

Alfonso, youth program making a difference in Memphis

By Larry Rea
Tee Times contributor

Blessed is a word Vince Alfonso Jr. uses a lot when he talks about his love affair with golf, family, church and job.

He has been able to combine all his love into one area - the Memphis Athletic Ministries' golf program.

"I am so blessed to have been called to serve the children in our community through my job as Director of Golf at Memphis Athletic Ministries," Alfonso says. "I feel so honored that parents, guardians, aunts, uncles and grandparents allow their children, wards, nephews, nieces, grandsons and granddaughters to come and spend a few hours each week with our golf ministry during which time they trust that we are helping them to help their children to love God more, others more and themselves more as well as teaching them to play the great game of golf."

End of story.
Well, we could end this story there, but we'll let Alfonso tell the MAM golf story, because it's a story worth telling told by a man who loves to tell stories. We're talking about a self-described "Christ follower" who loves working with children and who is a 30-year Class A member of the PGA.

Need I say more?
When he was named director of golf for MAM, the organization's plan was to take the MAM golf program to a new level. And Vince Alfonso Jr., who started playing golf at age three, was just the man to do it.

In addition to stints as an assistant pro for his father Vince Sr. at the old Bella Vista Country Club in Memphis and later spent 15 years in the music business (record promotion, artist management, record production, music publishing and artist booking for the likes of Al Green, Isaac Hayes, Carla and Rufus Thomas and the Boxtops among others), all of which gave Alfonso an up close and personal look at marketing, promotion and advertising

on a regional and national scale.

Alfonso also had a five-year stint as general manager and head pro at Holiday Golf Club in Olive Branch, Miss., and spent 13 years in a similar capacity at The Rail Golf Course in Springfield, Ill., where he also was a partner.

In 1996, Vince and his wife Sally purchased Kimberling Golf Course, a challenging nine hole course located near Music City Highway in Branson, Mo. Vince and Sally also formed Alfonso Creative Golf Enterprises in 1996 and became involved in golf course systems analysis and consulting with special emphasis in the area of promotion, marketing and advertising primarily for privately owned daily fee golf courses.

Before joining MAM's staff, Alfonso served as Executive Director of Mid South Junior Golf Association. Though he wasn't looking for a job, MAM officials approached him because they felt the combination of ministry and direct contact with participants would be a compelling draw to him.

MAM is a non-profit, faith-based organization founded in 1998. It uses sports to bring at-risk young people together to introduce them to life-changing programs. Alfonso eagerly accepted MAM's invitation to join the organization.

He knew the call to the ministry of MAM was where God wanted him. One of the first things he had to do when he answered MAM's call was to revive the former Army Defense Depot Course, which had been over-run with fallen trees and weeds to the point that there were only scant traces



Coach Vince Alfonso Jr., PGA, shares the game of golf with these fifth-grade boys who attend Magnolia Elementary School. From left to right, Daavon Sanford, Vince Alfonso Jr., PGA, Jamal Sanford, Leterrio Anderson, Jeremiah Washington, and Nehemiah Washington.

that a golf course had ever existed.

Now, as Paul Harvey used to say, is the rest of the story.

Alfonso likes to call this side of his story, "Teeing off for Memphis youth." He teaches process as the most important part. He doesn't want the children who participate in the MAM golf program to let any one golf shot define who they are as golfers . . . or people. In the MAM golf program, a beginning golfer's success isn't based on the distance he or she drives the ball.

"If you have the right process, you'll get a good outcome," says Alfonso, who helped create MAM's middle school golf program and a city-wide outreach beginner golf program. He shows youth how exercising control can positively impact their game, whether putting, pitching, chipping or making a full swing.

Some of professional golf's heavy hitters, such as Jerry Pate and Loren Roberts, have helped redevelop the MAM golf course. He's also incorporated a ministry component as part of his MAM role. Before each round of golf, youth take part in a 30-minute period called 'Stop, Sock and Roll' during which they have a highly vocal good time.

And then, there's the ministry component as he leads a devotional after the formal golf lesson, all part of what the 1963 graduate of Catholic High School says is the mentoring and Christ-sharing side of his job.

The MAM Park Golf Course has a clubhouse containing offices, a computer lab, two multipurpose rooms and a "Full Swing Golf Machine" where youth can electronically play some of the top

golf courses in the world. A citywide outreach beginner and intermediate golf program is offered year-round to boys and girls ages 8 to 18.

Every summer MAM offers a "Golf is Fun" Fusion Golf Academy designed to teach not only the fundamentals of golf, but how to know and love God, love others and love self. The MAM "Golf is Fun" Fusion Golf Academy truly reflects the MAM mission by bringing God, golf and fun together. The academy, which completed its second year in 2010, is designed to teach not only golf but also life skills to urban boys and girls age 8-18.

MAM, which also sponsors a program at LeMoyné Owen College entitled "Golf for Business and Life" has touched thousands of lives over the years. By teaching three simple

mantras of love God, love others and love self, MAM encourages spiritual growth, compassion and personal responsibility. It serves more than 1,200 youth daily (9,000-plus annually) in its after school and summer programs at 14 neighborhood youth centers and 8,000-plus

youth in our community-wide sports activities. As one of the foremost youth-development organizations in Memphis, MAM has 42 full-time employees, countless volunteers and 144 community partners.

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, and then we graduate them and move them to real clubs and real balls, where they're rolling (putts) and chipping."

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."

For more information about MAM's golf program call (901) 606-7332 or go to MAM's web site at www.mamsports.org.

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