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Orinda Intermediate School Golf Team Earns Back-to-Back Titles

By Karl Buscheck



The championship OIS golf team. Photo provided

Jones' impact in his first season with the team.

A stroke of good fortune played a big part in the rise of the Orinda Intermediate School golf team.

"We're so lucky to have Eric Jones," team manager Denice Gant said of the former Stanford golfer who is one of the squad's co-head coaches along with Tanya Chantara. "That was just a gift that fell in our lap."

As Gant tells it, Jones had emailed her before the season start asking if she wanted any help running the team. After taking one look at Jones' resume, the answer was a resounding "Yes." Jones is not just an OIS parent, but also a two-time World Long Drive Champion and Northern California PGA Teacher of the Year.

"He is the reason we were able to take this (program) from 20 (players) to 36," Gant said of Jones. "We could not have done it without him."

When Gant initially took over as team manager two seasons ago, the OIS team consisted of 12 athletes. This season, there were 36 players on the roster - including 23 boys and 13 girls.

In each of the past two seasons, OIS has rolled through the East Bay Middle School Golf League schedule with an unblemished record in match-play. The Bulldogs have also won the league's championship match in back-to-back seasons, besting Stanley at Buchanan Field Golf Course in Concord on both occasions.

With such a sprawling roster, there are plenty of logistical challenges to navigate for Gant, Jones, Chantara and the team's crew of volunteer coaches.

"We never have all 36 players together because we would crush a facility if we sent 36 players (to the same place)," Gant

explained.

Instead, the program is split in two. There's the competitive team, which consists of the top six golfers, and the development squad which includes the rest of the players.

The Bulldogs practice at Buchanan Fields on Mondays and at Moraga Country Club on Tuesdays. On Wednesdays, the team plays its match of the week. The home matches take place at Buchanan Fields, while the away matches are hosted at a variety of courses across the East Bay, from Boundary Oaks to Diablo Hills to Tilden Park to Redwood Canyon and Lake Chabot.

"It's basically golf immersion for 10 weeks," Gant said. "They're playing three days a week. So, they're playing 30 times in 10 weeks. It's pretty amazing. You see this transformation from these kids from the beginning to when they're done. So, it's really awesome."

The burgeoning team has also played its way onto a few of the premier courses in the area.

"We do have a number of kids who are members at private clubs," Gant said. "And their clubs have opened their doors to us. We had invitations and we played invitationals at Orinda Country Club, Claremont Country Club and Moraga Country Club. The support of the local country clubs has been incredible for our team."

Next spring's group will look noticeably different from the current championship team. According to Gants' calculations, 18 players will be graduating from the program - many of whom will go on to play at Miramonte.

Even with the turnover looming, Gant is already planning for yet another successful go-around in 2017.

"We're going to continue to support as many golfers as we can," Gant said. "And keep the program as open and inclusive as we can."

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[back](#)

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