

Catching Up With Evan Johnsen

The Director of Programs and Development at The First Tee of Greater Seattle talks about how his journey led him to The First Tee, his past as a college golfer, and his love of providing opportunity for young people.

Tom Cade: Okay, you're listening to the news from Washington Golf. This is Tom Cade. I am the senior director of communications for Washington Golf. And today we have with us Evan Johnsen, who is the director of programs and development at the First Tee of Greater Seattle. Evan, thanks for coming on today.

Evan Johnsen : Thanks for having me, Tom.

Tom Cade: Yeah. Did I get your title correct? Yeah?

Evan Johnsen : You did, you did. And that title has evolved a little bit over the last couple of years to include the development side.

Tom Cade: Yeah, there you go. Yeah, you used to be the programs director. I always knew you was that. So now I see the development, yeah. So Evan, I just wanted to get some background on yourself actually. I know a lot about the First Tee chapter itself, but why don't you let us know about your particular journey, how you got here? Where'd you start from? Where'd you go to school? Where'd you go to high school?

Evan Johnsen : Yeah, thanks. I grew up in this area actually, Skyline High School up on the Sammamish Plateau. I played on the golf team there, and I was the captain for a couple of years. I went on to play at Claremont McKenna College down in California, a division three NCAA school. And I had a lot of fun down there playing golf, mostly focused on academics, but I was able to enjoy some time on the golf team. And we even made it to the national championships one of those years.

Tom Cade: How did you choose Claremont?

Evan Johnsen : First of all, my college search was all within the state of California. Growing up in the Northwest, I love it here, but I was looking forward to some sunshine. And about 8 to 10 schools were on my list. Claremont just really stood out as a niche school, great academics, good culture. And I was able to play on the golf team too. So a combination of academics and golf was my ultimate goal. And I'm really glad I went there.

Tom Cade: Yeah, okay. So what year did you graduate?

Evan Johnsen : I graduated Claremont in 2005. And came back up to the Northwest actually to explore career opportunities. I had a bachelor of arts in psychology and legal studies. So I was considering going into law. Of course the golf world has always

been forefront of my life. So looking at some options there, I ended up getting into real estate development and real estate finance for a few years, four or five years thereafter after graduation. And I really enjoyed it, learned a lot, played golf a ton as recreation on the side, playing tournaments, and a lot of Washington Golf events, and I'm really enjoying that.

But I missed golf, and I ended up getting involved in the First Tee as a volunteer, just randomly met Heidi Wills, who was our executive director at the time. And she invited me to come volunteer with the chapter. I really enjoyed it. I had a great time with the people I met. It seemed like a really important program to the community that I hadn't known that much about in the past. It headquartered up in Jefferson Park, which is not a place I had spent a ton of time up until that point, growing up on the east side.

But I started getting more and more involved in the chapter as a volunteer, and as a part time coach. And then in 2011 the program director position came available. And I talked to Heidi a bit, and realized how interested I was, and dropped everything else and went full time into the First Tee, and really enjoyed every minute of it.

Tom Cade: Yeah. So what was your first role as a volunteer? Was it as a coach? Or was it...? Because I see you started in 2009 as a volunteer. You've been around quite a bit for this.

Evan Johnsen : Yeah, time definitely flies. And like a lot of people, you just dip your toes in, "Hey, I have an interest in getting involved. I want to give back. I love the game of golf. I want to work with kids. I'm not really sure how to do that." And like a lot of our volunteers, that's how you get started. Maybe help out with a special event, come to a coach workshop, maybe just a phone call to learn more. And if you decide that you want to be a part of the mission, and you find a role that works for you then yeah. It evolves from there.

So for me it was one special event up at Jefferson Park. It was a fundraising shootout, where people could come out and try to get a hole in one on the par three, and there'd be a prize at the end of the day for all the closest to the pins. And I played, and then I would also just walk around with people who were playing solo. And I got to meet a lot of people from First Tee, and especially the staff. And then from there it became a coaching role for sure. So that was towards the end of 2009. Starting in 2010, I started going to some of the trainings, and I was coaching with the First Tee part time.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative), okay. So somewhere along here it looks like you became a member of the PGA section, pacific northwest section. Is that right?

Evan Johnsen : I did, yeah. I'm a level three associate. So hopefully by the end of the year I'll have my full status as a PGA member, but it's been a really incredible journey. I'm really glad I did that. The PGA started expanding its parameters a little bit to

allow people in my role, similar for C chapters around the country to join the PGA. Even though we're headquartered at a Green Grass facility, I don't necessarily manage an instructional staff, or a golf cart fleet, or some of the other operational categories that a golf course needs to do the agronomy side.

And yet we are part of the fabric of the golf industry. And so I've really found a lot of satisfaction and ways to get involved in the local PGA, especially from a player development standpoint. We're obviously very involved in junior golf, really moving the needle with things like PGA junior league, starting kids out from a young age, giving them a full appreciation for the game of golf. And so, being a part of the PGA has been a blast. I really enjoyed it. And met a lot of good people along the way.

Tom Cade: So the development addition to your title, is that where all this comes in? With the grassroots growth with it?

Evan Johnsen : Yeah, as a nonprofit, in some ways everybody who works for the First Tee is involved in some way on the giving side. And we were fortunate to have families, and volunteers, and donors, and all of the people involved in the first year giving in some way. So whether it's maybe a recruitment of new volunteers and coaches, or maybe creating a new fundraising event that's going to help raise much needed funds for the First Tee... One of the amazing things about the First Tee, and what sets it apart is any young person can join regardless of their ability to pay.

So we can offer up to a full scholarship for any young person who needs it. And to do that we have to raise a pretty good amount of money behind the scenes to make that possible. So yeah, that's been a lot of fun. We have individual donors. Every \$5 and \$10 donation makes a difference. And then we also have major fundraising events where we see some pretty significant giving by individuals, local companies. So that's been a lot of fun.

Tom Cade: Yeah, well great. So these days with the current situation, with many businesses closed down for temporarily, including golf, I noticed on your website actually, that on March 11th your programs stopped operations. Is that correct?

Evan Johnsen : Essentially. In-person, yes. We're still operating as a chapter, and we're finding ways to reach kids at home by email, through social media, through video calls. We're on the Zoom train. SAnd we've got weekly calls with our different groups of kids, whether they're teenagers in our junior advisory board, or our ACE program, girl's golf. It's really great to be able to maintain that connection when we can't do it at the golf course. We did have to cancel our spring session, which is where the kids come to the Green Grass facility. And we were expecting about 900 kids enrolled this spring. So that was a big decision, and a hard one to swallow, because we were really ready and excited to see the kids again. But we put that on hold for now, obviously.

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Tom Cade: So you've done as much as you can though virtually, and keeping the interest going, yeah?

Evan Johnsen : Yeah, yeah, exactly. One of the things that I've always appreciated about the First Tee, and more as time goes on, is how long kids will participate in their childhood. We have kids who will play with us from age 5 to 18. So they join as a little tyke, and just learning the game of golf, and doing some fun games, running around, and playing golf baseball. And then fast forward, they're playing on their high school team and thinking about what college they're going to go to. And all along the way they build relationships with us, the coaches, people they can look up to and ask for advice, and the golf course, their home course is a familiar place to go, whether it's Jefferson, or Riverbend, or Jackson park, Crossroads Par Three.

And so we don't want to lose that. Granted they're at home, and they aren't able to get out and about in all aspects of their life. So we're not alone obviously, but it's more than just golf instruction. It's also relationship building. And so we want to even maintain that the best we can.

Tom Cade: Yeah, so for kids and for parents who want to still want to continue with the program, and maybe get into the program for the first time, they just go to the website? Or they contact anyone in particular?

Evan Johnsen : Yeah, yeah, great question. In some ways getting involved in what that looks like going forward, we hope returns to what we would normally have, which is our full session of class. You'd sign up for the spring, or you sign up for summer, or fall, or all the above. You're signing up for an eight week season. And then other optional special events that happen during that time, clinics, and tournaments, and whatnot. But it's really that eight week class session where you're going to come to the golf course once a week and learn golf skills and life skills.

That right now, that's what we had to cancel for spring. Looking ahead to summer is going to be our next season. And we're trying to get our minds around what that will look like. There are obviously a lot of new considerations. We, along with everything else in golf for the most part, have a distinct advantage to be able to socially distance, and reduce the need to share equipment and things like that. We provide clubs for any kid who comes to the program and doesn't have their own. And so they're outside, they've got their own club they can use, and they don't have to share it. We can easily space people apart.

So we're really optimistic about what we'll be able to do this summer. Normally our summer registration would open April 28th, and we would have tons to choose from. Summer is our biggest season. We have 12 locations, including now up in Snohomish County. And so we're hoping to mirror that as best as possible. It might be smaller groups than we're used to. There'll be some new things to get used to. We might be wearing facial coverings while we're playing golf, whatever is the smartest decision. We want to really be part of the

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solution, but do the best we can to impact young lives through the game of golf, and get them out swinging the club, and walking on the grass again. We think that's really important, so.

Tom Cade: So for updates for the programming, and the status and scheduling, they just go to the website? That's the best place to go?

Evan Johnsen : Yeah, the best place to go is the website. That's where we keep everything updated. Right now you won't see too many details on what the summer class options will be, but you can get on our mailing list. You can get a feel for what last summer would have looked like. And we're going to make it as similar to that as possible.

And our rough date for summer registration will be May 12th. That also comes about a week after the state stay at home order is scheduled to be lifted, or changed, or whatever happens. And so that'll be a big benchmark for us, just as it is for a lot of others in the golf industry, is what things will look like going forward. What are the recommendations, group sizes, and what that looks like. So about May 12th is when we anticipate having summer registration open.

Like I said, you can go on the website, you can call our office, you can email us information@thefirstteeseattle.org. And we can make sure we keep you updated. It should be a lot of fun. Generally in the summer we have class from age five and up, all skill levels, and everything takes place at the golf course, which is great.

Tom Cade: Yeah, that's really great. So just to repeat, but the website address is firstteeseattle.org. And the phone number is (206) 762-2334. Is that the best one?

Evan Johnsen : You got it. And the website, just add a, "the." So it's thefirstteeseattle.org.

Tom Cade: Oh it is?

Evan Johnsen : Yup. And well, you can actually go to either. Now that I say that, their university is rebranding. And you'll see the "the" being dropped this year. But actually, firstteeseattle.org or thefirstteeseattle.org will both take you to the same place. So okay, you're updated.

Tom Cade: Yeah, firstteeseattle.org. And Evan Johnsen, thanks for taking a few minutes to talk about this. I know these are interesting times, but it sounds like you're doing everything you can to keep the game going on your end.

Evan Johnsen : We sure are Tom, and thanks. And a lot of what we're able to do is in large part thanks to Washington Golf, and the Washington Golf Alliance, which is working so hard to bring golf back to our communities, and in a safe way. So thanks to

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everything you guys are doing. It's going to make our summer programming possible.

Tom Cade: Yeah, very good. We're looking forward to it. And May will be an interesting month. We'll get a lot more clarity about what we can and cannot do. And we're hopeful, all hopeful, that I think the golfing industry will be able to be in the forefront of all of that, hopefully.

Evan Johnsen : I agree with you there.

Tom Cade: Okay Evan, thanks so much for your time. And we'll talk soon again.

Evan Johnsen : Great, thanks Tom.

Tom Cade: Okay. Bye bye.