSTOM Shirts & Suits

- Look and feel your best
  - Superior Workmanship
  - Always The Right Price
  - Schedule a fitting today
- 1-800-672-6583**



Order custom shirts online & save!

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