

# Only nine but plays a mean

**In recent times pennant golf has become the precinct of the young guns, but it seems they are getting even younger, as MIKE HEDGE found out.**

As it has done for 112 years, Victorian pennant golf showcased the familiar names and introduced unfamiliar ones in the season just concluded. But in 2011 the competition experienced something new.

A nine-year-old capable of keeping up with the "big boys".

Karl Vilips is the youngest player – and almost certainly the smallest – ever to compete in pennant in Victoria. It would be wrong to say he set the competition alight. He played two matches for Southern Golf Club in Division One Colts Pennant, halving won and losing the other.

But his appearance late in the season revealed a kid with a classic swing and a future in golf that may well be unlimited.

Karl has won almost 30 golf tournaments, including four in the United States. He also has a world championship to his name and he's hoping to collect another international title or two in the next few months.

In the penultimate pennant round on May 1, Karl earned selection for his first game in the under-23 competition, playing for Southern Golf Club against Victoria. The decision to play Karl in the Colts team was one made slightly easier by Southern's position near the bottom of the ladder, but it was still one the team manager, Adrian Camba, thought carefully about.

"There was a lot to consider, and we spent a lot of time thinking about whether

to play Karl. But I'm really pleased we did, and I see that other clubs followed the lead and played some young players in the final round," Camba said.

For the first 16 holes of his match at Kingswood, a course he hadn't played previously, Karl kept himself in the match against an opponent almost twice his age, only to three-putt the 17th and go one-down.

After a brief expression of disappointment, a pat on the head from his Dad and a word of encouragement from his caddy, Karl pulled himself together to win the 18th and square a match that proved vital to Southern claiming its only victory of the season.

In the way kids do, Karl offered a frank summing up of the match.

"I was a bit nervous on the first tee because there were a lot of people watching. I had a smile on my face," he said.

"I think I played OK. But the tees weren't at the very back."

For Karl it was a crowning moment, for his father Paul, a proud one and for Southern and the club's head professional, Sean Kirschenberg, it was a reward for the decision to give him membership and provide support and coaching.

It also showed that there is more than one way to get a ball around a golf course in a respectable number of shots. Karl's best tee shots are about the length of the average adult player – about 180m, all but the shorter par fours are beyond him in two shots, the greens at many par threes are difficult to reach in one, and par fives generally require three of his best if he's to get on in regulation.

But a swing that most players dream of, the ability to keep the ball in play and a delightful short game make him ultra-competitive, as he showed in his Pennant "trial" when he beat Southern stalwart and Senior Pennant player, Stuart Seear, off the stick.

The story of Southern's prodigy isn't all glory. In the final Pennant match of the season, he lost to Royal Melbourne's Chris Cranston, who, to his great credit, treated his young opponent with the utmost respect. "I only wish I'd had a swing like that when I was nine," Cranston said.

Admiration for the totally natural and uncomplicated swing is shared by Kirschenberg, who is assembling a coaching team around Karl.

"He's an amazing talent, there's no doubt about that," Kirschenberg said. "And as he grows he's going to get better and better. The first thing to do is fit him out with the right clubs; we're making sure he gets good advice, and most of all, we're trying to make sure he enjoys himself."





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"For me it's a chance to put something back into the game."

The effort Southern is making may well benefit the club in the long term, but according to Karl's father, Paul, the deal is a good one in every sense. A single father, Paul relies on Centrelink benefits for his income after being imprisoned and tortured by agents of the Mugabe government in Zimbabwe, where he ran a migration agency.

Karl's mother left the family when he was a toddler and the father and son have moved from Western Australia to Queensland, to Sydney and now to Melbourne. Along the way they've lived in boarding houses and rented a room here and there. Karl's first set of "proper" golf clubs were bought with the money he earned picking up lost balls, cleaning them and selling them to his local pro shop.

"People have been very good to us; we've been allowed to play and practise at some great courses. But this is the first club that has made Karl feel really welcome," he said.

Like most parents, Vilips is aware of the perennial problems that can accompany exceptional talent. He's mindful that golf shouldn't be the sole focus of his son's

life, and that the welcome provided by the golf club has to be balanced by a life away from the course and the game.

"There are times when I don't allow him to play. If he's getting a bit obsessed, I give him a break. So far it seems OK. When we came home after the match against Royal Melbourne, the first thing he wanted to do was go out and have a kick of the football with me. I was pleased about that," he said.

"I actually found it was a good thing when he went to Auskick and discovered he wasn't a star at football. And there's his schooling. We really focus on that."

Good intentions, however, are not always enough. Luck, hard work and good management will also play a large part in shaping Karl's future. All of which is on his father's mind as they go back to America later this year to play again in the kids' world championship he won in 2009, but couldn't play last year due to a lack of funds. This year, Kirschenberg has personally helped with the expenses. He's also adding to Karl's understanding of the game.

"Karl really doesn't know a lot about the game itself, it's mostly just a natural thing with him,"

his father says.

"But with the team Sean is getting around him he's starting to realise there's more to it. Really though, he just wants to win."

In Karl's case, there have also been the inevitable, and not unwelcome, defeats that have helped the education process. After the Pennant defeat he struggled with tears of disappointment – "there's too many bunkers and I played crap". Then his Southern teammates gathered around him.

After that he was a nine-year-old again, and he wanted an ice-cream. ■