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On the golf course, refugees learn the game of life

By Julia Lyon

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The sun beat down on the line of immigrant boys chopping at the green, but they didn't give up.

Smack! Mohamed Ibrahim, 17, swung his club back and watched the ball fly. Until a few weeks ago, the only golf played by many of these teens, most of them African refugees, had been miniature golf.

But now, Mohamed and his brother are among nine boys practicing golf twice a week at the Rose Park Golf Course, part of a new mentoring program that aims to change their lives.

Only the second PAR FORE program in the country, the new initiative combines sport with life skills education. Each session begins with a lesson. Last week, the boys took turns helping a partner who was blindfolded find a ball.

"Giving clear directions, listening, these are all important parts of communication," explained Amanda Hoyer, a Colorado State University graduate student in occupational therapy who is helping the program. "When is communication important in golf?"

The boys squirmed and joked among themselves. But something sank in. Mohamed said he'd learned about respecting his friends. Not to mention that playing Tiger Woods' game made him feel like he fit in.

"It's an American sport," said the Somali refugee, who has lived in Utah for two years.



Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune
Gerard Habomanina practices on the driving range Thursday at Rose Park Golf Course. PAR FORE is a mentoring program that teaches golf and life skills to refugee youths.

If the boys weren't at PAR FORE — an acronym for perseverance, accountability, resilience, fellowship, opportunity, respect and empowerment — they'd be playing soccer or hanging out with friends, with nothing new to do, many said.

As gangs become more of a concern in the Utah refugee community, the golf program is meant to fill those empty afternoons while connecting the teens to college students and teaching them practical skills. The refugee teens typically arrived only a few years ago, with little formal education and big cultural gaps. They often struggle to fit in.

At the youth program at Hartland Partnership Center on the west side of Salt Lake City, "it turns out this particular age group of boys didn't have anything they were connecting to," said Yda Smith, a University of Utah assistant professor of occupational therapy, who runs the golf program.

So far, the golf has stuck.

Several years ago, a similar mentoring program called The First Tee ran a chapter at the Rose Park Golf Course, nudging some kids to grow, recalled golf pro Derek Schmehl. This will renew that effort.

"There's certain ways you conduct yourself on the golf course," he explained. "It's a game where there's no official. You call penalties against yourself."

Alex Lopez came to Utah from the East Coast for a research symposium in 2009 and realized Salt Lake City's west-side demographic was similar to the kids he worked with in PAR FORE in New York. He got a grant from the United States Golf Association to fund both programs.

"We don't tell the children we're trying to change who they are," said Lopez, assistant professor of occupational therapy at Stony Brook University in Long Island. "What we want to teach them is that there is value in the sport."

Utah's PAR FORE program needs to raise money for the upcoming year. Other graduate students assist with teaching life skills, but a golf professional teaches the game. The grant pays for transportation, course fees, equipment and the golf instruction.

As the program at Rose Park grows this year and the teens evolve from practicing their swing to playing the game, organizers plan to add more college student mentors. Volunteers are needed.

Abdul Aden, a 21-year-old Salt Lake Community College student and Somali refugee, understands the value of such a buddy system. He works for a University of Utah west-side youth program through University Neighborhood Partners. Now he is learning the game along with the teens, acting as both role model and mentor.

"There aren't enough programs that will show them how to be individual thinkers," Aden said.

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