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Father knows best about golf's benefits

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Billy Turner

Tim Harris made a decision a while ago, and Hurricane Katrina cemented it.

Harris learned golf at the knee of his father, Ivory, and at the side of 10 siblings while growing up in the Hollygrove area of New Orleans. All 11 kids graduated from college, and four gained master's degrees. But it was at Joe Bartholomew Golf Course and caddying at the New Orleans Country Club that Tim found his foundation.

He decided to accomplish the same things with his six children, doing what he thought was the best way to form relationships, the way he had always formed relationships . . . at the end of a golf club. The sweet smell of cut grass in the summer mornings. The friendships formed among competitors.

"I was always fascinated by the game," Tim said. "So I wanted my family to be grounded in it. I loved the fact that whatever you put into it was what you got out of it. This is a sport you can do for life, and that's important for my kids."

Thanks to the wonderful help from organizations such as The First Tee, City Park North Course, the Bayou District Foundation and pros throughout the city, Harris has found his dream.

He dropped his job as a commercial investor when Katrina blew threw. Afterward? He concentrated on his children, so much so that he became the golf coach at Louise S. McGehee School as a certified non-faculty coach. His golf team? His two daughters, Pearlissa, 14, and Angelica, 11. They won the regional last year, and they are planning on hosting the regional next year.

His oldest son, Timothy, a 17-year-old rising junior at Jesuit and a five-year member of The First Tee program, will participate in the First Tee Open at Pebble Beach in September after qualifying July 14-18 at Shadow Valley Country Club in Rogers, Ariz.

"I play golf because I love traveling across the state, in fact across the country, and meeting junior golfers and making friends," Timothy said.

Pearlissa Harris played at the Wentworth by the Sea Country Club in Rye, N.H., this summer.

"It was very hilly and muddy in New Hampshire," Pearlissa said. "We also got to meet President Bush senior. That was a great experience."

She said she understands how fortunate she is to have a father who is giving so much.

"He is great," Pearlissa said. "I noticed that sometimes other kids don't have their parents with them. But our dad is always with us."

The other kids are Zachary, 13, Luke, 9, and Jeremiah, 8.

Angelica might be the best golfer of the lot. She shot 81 at this summer from the women's tees at TPC Sawgrass and a nine-hole 36 at Stonebridge from the men's tees.

Luke has a sweet swing as well. But Jeremiah might be the best story. He is autistic, but he has learned to mimic the golf swing, and his dad's pride comes through in his voice when he talks about Jeremiah.

"When you see them all together, it's just amazing," said James Leitz, director of golf at Pinewood Country Club and one of the family's teachers. "They're all different children, but he handles each of them so well and as individuals. He's just a quality dad."

Before Katrina, Tim had the family involved in The First Tee at Bartholomew. They continued in the program even though Bartholomew closed. David Smith, an independent teacher at the North Course driving range, is among those who helped the kids.

Tim works with each child individually.

"I no longer play," he said. "If you see me with a golf club in my hand it is to teach my kids. I understand the game, though. I became a spectator so that my kids could progress. We discuss each shot. We work on their shots. I'm a student of the game. I'm fortunate to be able to do what I do. I took a back seat to my kids, willingly.

"I had a good teacher in my father. I saw him do the same thing for his kids. It became a part of what I do.

"Kids don't become whatever overnight. You have to work with them. That's what I do now."