

Special Olympians hone their golf skills at Button Hole

By GALE CARROCCIA

If you want to know the true meaning of overcoming obstacles, determination and inspiration, you have only to look at the Rhode Island Special Olympics athletes as they learn the game of golf at Button Hole Golf Course.

"We started to learn golf behind the range of the Ramada Inn in Seekonk, Mass., then we took a year off and we have been at Button Hole for seven years," said head coach Lisa Bessette. "Now we have two groups each with 30 to 40 playing golf."

The ages range from 10 years old to adult and the Special Olympian athletes are afflicted by physical, intellectual or sight impairments. Watching the athletes as they practice at Button Hole, however, it is their perseverance and spirit that shine through.

Button Hole is Johnston's de facto golf course, located on the Providence-Johnston line.

The two groups were given the option to name themselves; one picked the moniker "Pawtucket Pacers" and the other remains unnamed. When they

started their Olympic training, both groups first learned the etiquette of the game of golf, along with the proper dress code. Later, they learned the basics of driving, keeping their swings flowing from the 3 o'clock position to the 12 o'clock position.

They also learn skills in the short putt, long putt and pitching.

"The ultimate goal is for the Olympians to play 4 to 9 holes, by hitting the ball consistently and driving the ball close to 75 yards," said Bessette.

The accomplished athletes practice twice weekly, split into groups of 15, coached by volunteers who also share the passion of playing golf.

Assistance from Button Hole is also incorporated.

"Button Hole was awarded the Spirit of the Sport Award last year for its work with the Special Olympic Athletes, the celebration was held at the West Valley Inn, in West Warwick," said Button Hole Executive Director David Hanna.

Two-time World Games gold medalist Ian Shepherd was introduced to the game of golf and developed his skills at But-

ton Hole more than six years ago. Shepherd won his gold medal at the 2007 Special Olympics world games at Tianma Country Club in Shanghai, China; paired with his father Mike, he knocked a tee shot five feet from the flag.

No stranger to championships, he also won a gold medal in skiing three years ago.

Ian and his father continue to practice at Button Hole, hoping to qualify again and to defend their title in the 2011 Summer Games.

This coming Saturday, the Rhode Island Special Olympics athletes will have a tournament to challenge their skills in the short putt, long putt, driving putt and chipping.

The skills challenge will commence with opening ceremonies and gold, silver and bronze medals will be awarded, along with ribbons and certificates.

"It may not be China, but the spirit of the Olympics is universal across all spectrums of our population and it is worth taking a pause to recognize the inspirational focus right here in our backyard," said Hanna.



Kevin Monaghan practices his swing for the upcoming golf skills challenge at Button Hole. (Photos by Gale Carroccia)