

# Winning trophies serves as practice for young golfer

By Richard Block

Putt, putt, putt. Up and down the living-room floor. With his plastic golf club, the toddler would hit balls toward a plastic pail set up

at the other end of the long room. Over and over. All day long.

In between sessions with his toy basketball hoop, Sahith Theegala, then 3, would watch the Golf Channel with his father in their Chino Hills home, where they still live.

He became so fascinated with the game that he started practicing in the house.

After six months of this, his father, Murli Theegala, took him to a golf course in Pico Rivera. According to Mr. Theegala, the boy played his first hole for par.

Now, 10 years later, Sahith is a highly ranked junior golfer. He averages more than 50 tournaments a year, and places first in about a third of those, according to records kept by Mr. Theegala. He plays in many tournaments in the summer, when school is out and the Junior PGA sponsors events almost every day. During the school year, he plays in a tournament most weekends. Tournament play is his training, he says.

Mr. Theegala said Sahith has always been a natural at ball sports, throwing a spiraling pass with a football at a year old and playing basketball at 2 before finding golf.

After that first day on the golf course, Sahith practiced on the practice range then moved up to the course. At age 6, Mr. Theegala said, Sahith won the youngest children's division at the Callaway Junior World Golf

Championship, and since then, has won the title for his age group three more times.

A demanding golf routine



might seem at odds with a full schedule at school, but golf fits into his daily life naturally, Sahith said: "You have little time gaps." Golf practice follows afternoon homework sessions during the brighter months; during the winter, he goes to the links right after school, finishing homework in the evening, he said.

Sahith's best tournament came when he was 8, he said, at the junior world championship. He shot seven under par, he said, and that was with unsatisfactory putting.

As he develops his game, Sahith will focus on driving strength. He wishes to improve on his 240-yard long ball, but he is confident with his short game.

Sahith and his father are also proud of his perseverant attitude. Even if Sahith gets off to a slow start, "everybody knows he's going to come back on the back nine holes," Mr. Theegala said.

That comeback spirit has occasionally faltered, though. In the most recent junior world

championship, Sahith finished in a tie for 14<sup>th</sup> place. In the final round, he gave up five strokes in the last six holes, including two bogies and, on the final hole, a triple bogie, and finished with a 219. The winner, Norman Xiong of San Diego, shot a 214.

Mr. Theegala put that down partly to the weather. There was a storm; after the break, the organizers wanted the golfers to hurry to finish the course, he said, so Sahith lost his swing.

Sahith admires golfers who attack the pin rather than playing too conservatively, he said. He enjoys watching the elite players, such as Vijay Singh and Tiger Woods. He wants to be a professional golfer, too.

But while he's playing, Sahith isn't preoccupied with the long-term future. He's just focused on the game at hand, on enjoying the round, on progressing one hole at a time.

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*Photo: Sahith Theegala, by Richard Block for Champion Newspapers.*