



Team Connecticut Enjoys Its Time at PGA Junior League Golf Championships.



POSTED January 10, 2019

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THIS STORY BROUGHT TO YOU BY: MALETTA PFEIFFER AND ASSOCIATES, LLC

It was magical trip for Team Connecticut, as they took part in the PGA Junior League Nationals during November at the Grayhawk Golf Club in Scottsdale, Az.

“Nationals was unbelievable,” said one of the team’s coaches, Bobby Sparks, head professional at Harwinton’s Fairview Farm Golf Course. “The PGA did an incredible job of putting on a first class event.”

Said Sparks, “They held a concert and skills contest where Kelly James (who had just played at Jordan Speith’s wedding) rapped continuously during the long drive competition about each kid and their accomplishments while they were hitting shots. There was a dedicated practice area by teams, along with uniforms, golf bag, and hats. The kids were made to feel like tour players. There was plenty of signage and banners that gave the event a Tour feel. The faculty and staff at Grayhawk were awesome.”

In addition to the actual competition, other highlights included a player lounge with food (breakfast and lunch each day), video games, ping pong, and a milkshake bar.

Said Jim Bunel, assistant professional at Fairview Farm and the team’s other coach, “The kids were shocked to see what Arizona looked like. A couple of our kids had never played golf outside of New England. So, for them to see the desert for the first time was really cool.”

Bunel believes youngsters on Team Connecticut took “a ton from this trip.” He commented, “First and foremost, we have a lot of work to do around greens. Each and every team we played putted the ball extremely well. We were by far the youngest team there. We had the two youngest kids in the field with the average age of our team being a fraction over 11. Every other team had a bare minimum of five 13-year-olds on their teams. By no means is this an excuse more than it is reality. In any sport, 13-year-olds should have their way with 11-year-olds. That wasn’t the case in Arizona. Our youngsters made it very clear that they will be around for years to come in Arizona as we have seven kids eligible to return next year.”

Sparks concurred. “Our kids were out-matched age-wise, but our kids played great and were not intimidated by the age difference and stuck to their game plan. We did not win a match but were in every match. Jim and I could not be prouder of the way these kids played and handled themselves.”

Team Connecticut, which won sectional and regional competitions to get to the Nationals, started off the Arizona championships against Washington. Said Bunel, “I think all of our kids wanted a ‘do-over’ on that one. Understandably so, the kids were very nervous and their games reflected that as we lost, 8-4. As we continued to go match to match we kept getting more comfortable and our play reflected that.”

Team Connecticut’s second match was against a much older Louisiana team. “This match was filled with much better play but still a similar result, an 8.5-3.5 loss, said Bunel. “Matches three and four were against two very stout teams, Ohio and Virginia. Ohio returned the majority of their third place team from last year, and the Virginia team who was old and big. I believe the hype around the Ohio team startled the kids slightly, but while the score was 10-2, it was a much closer match. We had two costly three-putts as a team and those ended up resulting in a point for the other team. Virginia was another hard fought match that ended up in an 8-4 loss for us.”

Finishing off the week was a match against California. “While the kids had realized they were not in the running for winning it all after taking two losses on opening day, I couldn’t be more proud of the way they continued to work together and fight to win every hole. To give some reference, we lost to Ohio, 10-2, and California, 8.5-3.5. Ohio lost to California, 8.5-3.5, with California going on to win the Championship. Our kids never gave up.”

Two of the individual highlights of the event for Team Connecticut was when Sydney Hidalgo holed out from 75 yards on a par-five, and when Reilly Fowles holed out a 40-yard pitch shot on the final shot of the event for Team Connecticut. The tournament was taped for showing on The Golf Channel.

The team was made of 10 “all-stars” from the PGA Junior League Western Connecticut League that consisted of squads from Fairview Farm (two teams), Watertown Golf Club (three teams), Crestbrook Park Golf Course in Watertown, and Chippanee Country Club in Bristol. After the Sparks-led team won the league title, coaches from all teams conferred to pick the top p

go to Sectionals, said Bunel, who is in his first year as a professional at Fairview Farm. He worked for Suzy Whaley Golf for a half dozen years and took three teams from SWG to the PGA Junior League Nationals.

The ages of the children on the team ranged from 8 to 13 and there was one girl, Hildago from Fairview Farm, on the squad. Other team members are North Cherry, Galen Fowles, Reilly Fowles, Caleb Smith and Brennan Myers, all from Fairview Farm, Rocco Palladino and Nate LaMadeleine from Watertown Golf Club, Alex Halpert from Crestbrook Park, and Brandon Frie from Chippanée Country Club.

PGA Junior League Golf has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. There were 42,000 participants across the country last year. Boys and girls of all backgrounds and skill levels are coached by PGA and LPGA professionals and learn and play together in a supportive, two-person scramble format.

Palladino said of the event, “My favorite moment was the entire skills challenge. It was great that Kelly James performed the entire time we competed in the long drive contest.”

Offered Cherry, “This experience has made me more excited to play because I want to have a chance to win a national championship before I age out. I have to continue to work hard in order to have a chance to do that next year. A lot of my friends said they saw me on TV and thought you only played golf by yourself and not as a team. I think a lot of them will play PGA Junior League next year.”

There were 33 Team Connecticut players, siblings and parents at the event. “We received help from numerous people, including the Connecticut PGA Section, and we cannot thank everyone enough for the support given to us on this great journey,” Bunel said.

He added, “Having been to the event myself four times it just gets better and better and you wonder how after each time. The PGA of America team did an amazing job rolling out the red carpet for these kids and making them feel like the touring pros. It was such a cool experience to be a part of a national competition where I got to represent our state. It was something I will never forget.”

Nor will anyone associated with Team Connecticut. Who knows, maybe there’s a National title in the team’s near future. And with people like Sparks and Bunel investing their time and energy on a daily basis, junior golf in Litchfield County is in good hands.

For more from John Torsiello click [here](http://www.litchfieldcountysports.com/stories/team-connecticut-enjoys-its-time-at-pga-junior-league-golf-championships-)