

U.S. Kids golf circuit to debut in area in June



NEW TOUR IN CANTON Canton-Akron U.S. Kids Local Tour director Doug Lemons met with (left) Justin Palmer, U.S. Kids manager of business development, and Kristi Novak, U.S. Kids e-marketing and operations support manager, to finalize details for the tour's debut this summer.

By Bill Snier

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It started with a father looking for golf equipment to help his 9-year-old daughter. It became Northeast Ohio's newest junior golf tour. The U.S. Kids Golf Local Tour, which features 37 tours in 22 states including three in Ohio, will debut in the Canton-Akron area in June. "I found out about it when I was looking for something for my daughter to play in," said Doug Lemons, former First Tee of Canton program director who also will begin operating the Ohio Junior Golf Academy at Rolling Greens Golf Course in March.

"They were run age-appropriate where the girls didn't play with the boys and the 9-year-olds didn't play with the 10-year-olds. The yardages also were based on age and gender. It doesn't get much fairer than that." The Cleveland tour director suggested Lemons investigate getting his own spot. "I told them Canton is packed with junior golfers, and the area is nicknamed the golf capital of Ohio," Lemons said. "I was told they were scaling back, and looking at more high-profile cities. But the director told me to get together a proposal, and they would look at it." That director was Aaron Stone, manager of U.S. Kids Local Tours and World Championship qualifiers. "To be honest, Canton really wasn't on our radar ... golf and Canton just didn't seem to go together," Stone said.

"We had Doug on our radar ... his passion was evident. We knew of his involvement with First Tee, and anyone who partners with that has a heart for volunteerism. Their application was very professional and well done." Stone estimates U.S. Kids receives hundreds of applications nationally, and had 35 in Ohio alone last year. "We have applications from smaller-scale cities, so we are going to watch the success of this one closely."

300-PAGE PROPOSAL

Lemons, who was assisted by Rob Steinberg, sports promotion manager of the Stark County Convention & Visitors' Bureau, and Tom Samartino, in preparing the 300-page proposal, said the family aspect is what drew him. "This is all about fun and family," said Lemons, who hopes to draw at least 100 players per event with eight area courses being involved beginning in June. Family members are encouraged to caddie for players. "This is kind of like a baseball team that does nothing but practice, but never plays in a game. There are just so many fun opportunities." The tour expanded into the 13-14 age group this season after being ages 5 through 12 in the past. There is a 10-stroke limit per player to maintain the pace of play. Individual participants should be able to shoot 63 or lower for nine holes or 126 for 18 to participate. "We have the pins in the middle (of the greens) and we will put tee plates out in different colors depending on the age groups," Lemons said. "Some will be in the middle of fairways. "Parents can coach as much as any caddie does for a player ... just about everything but showing them how to swing a club. At this point, the kids should know that."

REGIONAL DRAW

And Lemons expects to draw from a wide area. "There's really nothing between us and Columbus," Lemons said. "And from the east, we expect to bring kids in from Youngstown and Western Pennsylvania. "It means new visitors who will be spending money here. U.S. Kids says usually 2 1/2 people accompany each player. It's good for the courses and good for county businesses. "NEW TOUR IN CANTON Canton-Akron U.S. Kids Local Tour director Doug Lemons met with (left) Justin Palmer, U.S. Kids manager of business development, and Kristi Novak, U.S. Kids e-marketing and operations support manager, to finalize details for the tour's debut this summer.