

Ryan O'Neil Golf Classic raises funds for Rio Mesa team and other county youth golf programs

A lasting memory

By Bob Buttitta

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Ryan O'Neil loved getting together with all the members of his family and sharing some laughs.

It was at one of those family functions 10 years ago where the former Rio Mesa High golfer's life ended prematurely, as he passed away after suffering a cardiac arrhythmia at age 24.

A few months after his passing, O'Neil's mother Mary and his older brother Lawrence were sitting at Las Posas Country Club trying to figure out a way to have something positive come out of the tragedy.

They eventually founded the Ryan O'Neil Memorial Fund, with the goal of raising money to support junior golf programs in Ventura County.

During his all-too-brief life, O'Neil was passionate about golf. He grew up playing in the Ventura County Junior Golf Association and then at Rio Mesa, where he was a two-time MVP.

The main source of revenues for the memorial fund is the annual Ryan O'Neil Golf Classic, which will be played this year March 1 at Las Posas Country Club.

It will be the 10th annual event, and like the previous nine, it will provide family and friends with a chance to gather and celebrate O'Neil's life.

"It's truly a reunion," Lawrence O'Neil said. "It's really about a celebration of Ryan's life and his memory.

"It's a day we all look forward to so much. A lot of the family comes and it really is a celebration."

This year's tournament will also honor Rio Mesa golf coach Tom Radford, who is retiring at the end of the school year.

Radford has been teaching at Rio Mesa for 35 years and started coaching the boys' golf team 27 years ago. In recent years he added the girls' team to his list of duties.

Radford coached Ryan and Lawrence O'Neil when they played golf at Rio Mesa.

"He was such a great coach, such a great mentor," Lawrence O'Neil said. "He was so involved with what we were doing as players and as kids.

"When you played well, you could not wait to tell him. He was such a good role model for all of us."

While his coaching duties will prevent Radford from playing in the tournament, he will be the guest of honor at the dinner that night and will receive a special award.

Many of Radford's players will be on hand to honor their former coach.

"It is a strange feeling knowing the light at the end of the tunnel is near," Radford wrote to the O'Neils. "I am still having fun, but I know I should retire while I still have my health."

Radford's current Spartans squad is one of the many beneficiaries of the money distributed by the Ryan O'Neil Memorial Fund.

Both varsity golf teams at the school get their golf bags, shirts pants, hats and windbreaker paid for by money from the fund. The junior varsity team also gets shirts.

In addition, the Camarillo High golf teams get their shirts paid for by money from the charity.

In addition, the fund gave the VCJGA \$10,000 for its program and it awarded The First Tee of Ventura County \$12,000, which it split among three of its programs, including Jon Gomez's "Training on Wheels."

The money also helps Ventura College with a \$5,000 donation after the college team lost most of its funding due to budget cuts.

"We decided from the start to keep all the money going to programs in Ventura County," Mary O'Neil said. "There is no administrative costs, so all the money goes to help the groups we choose.

"Our goal is for them to become our partners. We give to them and they help us with keeping this going."

Mary O'Neil knows her son is thrilled with the impact the tournament in his memory is having.

"He loved golf so I know he is happy knowing that we're giving kids a chance to play the game," Mary O'Neil said, "establishing the fund and helping promote junior golf.

"Ten years later, Ryan's memory is very much alive. His logo is on golf bags and shirts and kids are getting to play golf, thanks to his tournament. I know he's up there smiling about that."

— Anyone interested in playing in this year's event can contact LawrenceO@accutechdata.com.



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