

'Big Mac' at Walnut Lane suits young golfers to a tee

By Josh McIlvain

John MacDonald, 62, has been helping Philadelphians get their lives together all of his adult life. He has been a teacher, a golf coach and the founder of Impact, which has guided underserved populations into the workforce since the early 1970s. Since 2004, he has also been executive director of The First Tee in Philadelphia, a nationwide organization that strengthens kids' approach to life through the sport of golf. It's not surprising MacDonald lobbied to get a First Tee chapter in Philadelphia; many of its teaching methods mirror what MacDonald has been doing for 40 years.

MacDonald grew up in North Philadelphia until he was 8. The family then moved to Lawncrest. It was there, up Rising Sun Avenue, that his life became forever intertwined with golf. "Down the street there were a lot of trees and a railroad. First couple weeks I lived there, I'd sit out and watch five or six kids crossing the railroad, and I wondered where they were going and then one day I followed them," recounts MacDonald, who now lives in Tacony.

It turned out a golf course was on the other side of the tracks, and he followed the other boys to a caddy shack where they stood around waiting to be picked as a caddy for the day. "Finally it got to the point where I was the last person in the shack and was asked to caddy. I was asked if I could carry two bags. At that time I could have fit into one of them, so I said yeah, not knowing what I was getting myself into."

He made it through one-and-a-half holes before "I was looking at



This photo, circa 1987, shows, from left, Ed Blaney, CFO Impact Services; Sister Carol Keck; and John MacDonald, all members of the Neighborhood Safety Committee. (Photo provided by Impact Services)

the green as if it were Mount Everest and I couldn't get up the hill." But he was taken pity on and relieved of one bag and continued to caddy for the rest of the day. "First time I made any money. I was so tired I didn't think I'd make it home." But he continued to caddy, and got stronger and was given his first club, a 3-iron, as a gift from a member. "I used to sneak on the course every night and do everything with a 3-iron."

Eventually he got a full set of clubs and caddied right through high school (Northeast High) and attended Temple University on a golf and soccer scholarship. In 1971 he became the golf coach at Temple and coached the team until 2002. But his first job out of college was as a salesman at Strawbridge's Department Store. He started out in china, then went to the budget floor and was finally moved to the toy department, where he realized this was not the career for him. So MacDonald took the dingiest rocking horse off the high shelf and declared that as soon as he sold this horse that had been collecting dust for years, he was leaving. So he cleaned up the horse, gave it a prominent display, it sold, and he was out of there.

Temple had a teacher's training program, and MacDonald decided to try it out. He ended up being placed as a long term substitute teacher at Penn Treaty High School. It was a school with a lot of troubled youths in an area with a lot of racial tension, poverty and people who were losing jobs as the factories shut down. "I found I really liked it," says MacDonald. It was here that he began to tap into his network of connections from his

years of caddying and Temple, bringing in sports figures to talk to the kids. It was also here that he began teaching kids golf by making makeshift driving ranges and using tennis balls so the kids could get the gratification of whacking a ball far without feeling the frustration so many first time golfers encounter.

MacDonald liked the work so much that he sold his house, bought a building at Front Street and Jefferson, and started a school for troubled youth — taking in those who had cut so many days from school that they were no longer allowed to attend school. This became the Lower Kensington Environmental Center, which would later become Impact in 1974 with a goal to get jobs for "difficult populations" (from truants and offenders to vets and those who had been shut out from work through discrimination, depression or other roadblocks). "I've been doing it ever since and will be doing it — wish I could live to 100 — because I just love doing it," says MacDonald.

"Impact" began with demolition, construction and landscaping work. "We did things so that folks could get a work record with us, and so they could be vouched for by us." The support work model, which came from the Department of Labor, emphasized peer group support, graduated stress (wherein workers could move up the skills ladder, and immediate gratification.

"I worked mostly with guys out of prison in demolition," MacDonald notes. Impact grew as an organization and took on a network of projects, including weatherizing

thousands of houses in Kensington, and now owns numerous businesses from construction to document keeping, and serves as something of an umbrella group to business associations and such organizations as The First Tee chapter.

In 1979, the same year his Temple golf team was ranked 17th in the country, MacDonald became the executive director of GPSGA (Greater Philadelphia Scholastic Golf Association) and set out to grow its youth program. "Back when I went to public school, golf was really big," laments MacDonald, who has been slowly persuading the school system to reintroduce the sport, with some limited middle school success. As he sees it, "athletic kids, strong kids can play golf, but it's also a sport that for the multiple of kids who are frail, weak, it gives those people an opportunity to succeed at a sport."

The First Tee has been a national organization for 12 years and currently has about 200 chapters nationwide. "First Tee is an outgrowth of the golf industry," explains MacDonald. "How are we going to create the next generation of golfers?" The First Tee's president and CEO is Joe Lewis Jr., the son of boxing heavyweight champion Joe Lewis, who was not only an avid golfer but the first African American to play in the PGA tour. MacDonald was able to open the Philadelphia chapter in 2004, and set about building a teaching facility in FDR Park with a 12-station driving range.

Then in 2008, Impact was asked to take on the Walnut Lane Golf Course as an economic development project and brought The First Tee there. "It's new to the regulars at Walnut Lane to have so many kids here," points out MacDonald. "Can't have certain behavior, so we're trying to reeducate people as to what's appropriate clubhouse behavior. Can't have the f-bomb; we just can't have it."

David C. Smith, program director for The First Tee at Walnut Lane, explains the goals of the organization this way: "The First Tee is a youth development program designed to teach life skills through the activity of golf. We try to coordinate the situation in golf to a situation in life." Smith, a PGA pro, has always seen mentoring as a part of teaching through-



John MacDonald, 62, executive director of The First Tee in Philadelphia, a nationwide organization that strengthens kids' approach to life through the sport of golf. (Photo by Josh McIlvain)

out his career. He was introduced to the sport through his father. "Some kids don't have that mentor," he says.

MacDonald's and Smith's approach is straightforward. They start with a one-mile radius around Walnut Lane and try to give every youth in that radius the opportunity to participate, and expand the radius from there. They really want to attract a younger group early on, "so we have a kid for 10 to 12 years." The First Tee's teaching methods differ from the typical golf lesson. "Most golf pros get kids to get the perfect grip first," says MacDonald. "At First Tee we get the kids to hit balls first. When they start to get frustrated because they can't make the target, then we say, 'Most folks would hold it like this.'"

John MacDonald has big plans for the Walnut Lane Course. He wants to build a teachers center for kids and include the science of golf in the curriculum. "We want to use Walnut Lane as a classroom. The whole golf course is a classroom."

For more information on The First Tee, visit www.thefirstteephiladelphia.org or call 215-482-3370. For more info on Impact, visit www.impactservices.org



A young blind golfer gets some help at an event this past summer at the Walnut Lane course, sponsored by The Middle Atlantic Blind Golf Association. The First Tee is looking into developing curriculum for visually impaired children as part of their national program.

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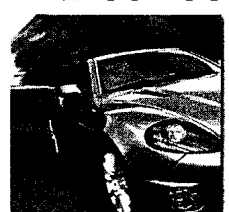
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