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Greening golf

Calif. project allows youth to grow the game—literally

ON the Monday morning after the Masters, as Canadians and left-handers celebrated Mike Weir's victory, more than 100 people gathered in a cold, metal storage building to commemorate the opening of the Metropolitan Golf Links in Oakland, Calif.

For all that has been written about Martha Burk and Hootie Johnson, the opening of Metropolitan may prove to be more significant in the fight for inclusion. For this opening not only heralded the return of golf to a plot of land heroically reclaimed from a pile of garbage, but it also celebrated the Oakland Turfgrass Education Initiative (OTEI), an improbable alliance of, among others, a bankrupt school district, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, local community colleges and the Future Farmers of America.

To understand the OTEI, it's necessary to understand Metropolitan's metamorphosis from its precursor, the Lew Galbraith GC. Everyone agrees that Galbraith stunk as a golf course. Literally. Once an industrial landfill, junk littered the landscape.

Sal Gomez, the last club president of the old Galbraith and the first president of the new Metropolitan, remembers, "It was like a cow pasture. Tires popping out of the ground and a refrigerator stuck outside the 16th fairway."

The course needed serious upgrading. In a moment of serendipity, the Port of Oakland, which owned the property, was about to dredge tons of sludge from the San Francisco Bay in order to maintain clear shipping channels. Thus, in December 1994,



Oakland high schoolers get a chance to learn about turfgrass at Metropolitan GL.

Galbraith GC closed and eventually was covered with a cap, two feet of clay compressed to one foot, and junk-covering sludge.

In 2001 a company called CourseCo took over the development of the land, and the city of Oakland asked them, as part of the contract to build and operate Metropolitan GL, to develop a job-training component (OTEI).

The person given the most credit for shepherding the program is Ray Davies, CourseCo's director of golf course maintenance and construction. "Our goal was to take kids who may not even graduate and give them a career path they might not otherwise consider," he says. "We're interested in introducing these kids to the green industry, anything related to horticulture, like working in a nursery, not just turf for golf courses."

According to Davies, what is unique about this program is that OTEI students can matriculate into a program at Merritt College for an associate's degree and then on to Cal-Poly San Luis Obispo for a full degree.

Today 80 students from Castlemont, a local high school, are enrolled in OTEI. Eric Edgerly, who coordinates the program at Castlemont, claims that, "The stereotype has been broken. Inner-city kids can do very well in agriculture. We have raised-bed boxes with fruit trees, vegetables and herbs."

While some of the Castlemont students will intern at Metropolitan GL, most will only visit on field trips. Edgerly notes, "The golf course was the magnet, but we have speakers coming into our classroom weekly. Irrigation specialists, agriculture seed companies, landscape architects talk to our class. This opens our students to opportunity and creativity."

And it seems to work. "I'm sure this group of students will have a higher graduation rate than the school as a whole because they are more goal-oriented," he added. "All this in the midst of the Oakland School District crisis, which has a \$100-million deficit."

And that is why on that rainy Monday after the Masters, more than 100 of Oakland's finest politicians, Port of Oakland employees responsible for dredging sludge onto the property, members of the old Galbraith and Johnny Miller, who helped design the new course, gathered to celebrate the opening of Metropolitan GL.

Meanwhile, a half-hour drive and several worlds away, inner-city FFA weeded beds of vegetables, on the path to careers none even knew existed years earlier. —Ron Lux