



## Life lessons



**Memphis Athletic Ministries'** coach Kirk Smith (left) helps Darryl Faciane, 8, with his swing while Moriah Crum, 8, and other participants in the group's "Golf is Fun" Fusion Golf Academy practice on Thursday.

*Game is golf, but aim is higher at **Memphis Athletic Ministries** camp*

BY MARLON W. MORGAN

Brianna Brown had never picked up a golf club before this summer. Now, the 9-year-old is lining putts to within six inches of a would-be cup on the putting green at the **Memphis Athletic Ministries Park Golf Course**.

Like Brown, fellow 9-year-old Kennedy Palmer also had never played, but now she finds herself enjoying all of the golf games she learned this summer at MAM's "Golf is Fun" Fusion Golf Academy.

The academy, in its second year, is designed to teach not only golf but also life skills and leadership to at-risk, urban boys and girls age 8 to 18.

This year, the academy, which started in June and ends today, took in about 44 youngsters, most of whom have been involved in MAM programs throughout the year. MAM is a nonprofit, faith-based organization, founded in 2000, that uses sports to help at-risk young people.

Vince Alfonso Jr., a golf instructor for more than 50 years and former executive director of the First Tee of Memphis youth program, developed the academy program.

First, he had to revive the former Army Defense Depot Course at 2146 Ball, which had been overrun with weeds and fallen trees to the point that there were only scant traces that a golf course had ever existed.

The beginning golfers start out using SNAG equipment, which stands for Starting New at Golf and includes clubs with oversized heads and golf balls slightly larger than tennis balls.

"With SNAG, they succeed," Alfonso said. "We want them to succeed a lot. We get them going with that, then we graduate them and move them to real clubs and real balls, where they're rolling (putts) and chipping."

That has been Palmer's favorite part. "It's really fun because you get to do it over and over," she said.

There are several golf games the students play, with Skittles as popular prizes.

Golf, however, is secondary to the program's mission.

The ultimate goal is to help the youngsters become better individuals. Each week, they learn about the fruit of the spirit, from Galatians -- joy, peace, love, faithfulness, goodness, gentleness, patience, kindness and self-control.

"This is about kids having fun so they want to come here, so we can share Christ with them," Alfonso said. "We're all about relationships."

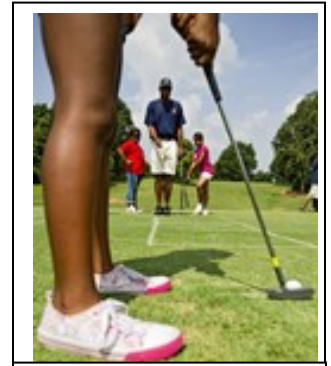
The students also spend time on academics -- including financial literacy, vocabulary expansion and more -- and praise and worship, while also taking field trips.

The goal is to make the children better students, better brothers and sisters, better sons and daughters.

"I've learned that we love God, and he loves us, too," Brown said.

Curtis Braden II, 10, is part of the intermediate group. He has been playing golf since he was 4, when he began tagging along with his father. He has enjoyed the opportunity to improve his game.

"I like that it's something you can enjoy instead of sitting at home and being bored all day," he said.



Morgan Smith (left), 8, coach Michael Clear and Destiney White, 8, watch from a distance as Christen Cooper, 10, gets ready to putt Thursday.

---

**SEE NEXT PAGE FOR MORE PHOTOS FROM THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL WEBSITE.**

Photos by Brandon Dill  
July 15, 2010



Boys and girls in the Memphis Athletic Ministries' golf academy watch as Destiny White, 8, prepares to take a shot during a "putt-off" at the MAM park golf course on Thursday.



Boys and girls in the Memphis Athletic Ministries' golf academy watch as Timmia Hardrick, 9, (far right) takes a shot during a "putt-off" at the MAM park golf course on Thursday.