

Groovy stuff: golf gear designed for children

by Mel Cheskin

Golf used to be a game for adults. In fact, the origin of the name is believed to be an acronym of the phrase 'gentlemen only, ladies forbidden'. Or in Tiger Woods' world, it's the game he plays when he's not playing other adult games. Did you ever see the video of little Tiger, made by his father Earle at the age of five or so? Not only did little Tiger look adorable, but even then he hit the ball so well. Going back a generation, golf clubs had to be specially made for children if they wanted to play at the game alongside their more serious parents.

How things have changed with the meteoric rise in popularity of televised golf and the subsequent rise in junior participation. There is a whole world of junior equipment for kids on the market from pairs of shoes to single gloves and from junior bag carts to miniature-sized clubs. The ball is about the only piece of equipment that does not need to be downsized; even kids feel it is hard enough to hit at adult size. When golf is no longer fun for children they lose interest, so the golfing industry is going all out to make sure that does not happen.

Walking around the PGA Merchandise Show in Orlando, it is surprising how many of the major brands cater to the children's golf market. Brands such as TaylorMade, Calloway and Ping all make junior-sized sets of clubs consisting of a driver, one or two irons and of course the all important putter. Not to be forgotten, custom-made and hybrid clubs for kids including left-handed versions are also available from these specialist manufacturers.

With junior equipment now readily available, the fashion and foot-wear designers have a fresh market to target.
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'Miniature' golf

All serious clubs made for juniors—suitable for kids starting at about age five—are exact miniature versions of adult clubs, obviously with shorter shafts and smaller club heads. The four criteria to be considered in junior golf club selection are: length of shaft, shaft flex, weight and grip size. Junior golf sets are made for age groups three to five (children of around 39-47 inches tall), for ages five to eight (for kids of 45-55 inches), for juniors aged nine to twelve (51-59 inches) and teens (55-62 inches). Just about all the major brands offer junior sets of clubs; some include a stand bag, hat, towel, tees and balls.

Flynn Golf, a New Jersey company established in 2007, is already acquiring an international reputation as a specialist golf club maker solely for junior players. Its VT Advantage golf series of drivers, woods, irons, wedges and putters come in a range of three sizes and offer wood or iron shaft options. Flynn offers both starter and full sets of junior clubs with various flex and shaft lengths that can be custom built for young Tiger types.

To overcome the drawback inherent in every set of junior golf clubs, namely that the child keeps growing while the clubs stay the same size, Accu-Length, located in Alpharetta, Georgia, makes an expandable junior golf club system. The secret of the innovation lies in its Spacer technology, which allows the adjustable shaft to be unlocked and unscrewed at the point just below the grip. The one-inch-long spacers are inserted and locked into place, allowing the club to grow in line with the young golfer.

There are also starter sets of golf clubs made for children that are more generic and less expensive, although some of these carry endorsements from famous players and sports brands such as Wilson and Spalding in order to add to their marketing appeal. Starter sets usually contain a driver, a seven iron, a wedge and a putter. Club shaft length, proportionate to age and size, is offered from one foot to three feet in length.

Logically, when it comes to carrying the mini clubs there is also a demand for miniature golf bags, which are simplified smaller versions of an adult golf club bag, complete with brand logo. There is nothing cuter for a grandparent than to see their grandson marching around the garden carrying his pint-sized golf bag containing miniature clubs and hopefully harmless plastic or foam practice balls. Although the junior golf market caters primarily for boys, the girls are not far behind, especially when it comes to clothing.

What to wear

Every sport has its dress code, especially golf, and juniors are no exception. Most of the major brands offer a junior collection of performance golf clothing for boys and girls. Nike features UV-blocking technology in its polos and Dri-Fit wicking shorts. Its 30+ UPF standards protect young skin from the sun's harmful rays and inhibit premature aging. This is an important feature considering the thousands of hours of outdoor practice it will take to hone the skills necessary for an up-and-coming young golfer to make it; even into Q-School.



Accu-Length's Hot Wheels Deluxe clubs are sized and weighted for the beginner golfer.

Accu-Length

Under Armour offers microfibre junior shorts and polos for juniors with adidas concentrating its marketing efforts on its exclusive ClimaCool performance fabric. Adidas makes shirts and pants with ClimaCool for boys and tops and skorts for girls. Ashworth, a specialist golf apparel producer, offers part of its stretch knit collection in junior sizes as well as junior-sized sweaters. Hi-tech performance fabrics start at youth sizes in Under Armour's collection for the young male golfer. Armour Stretch polo shirts improve mobility for young flexible golfers and accelerate dry time with lightweight four-way stretch polyester fabric. Anti-odour technology that helps prevent the growth of odour-causing microbes is another feature of the Armour Stretch material.

Trumpette, located in Sacramento, specialises in clothing for tots to teens with particular emphasis on mini golf. The company was founded by former fashion industry maven Jon Stevenson, who began designing infant body suits, or 'onesies', for his adopted son Nicky to wear on the golf course. The aim was to produce clothing that would suit little boys and more importantly distinguish boys' fashion from girls'.



Under Armour's Boys Performance Polo.
Under Armour

Starting with socks, Trumpette offers 'baby tee time' for tots with a series of golf motif designs for girls and boys that would make any grandparent swoon.

Additionally, Trumpette has created matching knitted long-sleeve sweaters with hats and novelty short-sleeve golf tees for both boys and girls. The golf tee shirts are silk-screened with either Argyll sweater designs or a silhouette of boy and girl golfers on the front. To keep young minds thinking along ecological lines, Trumpette also produces a unisex organic cotton sock line and organic tights for girls.

Hand and foot

Although golf shoes are not an essential accessory for the junior golfer, with many juniors preferring to play in a suitable alternative form of athletic footwear, golf shoes are available in small sizes for children. FootJoy, adidas, Nike and many other shoe brands produce (typically cosmetic) versions of their performance-based, biomechanically designed adult shoes for kids. Sizes start at US size 1 and run to size 6.5 for both boys and girls. Most junior shoe models follow the styling of adult brand models.

Adidas, one of the first major shoe companies to enter the junior golf shoe market in the 1990s, offers several models for both girls and boys. The junior K Gazelle has a spikeless rubber outsole with a waterproof synthetic leather upper. Nike's TW 2010 model for boys has a sporty athletic-style upper with a removable spike system. Callaway also has several junior models in its range from sizes 1-6.

FootJoy, like Callaway, is a specialist golf company as opposed to giants such as Nike and adidas who have shoes across all categories of the athletic footwear market. Nevertheless, FootJoy is fighting hard to capture the junior market by offering the largest golf shoe range to juniors. Its Tech Saddle model comes with a CoolJoy waterproof upper, FTS fast twist spike system with quarter-turn Pulsar cleats made by Softspikes imbedded in a DuraMax rubber outsole. Another new model designed to appeal to the junior market is the FootJoy open-toed sandal with Velcro fit straps on a DuraMax moulded rubber spikeless outsole.

Getting kids started on the right hand, as well as on the right foot is all part of today's junior golfing equipment. Specialist single hand gloves in both right and left versions are available from several manufacturers in children's sizes. PowerBilt makes a cabretta leather glove with Palm Lycra panels in two sizes for juniors. Regular small size for children is a smaller version of the ladies' small, whereas cadet size has shorter fingers and wider palms for the big kids. Both Nike and FootJoy make single junior gloves in right- and left-hand versions.

With the popularity of the sport on the rise, junior golf schools are encouraged by parents and sponsored by commercial interests. Nike runs week-long camps for kids as young as nine. Junior golf academies are run by several universities in addition to celebrity-endorsed camps and schools. There are upwards of 2,000 tournaments for junior golfers in the US, with 7,000 registered and ranked junior players at state and national level. Finding the next golfing prodigy has gone way beyond playing a round with dad on Sunday morning.

Golf has always been a demanding sport at all levels and in all aspects. Time, money, concentration and the right equipment have always been an essential part of the sport. Now that golf attire and equipment is available for all ages, junior golf participation is sure to be on the ascent, along with equipment sales.



The TW 2010 Jr, part of Nike's junior golf footwear collection.
Nike