

Saddlebrook Prep Is Successfully Mixing Elite Athletes With Academic-Only Students

By Joseph Stanziani

Neighborhood News Correspondent

In June 2023, Saddlebrook Preparatory School (aka Saddlebrook Prep or Saddlebrook Academy), traditionally known as a middle and high school educating elite golf and tennis athletes, began enrolling academic-only students. Currently, there are only three students in the academic-only program, representing less than 5% of the student population. However, the presence of these students has started to reshape how Saddlebrook Prep manages student life and academics as it adapts to serving both its elite athletic and academic-only students.

All three of the academic-only students live locally, in the Wesley Chapel and New Tampa area, and do not board at Saddlebrook Prep. The size of this local enrollment reflects the program's initial phase, which appeals to local residents rather than bringing in national or international students.

Patrick Farrell, the vice president of international sports at Saddlebrook Prep, said the academic-only program was started in response to the community growth in the Wesley Chapel and New Tampa areas. Farrell noted that Saddlebrook saw this as an opportunity to expand the school by allowing academic-only students to attend.

Deanna Garrett, head of Saddlebrook Prep School, has only nice things to say about the progress the academic-only students have made in integrating with the school's renowned student-athlete population.

"They get along very well, forming unique

friendships with friends from 18 different countries around the world," Garrett says. "It's really a joy to see how the different cultures all come together and accept each other."

Farrell further noted the improvement he has seen in students now interacting more across the two student groups than they did in the past.

"Now there are other things to have conversations about, other than the golfers staying only with the golfers and the tennis students staying with the tennis people," Farrell says. "There's now much more interaction between them as well as with our academic-onlys."

Farrell further explains that the inclusion of academic-only students also has increased participation in student life activities. "There are more kids for prom, more kids for the off-property events we do, and for our community outreach events at Saddlebrook Prep to benefit the community," he says.

Those events include Spirit Week; "Saddlebrookathon" (a four-day themed event with mid-morning games); and the Fun Run, a one-to two-mile fundraising event that supports



(L.-r.) Saddlebrook Preparatory School Head of School Deanna Garrett, Saddlebrook VP of international sports Patrick Farrell, director of racquet sports Sean McQuillan, director of golf instruction Mark Hirshey and golf instructor Jan-Michael Norman. (All photos on these pages by Charmaine George)

Saddlebrook Prep's prom. Additionally, students participate in volunteering, as part of their community service, with nonprofit organizations like the Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, and Metropolitan Ministries.

Saddlebrook Prep continues to follow its established academic structure and curriculum for both athletes and non-athletes. The school maintains a 10-to-1 student-teacher ratio and offers Advanced Placement (AP) courses, National Honor Society (NHS) participation, and STEM electives. The school has dual accreditation from the Florida Council of Independent Schools and from Cognia (a global nonprofit organization that provides accreditation and school improvement services to educational institutions).

While there are only three current academic-only students, past graduates are already attending college in the state.

Middle School Program

In regard to the Saddlebrook Prep middle school, Garrett reports that a majority of middle school students continue to stay at Saddlebrook Prep through high school. Garrett cites that the

school's athletic facilities are a prominent reason families continue to stay at the school.

"For the most part, our middle schoolers transition into high school once they've decided that this is the kind of training facility that they want to attend," she says. "A lot of times, our middle school students also have siblings who are in high school. So the family is here for both their children so they stay and move on to high school with us as well."

Even with the recent academic expansion at Saddlebrook Prep, athletics remain a major focus of the school's identity. Saddlebrook Prep does not participate in the Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSAA) circuit and therefore does not hold any state titles in tennis or golf. Instead, Saddlebrook Prep athletes compete nationally in tennis tournaments organized by the United States Tennis Association (USTA), the Intercollegiate Tennis Association (ITA), and Universal Tennis Rating (UTR). For golf, Saddlebrook participates in the Hurricane Junior Golf Tour (HJGT) and tournaments by the American Junior Golf Association (AJGA). Farrell says that Saddlebrook athletes have



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earned "a lot" of placements and trophies across these tournaments each year.

Recent graduates include Aline Krauter, a 2017 graduate who now competes on the LPGA Tour after playing at Stanford University and having won the U.S. Women's Amateur Championship in England in 2020; and Carl Billups, a 2020 graduate who earned his PGA Tour card for the 2024-25 season after being named the Korn Ferry Tour (the leading pathway to the PGA) Rookie of the Year and earning himself a "battlefield promotion." (Note-A battlefield promotion occurs when a golfer earns automatic advancement to a higher tour by winning three events in a single season.)

Other notable alumni include Andy Roddick, recognized as a Saddlebrook Prep alumnus because he trained there. Roddick went professional instead of attending college and rose to world No. 1, winning the U.S. Open and reaching multiple Grand Slam finals.

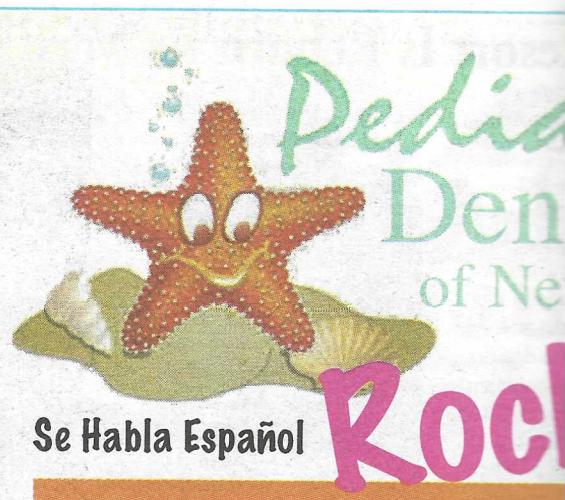
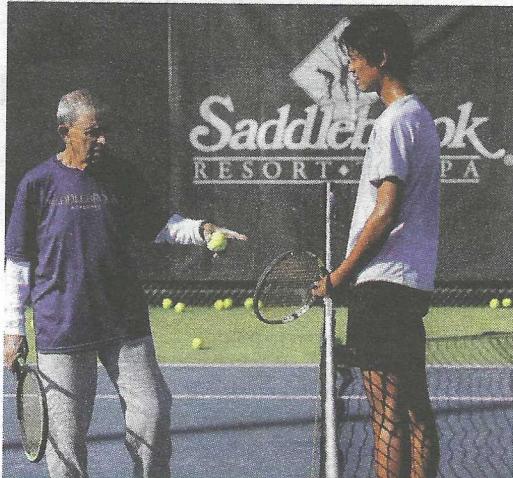
Keegan Bradley, also considered a Saddlebrook Prep alum because he trained for about a semester at the academy, became famous for winning the 2011 PGA Championship in his rookie year on the PGA Tour. Bradley has won a total of eight PGA Tour titles.

Along with Saddlebrook Prep's athletic reputation, the school has built a strong academic reputation for sending students to top-tier universities. Fourteen graduates, spanning from 2020-25, have attended top-tier universities including Stanford, Georgetown and New York University and U.S. military service academies. Out of the 38 students who graduated during those five years, 97 percent (37 students) went on to higher education.

For families intent on enrolling their children in the academic-only program at Saddlebrook Prep, the admissions process consists of a personal statement essay detailing their interest in attending the school, along with official transcripts from all previously attended schools. Due to Saddlebrook Prep's commitment to sustaining small classroom sizes and engaging learning environment, the evaluation process, conducted by faculty and leadership team members, can be rigorous. Tuition costs per academic year are \$25,000 for non-boarding students and \$48,275 for boarding students.

With only three academic-only students currently enrolled at Saddlebrook Prep and graduates beginning their college journeys, the program remains small, making it a great alternative to other area private high schools.

For more information about enrollment deadlines and the admissions process, call (813) 907-4300, visit SaddlebrookPrep.com or see the ad on pg. 31 of this issue.



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