

Willie O'Rourke-

Five decades of managing and mentoring Junior Golf



By George Smillie

Willie O'Rourke's long association with successful junior teams has made him a legend in his home club of The Island. The record speaks for itself - two All-Ireland pennants in the Club Youths, another in the Fred Daly and two more in the Junior Foursomes. To these can be added another dozen Leinster pennants, including an U15s as well pennants for the above competitions, and of course a number of near misses. Perhaps a look back at his life and career in golf can provide an explanation for these extraordinary successes.

His boyhood was spent in the Baskin in North County Dublin - not renowned as a nursery for golf, but nevertheless, not too far from Portmarnock Golf Club. On the other hand, however, at least an hour's walk when travelled by foot as the young O'Rourke did to get his first introduction to the game that would consume his interest ever since. As the eldest of a large family growing up in the years after WW II, he was expected, as a young teenager, to supplement the family income by caddying for the wealthy members of Dublin's premier golf club. Before ever striking a golf ball with a golf club, his aptitude for the game was revealed when no less than Jimmy Bruen, probably Ireland's greatest amateur, was overheard commenting that his caddie, the young O'Rourke, knew his way around Portmarnock. That another client, Sean Lemass, regarded by many as the father of modern Ireland, was equally satisfied can only mean that Willie was born with an aptitude for golf that quickly grew into an understanding of the game.

Years later, in 1962, when circumstances allowed him to play the game that had fascinated him for so long, he joined The Island. As was the custom at the time he was invited to play a round with a member of the Committee, who on the evidence before him awarded Willie his first handicap of 10. Within a few years that handicap was reduced to 4, and along the way Willie had collected 'Golfer of the Year' in 1964 and the Law Shield - the Club's match-play championship played off scratch - no mean achievement considering The Island had players at the time good enough to win pennants in both the Barton Shield and Senior Cup. Years later, golfing ability and skills were important ingredients contributing to his credibility as a mentor, starting with Philip Walton and Martin Sludds in the 70s and continuing through a host of inter-provincials and internationals to present day stars such as Paul McBride, Kevin LeBlanc and Gavin Moynihan.

As a golfer, Willie was good enough to play in the East of Ireland and Close Championships in 1966, but as a married man with a young and growing family, and having just started his own contracting business, he had little choice but allow competitive golf to slip down his priority list. He remained an enthusiastic club golfer but limited his ambition to the Club's Junior Cup team. A Leinster pennant in 1971 was a welcome reward for his efforts with that team, but more importantly it was the progenitor of what was to become his attachment to junior golf. In those days the Junior Cup was the first step for young fellows with an interest in pursuing golf as a sport rather than a leisure activity, and Willie was quick to encourage any of them whom he thought had a bit of talent to take that route. At the same time his family of five boys was growing up and making increasing demands on his time, and the role of father had to be given precedence. While it may have been to the detriment of golf in The Island at the time, there can be little doubt that the experiences of minding, encouraging and understanding five sons in their sporting endeavours was ultimately to be a major factor in the relationships he established with junior golfers. Without doubt it was then that he discovered how to be firm without being hard, and the importance of earning respect rather than demanding it.

The advent of the Smurfit Junior Foursomes in the mid-seventies, later to become the Irish Junior Foursomes, but initially confined to Leinster, transformed club golf for juniors. Whereas, previously, The Island had junior members, it, for the first time, established a junior section. The Smurfit was the first opportunity for inter-club competition for juniors and Willie embraced the challenge enthusiastically. Though barely able to field a team, in those early days a team comprised three foursomes pairs, The Island reached the final in 1977, and though beaten in a very tight contest by Birr, junior golf at The Island, with Willie at the helm, was up and running. The Junior Foursomes has remained dear to his heart ever since, Years later, he was instrumental in the evolution of an annual match between Forrest Little and The Island, held in honour of Andy Desmond, who had been a member of both clubs, into the Fingal Foursomes. Closely based on the format of the Irish Junior Foursomes, the winner receives the Andy Desmond Trophy - to date it has been handed over to Willie on five occasions. This innovation is a demonstration of Willie's commitment to junior golf, for with him it was never a mere involvement, and it is beyond dispute that commitment is another of the ingredients that helps explain his success story.

While Willie can be intimidating, he is a gregarious man who enjoys company and conversation. He has the happy knack of putting young lads at ease by engaging them in chat more as equals than as man and boy. He gets them to talk and he listens, and in turn they listen, and as they do so they learn about the game of golf and how it should be played, for the conversation seldom strays from those subjects. Serious points are made but there is lightheartedness too, and what comes through is that life is to be enjoyed, golf is to be enjoyed, and there is nothing more enjoyable than winning. While there may be nervousness going out to play under Willie's critical gaze there is comfort in the knowledge that winning is not demanded, for if you play sensibly and to your ability he will not only be satisfied but he will let you know it.

So what does this all mean in terms of understanding Willie's success - well, it stems from his knowledge and understanding of the game, and a personal level of skill that allows him to be a credible mentor. Add in commitment and a rare ability to communicate and empathise with young people, and there you have it - and oh, you need to really enjoy it as well.