



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Els for Autism® and Dan Marino Foundation Launch Ernie Els #GameON Autism® Marino Adaptive Aquatics Certification Program

Jupiter, Fla. — Els for Autism and the Dan Marino Foundation today announced the launch of the Ernie Els #GameON Autism MARINO Adaptive Aquatics Certification Program, a specialized online certification that prepares aquatics professionals to safely and effectively serve individuals with developmental disabilities. The program supports water safety initiatives in Florida while expanding access to evidence-based, individualized aquatics instruction.

Drowning is the leading cause of death for children with autism, who are 160 times more likely to drown than their neurotypical peers (APD Florida, 2024). Since 2021, more than 100 children with autism have drowned in Florida, with Palm Beach County reporting the highest number of incidents (Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, 2024).

Originally established through Florida House Bill 1319 to address the heightened risk of drowning and limited access to appropriate swim instruction, the certification builds on the pioneering work of the Dan Marino Foundation and is now fully overseen by Els for Autism.

Following a comprehensive review, Els for Autism enhanced the certification to align with current best practices in aquatic safety, autism and developmental disabilities support, and inclusive instruction. The self-paced online course is available through a Learning Management System hosted by Els for Autism and provides evidence-based instruction in developmental disabilities, behavior support, communication strategies, and water safety. Florida aquatics professionals who maintain current certification through the Ernie Els #GameON Autism MARINO Adaptive Aquatics Certification Program may participate in the Florida Department of Health's Swim Lesson Voucher Program, helping increase access to adaptive swim instruction and water safety education for individuals with developmental disabilities.

"Nearly 20 years ago, the Dan Marino Foundation started the Marino Adaptive Aquatics Certification Program because every child deserves the opportunity to be safe and confident in and around the water," said Dan Marino. "I'm proud to see it continue to grow through our partnership with Els for Autism. The more instructors we train, the more families we can help and the more lives we can protect."

Upon completing the certification, instructors may continue their professional development through the Ernie Els #GameON Autism Aquatics Official Program Provider (OPP) training, helping expand access to safe, inclusive, and impactful aquatics programming for individuals and families in communities across Florida and beyond.

"For many individuals with autism, sports are more than recreation; they are a lifeline for mental and physical wellbeing," said Ernie Els. "Through the Ernie Els #GameON Autism Sports Program, we've seen how structured sports make a real difference. I've experienced the importance of water safety firsthand while swimming with my son, Ben. It's one of our favorite things to do together. For families like ours,



this work is essential. Expanding into aquatics is a lifesaving next step, and aligning the Marino Adaptive Aquatics Certification with our curriculum strengthens the support available to families."

The launch of the certification aligns with the development of the Specialized Autism Friendly Recreation Complex at The Els Center of Excellence® in Jupiter, Florida, scheduled to open in Spring 2027. The Aquatic Center will provide spaces for water safety instruction, swim lessons, and recreation for individuals with autism, their families, and the broader community.

"The time is now for our community to come together and prevent another tragedy by expanding access to safe swim practices for individuals with autism," said Dr. Erin Brooker Lozott, EdD, BCBA-D, CCC-SLP, Program Director of Els for Autism. "At Els for Autism, we are taking a proactive approach. We created an aquatics program designed specifically for how individuals with autism learn because no child should be at risk of drowning simply due to an attraction to water. By aligning certification, curriculum, and implementation, we are building a scalable model that expands lifesaving instruction locally and globally."

"We are grateful to the NCH Dan Marino Outpatient Center for more than twenty years of partnership and for helping certify hundreds of adaptive aquatics instructors who expanded safe, inclusive swim education," said Mary Partin, CEO of the Dan Marino Foundation. "We are confident this next chapter will extend its reach and impact even further."

The Ernie Els #GameON Autism Marino Adaptive Aquatics Certification Program is now available at www.elsforautism.org/aquatics-certification.

About Els for Autism®

Els for Autism is devoted to helping children and adults with autism and their families have a better life. Our purpose is to help people with autism of all abilities reach their fullest potential and live meaningful, fulfilling lives, while supporting the caregivers who walk alongside them.

Els for Autism was established in 2009 by Former World No. 1, World Golf Hall of Famer, and four-time Major Champion Ernie Els, his wife Liezl, and Publisher and Founder of M. Shanken Communications Marvin R. Shanken. The Els' son, Ben, is impacted by autism, and their personal journey inspired a lifelong commitment to creating better outcomes and brighter futures for individuals with autism.

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