

Irvington and Southern Regional girls bond through golf



Their schools were both closed for spring vacation one recent week, but that didn't stop a group of students from Irvington and Southern Regional high schools from taking part in a unique educational and athletic opportunity.

Both schools play varsity golf. In the case of Irvington, it's a co-ed team comprised mostly of girls. Southern has both boys and girls teams.

Through a fortunate set of circumstances, Irvington's girls, most of whom have never ventured far from their urban Essex County home, took an 85 mile trip to the Shore to play Southern at Ocean Acres Country Club in Manahawkin.

It was a day full of golf, fun and camaraderie between high school students who'd otherwise never cross paths. It's also worthy of recognition as part of NJSIAA Sportsmanship Appreciation Week, sponsored by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy, which runs through May 14.

Aside from getting to know each other, the Southern Regional girls also offered golf tips to the Irvington girls, most of whom are relatively new to the sport. And deeper connections were made, especially in conversation between two players in particular - Tylesa McBean of Irvington and Julie Simms of Southern. Tylesa is a senior who will be attending the Naval Academy, while Julie is a 12th grader headed to the Air Force Academy.

"We are able to talk," Tylesa said. "That was really cool."

The day happened pretty much by chance. Because its matches are co-ed against mostly boys, Irvington coach Tom Larranaga and athletic director Dr. John Taylor were on the lookout for girls matches, and placed a message on the online forum used by the state's athletic directors. Southern AD Chuck Donohue, whose school was also looking for girls matches, took notice.



He consulted with his girls golf coach, Jeff Reilly, and both agreed that the match would be a great idea. With both schools on vacation at the same time, it became even more of a no-brainer.

“Basically, I have 17 girls on my golf team this year,” Taylor said. “The Super Essex Conference doesn’t sponsor girls golf. Not enough schools have it. I’ve created posts looking for girls-only matches, but most schools in the Big North or Shore Conference that have girls golf teams already have full schedules. Chuck and I got to talking, and he said Southern had an opening.”

From that connection, what followed was a memorable day for all who participated.

“It was new and different and we had a lot of fun,” McBean said. “They were super nice. They were really friendly, and were pretty cool. They helped us a lot with the course. We were all girls, out on the course playing golf and having fun.”

“It was a really fun experience,” said Southern Regional senior Mary Kate Reilly. “We’ve all had different experiences in golf. They were less experienced than us, but it was super-fun learning with them and helping them with the game. To me, it was more about making friends. The girl I was playing with is going to the Naval Academy, so I thought that was very cool. We were also talking, and comparing our schools and golf experiences. And then after we finished, when we started taking pictures and talking with each other, we all got close again and it was really fun.”

Southern’s Maddie Beirne is a sophomore, so her high school experiences so far have been mostly local.

“I’m only a sophomore, so I’ve only played X amount of schools,” she said. “To see a new school was nice, getting to know new girls and see other golfers. It was really fun. We helped them out, but we also learned from them. It was nice getting to know other girls and help them with a sport that we love to do.”

McBean, who previously played baseball, is in her second year of playing golf, and is loving it.

The chance to play a match in an unfamiliar environment only deepened her appreciation.

“I really enjoy everything about golf,” she said. “It’s something you can do forever. That day we were a little nervous, but coach just told us to go there, have fun and meet new people. Once we got there, everyone was so nice and welcoming, so we just said ‘Let’s do it’ and we had a great time.”

Those feelings were echoed by Ashley Rodriguez, her Irvington teammate.

“We played with girls who were really cool and fun to play with,” she said. “We also never played a course like that with holes on the water. We had also never gone that far. It was more than an hour drive. It was nice seeing how they played. The girls we played against were good, and we usually play against guys. Playing an all-girls team was a good experience, because we mostly see dominant males as the other team.”



The day went so well that the coaches have spoken about a return match, possibly at Weequahic Park in Newark, next spring.

“It was awesome,” Larranaga said. “On the way home, the girls were talking about how great it was. It was something our kids are never going to forget. Their coach is a nice guy and runs a really good program. It was perfect for both teams to see a different end of the spectrum. It gives them a little bit of perspective from the other side.”

Reilly, the Southern coach, agreed.

“It was a great experience,” he said. “Our girls are pretty experienced at golf and theirs are still learning, and at first you wonder how it’s going to go, but there was a good connection and you saw a real positive experience in what high school athletics can bring out in kids. At the end was where everything kind of really came together. The girls were taking pictures and following each other on Instagram, just being teenage girls and having a great time. Coach and I definitely decided it’s worth pursuing for next year. It turned out to be a great educational thing during spring break. It was an awesome day.”