



Maryville

Caring for Children. Strengthening Families.

Flagstick News

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MARYVILLE GOLF ACADEMY

Established 1994

Opening the world of golf to children, adolescents, and adults in harm's way who would otherwise not have the opportunity.

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Leadership leads, many hats, one badge — PGA

When Maryville Golf Academy's Juan Espejo, PGA professional, was nominated by Westmoreland Country Club's Hans Larson, president of the IPGA Foundation, for Golf Professional of the Year, the honor was more than just recognition—it became a moment of meaningful reflection.

As Espejo filled out his bio for the nomination, he began to see just how deeply connected his journey as a golf professional has been to the mission of Maryville and Maryville Golf Academy. He found himself reflecting on the core values that have guided him—values he shares with fellow PGA golf professionals.

"The nomination made me pause and realize how intertwined our work truly is," Espejo shared.

"The values that guide the PGA Foundation—mentorship, opportunity and community—are the same values that shape everything we do at Maryville Golf Academy."

This alignment of missions is no coincidence. The partnership between Maryville Golf Academy and PGA Foundation has become a cornerstone of the program's success. Together, they are not only teaching golf—they are building character, confidence and community in every young person they reach.

"It's a partnership that goes beyond sport," Espejo added. "It's about player engagement, growth—on and off the golf course."

The PGA Foundation is the charitable arm of The Professional Golfers' Association of America. Founded in 1978, its mission is to positively impact



The children from the Ray and Joan Kroc Salvation Army Community Center recently explored the exciting world of golf at the Chicago Golf Show, getting a fun, hands-on introduction to the sport. Chaperoned by Juan Espejo, the group met Tom Corcoran, the owner of the Chicago Golf Show.

the lives of youth, military veterans and diverse populations through the creation and utilization of golf programming that supports education, health and wellness, and youth development.

The Maryville Golf Academy, established in 1994, offers the Maryville children and Chicago youth the opportunity to work, play and practice at neighboring facilities. Now celebrating its 31st year, the Academy continues to grow and expand its outreach, serving hundreds of children, youth and young adults who might not otherwise have the opportunity to learn, grow and develop through the game of golf.

The continued support of the PGA Foundation ensures that Maryville's golfers have access to resources, mentorship and meaningful experiences that shape their lives far beyond the fairway. It's a shared vision—of equity, opportunity and the belief that every child deserves the chance to thrive—that fuels this partnership and drives it forward. And thanks to the golf experts, that vision is being realized, one swing at a time. ■

Maryville trains veterans to become the next golf mentors

Every Thursday on Maryville Academy's Des Plaines campus, a special kind of golf lessons take place—one that is about much more than technique and swing mechanics. A group of U.S. military veterans are not only learning the game but preparing to pass it on.

The group that started with three PGA Hope graduates has now grown to 21 members at Maryville. They meet weekly for PGA-led instruction, skilled development, playing opportunities, camaraderie and a shared purpose. Their mission: to become future golf instructors and role models, helping to expand access to the game for local communities and youth.

"Golf is more than just a sport," said Maryville Golf Academy's Juan Espejo, PGA professional. "It's a social game that brings people together. It teaches patience, focus and respect—all things these veterans know well. Now they're

using those skills to give back."

In exchange for the training they receive, the veterans will help teach at Maryville Golf Academy clinics, where they will work with children and families from surrounding communities. It's a full-circle moment—learning while leading and healing while helping others grow.

During one recent session, the group took on an 18-hole golf course and practiced on the golf center's state-of-the-art Full Swing simulator, blending friendly competition with hands-on learning. But for these veterans, the true reward comes in sharing what they have learned.

"Teaching golf is a way we can contribute, connect with others and support the next



A group of veterans trained to become golf mentors at Maryville Golf Academy. (Standing left to right): Rich Adler, Jr., Mark Thornton, Nik Prvulov, Mike Guilano, Chloe Ronde, Ames "Doc" Ronde, Olivia Ronde, Eric Molina. (Kneeling left to right): Emanuel "Manny" Holloway, Josh Howe, Josh Leong.

generation," one participant said. "It feels good to be part of something bigger again."

This unique initiative reflects Maryville's commitment to innovation in both youth development and community outreach. By bringing together veterans and young people through the game of golf, the Maryville Golf Academy is cultivating not only skills—but purpose, pride and partnership. ■

Seeing the bigger picture: My eye-opening experience with Maryville Golf Academy's outreach program

By Richard Adler

As a long-time supporter of Maryville Golf Academy, I've always known that incredible work is being done with the kids at Maryville, including with children who have found a safe and encouraging environment through the game of golf. But it wasn't until I recently had the chance to spend time

helping with some of the outreach efforts that I truly understood the full impact of Maryville's work.

To be honest, I was more of a "tag along," but it

turned out to be a great learning experience. What I saw opened my eyes to just how far and how deep Maryville's outreach goes—and how deeply golf can transform lives when placed in the right hands.

Over the past several weeks, I witnessed the running of a golf program that's part of the physical education curriculum for grade school kids. Maryville also runs an after-school programming for high school students at Providence St. Mel, Legacy Charter School, Christ the King and St. Angela School.

Continuing in the tradition of the caddie training program that started in 1994 when the Maryville Golf Academy was founded, two caddie training programs were hosted at Ray and Joan Kroc Salvation Army Community Center and Chicago's Columbus Park, which was an Austin neighborhood collaboration with Chicago Park District, TROON Golf Management Company and BUILD.

One of the most exciting initiatives I learned about is Maryville's growing partnership with

the Chicago Police Department, which runs a vibrant summer league. With help from Hans Larson, president of the IPGA Foundation, Maryville Golf Academy is coordinating with Illinois PGA professionals to support the league by providing coaching on the range every Tuesday and assisting them with their golfing needs. The Maryville Golf Academy is supplying this support to improve the police officers' mental health.

The Maryville Golf Academy also does meaningful work with veterans, individuals with disabilities and other first responder groups. Its spring efforts are focused on helping committed young caddies land placements at country clubs in the south suburbs and Chicago's Southwest Side.

What stands out the most is that Juan Espejo does all this while proudly promoting Maryville's mission, using golf as a tool for personal growth, connection and opportunity.

I've come away from this experience with a newfound appreciation for what the Maryville Golf Academy does. If you have the time, interest or resources to help support the Maryville Golf Academy's efforts, I encourage you to reach out. There's no shortage of ways to get involved and the impact is real. ■



Rich Adler Jr. joins working caddies from the Ray and Joan Kroc Salvation Army Community Center for a teaching moment during one of their trainings.

Golf gave me my life back: A veteran's journey through the Maryville Golf Program

An Interview with Nikola Prvulov

Q: How did you begin participating in the Maryville Golf Program?

I'm a veteran who served in Desert Storm as a Marine. After an incident related to PTSD, I was receiving treatment at Hines VA. For five years after that, I rarely left my home. I would sleep during the day for long stretches, and I was extremely hypervigilant. I wasn't comfortable around people—especially crowds—and I struggled with depression over not being able to work anymore. I gained weight and felt like I had no purpose.

The VA introduced me to golf as part of recreation therapy, and I took an introductory course through a few Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), including Revelation Golf and AllenForce. Through those programs, I was introduced to Maryville Academy and the work that Juan Espejo was doing with veterans. That's when everything began to change. My journey to recovery has been deeply impacted by Juan's hard work, compassion and his belief in the healing power of golf.

Q: How did golf improve the quality of your life?

Juan is involved in Project Hope for veterans through the PGA, and he realized the need for more consistent programming beyond occasional clinics. So, he started offering weekly instruction for veterans. We meet for a one-hour lesson and practice session, followed by playing nine holes with continued guidance.

After several sessions, I gained the confidence to play on my own. I even joined a weekly veterans league. Juan's kind heart, his patience and thoughtful teaching style are the reasons I fell in love with the sport. But what's more

incredible is his vision: expanding this program to include veterans' families to help with recovery and reintegration.

He's working with organizations like the Travis Manion Foundation, Merging Veterans and Players (MVP), and AllenForce, connecting veterans with other communities through golf. He brings together groups from the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, inner-city schools in high-crime areas and local first responders, including police and firefighters—using golf to build bridges where they're most needed. His grassroots approach to outreach is truly community engagement at its finest.

Q: How did working with the Maryville Academy Golf Program impact your life?

In short, it changed my life. My friends and family have seen the difference. Every day, an estimated 22 veterans die by suicide—and I am certain that programs like this, and people like Juan, will help change that number for the better.

With Juan's support, I created a personal wellness program focused on physical fitness and mental health. Over the last four years, I've lost 50 pounds, I can now run nine miles, and I've significantly improved my strength, mobility and flexibility. I'm more active socially and I've made lasting friendships through Maryville's program. My son has even taken an interest in golf and we're working with Juan to create a Train the Trainer curriculum for youth in our church community.

Maryville has helped me rediscover my purpose. Volunteering with them showed me that my experiences, education and background still matter—and can be used to make a difference in the lives of others.



Nikola shares his love of golf with children from his Serbian church group

Q: What is your background and has it been useful in your work at Maryville?

Absolutely. I hold a Master's in Outdoor Therapeutic Recreation Administration from Aurora University and have an extensive nonprofit management background, both domestically and abroad. Early in my career, I was a wilderness therapist working with court-adjudicated youth, Native American youth and veterans in recovery.

Internationally, I worked in post-conflict zones with several humanitarian organizations, including the United Methodist Committee on Relief, Mercy International, the American Refugee Committee and the Center for International Rehabilitation. My work included preschool outreach for refugee children, youth center management in Bosnia and leading health care reintegration programs in partnership with WHO and World Vision. I've also consulted on refugee repatriation programs in Kosovo and led wheelchair manufacturing and distribution projects for landmine survivors in India, Afghanistan and Jordan.

That experience in trauma recovery, community building and education has translated directly

into the work I now do with Maryville and the veterans we serve.

Q: What other community engagement projects are you involved in?

I want to pay it forward. Right now, I'm helping Juan with club repair and mentoring other veterans through golf. I've started a youth golf program in my church, which is expanding to include lessons for both parents and children. It's been endorsed by our Diocese Youth Department. I'm also supporting a local gym's veterans fitness challenge.

Volunteering at Maryville has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. It's the best job I've ever had—even if I'm not paid. It's therapeutic, it's fulfilling and it's given me a renewed sense of purpose. I'm honored to work alongside Juan and to help extend these programs to communities that traditionally haven't had a presence in mainstream golf.

This work is helping improve my physical health, my mental health, my recovery from PTSD and my spiritual journey. And I'm committed to continuing for myself, for my family and for those still searching for their own path forward. ■

Illinois PGA honors 2024 Special Award winners for Outstanding Achievements in Golf

The Illinois PGA Section proudly announced the recipients of its 2024 Special Awards in January, recognizing excellence and leadership among golf professionals across the state. These awards celebrate dedication to the game, player development and service to the golf community. Congratulations to this year's honorees:

John Varner, PGA (Beverly Country Club), Professional of the Year: The highest honor, awarded for overall performance, leadership and contributions to the game and the community.

Christopher Oehlerking, PGA (The Golf Practice), Teacher of the Year: Recognizes excellence in golf instruction and a passion for advancing the skills of students.

Ed Stevenson, PGA (The Preserve at Oak Meadows), PGA Executive of the Year: Honors a PGA Professional for outstanding leadership, vision and strategic management.

Conner Burke, PGA (Butterfield Country Club), Assistant Professional of the Year: Celebrates exemplary service, leadership and performance by an assistant professional.

Kevin Weeks, PGA (Cog Hill Golf & Country Club), Youth Player Development Award: Recognizes exceptional work growing the game among junior golfers.

Eva Rogers, PGA (Medinah Country Club), Player Development Award: Awarded for efforts in growing participation in golf through innovative programs and outreach.

Nick Papadakes, PGA (Onwentsia Club), Bill Strausbaugh Award: Honors a PGA Professional who firmly commits to mentoring and community service.

Joe Sheren, PGA (S.M.A.R.T. Golf & Fitness), PGA Professional Development Award: Recognizes contributions to fellow PGA members' education and professional development.

Marc Heidkamp, PGA (Old Orchard Country Club), Bill Heald Career Achievement Award: Celebrates a career of continuous service and dedication to the Illinois PGA Section.

Connor Farrell, PGA (Briarwood Country Club), Merchandiser of the Year – Private: Awarded for excellence in merchandising and retail operations at a private facility.

Jason Tomaras, PGA (Harborside International Golf Center), Merchandiser of the Year – Public: Honors outstanding retail and merchandising performance at a public facility.

Kevin Fitzgerald, PGA (PGA Member), Distinguished Service Award: Recognizes long-term commitment and exceptional service to the Illinois PGA Section and the game.

Josh Pius, PGA (Inverness Golf Club), Deacon Palmer Award: Presented to a PGA Professional who has overcome personal adversity and maintained strong character and service.

Terry Russell, PGA (Cantigny Golf), Patriot Award: Honors contributions to military personnel through golf and support of veterans and active service members.

The Illinois PGA and Maryville Golf Academy congratulate these outstanding professionals for their remarkable dedication and impact on the game of golf in Illinois. As ambassadors of the Maryville Golf Club and if you happen to come across these award winners in your travels, be sure to acknowledge their accomplishment. ■

Save the Date



31st Annual IPGA-Maryville Gleason Cup Invitational

Monday, August 11, 2025
1500 Merit Club Lane,
Libertyville, IL 60048

For more information, contact
Tina Hock at 847-294-1982
or email her at
restivo-hockt@maryvilleacademy.org



Maryville
Caring for Children. Strengthening

Save the Date

*Maryville CYO 10th
Annual Golf Classic*

Monday, September 8, 2025
The Preserve at Oak Meadows
Addison, IL

For more information, contact
Tina Hock at 847.294.1982 or
restivo-hockt@maryvilleacademy.org.

Our Mission

The Maryville Golf Academy is an embodiment of the Maryville Academy mission of protecting children and strengthening families. This opens the world of golf to children, adolescents and adults who otherwise do not have the opportunity. We teach values and lessons inherent in the game: etiquette, honesty, discipline, sportsmanship and how to have fun in a structured and safe environment.

Established in 1994, Maryville Golf Academy conducts PGA-led instruction with professionally fitted equipment, weekly practices and nine-hole competitive rounds. We also provide job training in caddying, club repair, golf ball recycling and golf facility management.

