



Million-Dollar Round

Professional athletes gather with little fanfare in Palm Beach Gardens to help Ernie Els and his wife, Liezl, raise money for the Els for Autism Foundation

By TRACY MARCELLO



“IT’S HEARTWARMING TO SEE SO MANY GOLFERS GET TOGETHER EACH YEAR TO SUPPORT ELS FOR AUTISM AT THE PRO-AM.” — Ernie Els



Clockwise from top left: John Daly takes a swing; Ben and Ernie Els cart around; Mike Piazza tees off.

Before the annual Pro-Am, participants are invited to tour the 26-acre campus and learn more about the services and programs—including therapeutic support, employment, independent living, and social/recreational programs—offered to more than 600 children and adults affected by autism spectrum disorder in Palm Beach County.

For many, like pro golfer Dicky Pride (who took first place in the tournament), the site visit is the best part of the event. “Walking through the halls with Ernie and Liezl, it was apparent how much time and effort they have devoted to this place,” says Pride. “Ernie made every child feel important, and it was obvious that this was a calling for their family to help others. I was even more honored to play in the tournament after I saw the campus and how it helps so many families.” elsforautism.org ❖

UP NEXT

Help support Els for Autism at these upcoming events

February 20: **Second Annual Champagne, Clubs, and Chukkas**

Enjoy an exclusive outdoor brunch and polo match at the International Polo Club Palm Beach and watch as the world’s most elite teams compete for the coveted C.V. Whitney Cup and the chance to be crowned the 2022 Gauntlet of Polo Champion. elsforautism.org/ccc

April 30: **Third Annual Roots and Ruts Off-Road 5K**

This 5K race features a course through the North Jupiter Flatwoods Natural Area, a 160-acre preserve consisting of mesic flatwoods, wet flatwoods, depression marsh, and dome swamp ecosystems. The run finishes at the Els for Autism campus. elsforautism.org/5k

April to October: **Twelfth Annual Golf Challenge Series**

Golfers across the country can participate in a series of amateur golf tournaments taking place at top-rated golf courses in the United States and Canada to raise money for the foundation. e4golf.com



Cigar Aficionado Pro-Am Golf Tournament at the Old Palm Golf Club in Palm Beach Gardens, an event that draws famous athletes from near and far, all in support of the Els and their foundation.

"It's heartwarming to see so many golfers get together each year to support Els for Autism at the Pro-Am," says Els. "It's a fun day out on the course, and we all walk away from our round having had a blast, all while benefiting the programs and



Clockwise from far left: Vijay Singh takes dead aim during the "Closest to the Pin" contest; Charles Barkley takes a photo with two members of the foundation's Sea of Possibilities microbusiness program, which is part of the Adult Day Program; Cristie Kerr lines up her putt.

services we offer at the foundation."

It wasn't only golfers who hit the fairway for the cause—hockey great Wayne Gretzky, basketball Hall of Famer Charles Barkley, and former

MLB catcher Mike Piazza are just a few of the other athletes who played alongside PGA and LPGA pros. All coming together, these players managed to raise more than \$1 million that day to support the Els for Autism Foundation.

The money will help the foundation expand its services in Jupiter to assist not only children but also adults. Foundation Chair Marvin Shanken, editor and publisher of *Wine Spectator* and *Cigar Aficionado*, created the Pro-Am event alongside the Els family. He says donations from the tournament will help fund the construction of the future Adult Services Building and Employment Initiative, which will be dedicated to the needs of adults with autism and could potentially double the number of families currently served.

"Most programs for individuals with autism, like Ben, go until they are 21, but then it is more difficult for these folks to find opportunities to contribute to their local community," says Els. The new wing will focus on creating more local, regional, and national employment opportunities for adults with autism and help businesses assist employees impacted by autism. Says Els: "We are excited about continuing our expansion of the campus to provide a space for adults with autism."



Wayne Gretzky, Marvin Shanken, Jim Thome, and Nick Piazza



Charles Barkley (center), with Ernie Els (left) and Marvin Shanken, holds his trophies for "Closest to the Pin" hole 15 and "Longest Drive" hole 17.

TRACY BENSON

Since 2009, Ernie and Liezl Els have been helping children with autism and their families around the world through the Els for Autism Foundation. Here in Jupiter, The Els Center of Excellence offers tuition-free education for kids ages 3-21, with facilities that include a sensory arts garden, a practice golf course, playgrounds, therapy rooms, and an outdoor basketball/tennis court.

"Our son Ben has really thrived in an environment where he feels at home and is excited to attend each day," Els says of his 19-year-old son who is impacted by autism spectrum disorder. "We continue to strive to provide the best for these kids."

To fund such an array of programs and services, the nonprofit relies on donations and fundraising, hosting many events throughout the year. In December, the foundation held its thirteenth annual Wine Spectator and



TRACY BENSON