

URBAN DESIGN

Neighborhood Schools

Walking to school is truly an uphill climb

By Mark Schnell



“When I was a kid, I walked to school! Uphill both ways! In the snow!”

This, of course, is what grumpy old men say to show ungrateful children how easy life is today.

In my case, this old joke is actually true. I grew up in Minnesota, so the snow was a given. I even walked uphill both ways. (My walk included a low point — a valley of sorts — that caused me to walk downhill and then immediately back uphill. This repeated on my walk home, so it’s accurate to say that I walked uphill both ways.)

Most shockingly, I actually walked to school.

The percentage of children walking or biking to school in America was already in decline when I was a child:

- In 1969, 48 percent of children, ages 5 to 14, usually walked or bicycled to school.
 - In 2009, 13 percent of ages 5 to 14, usually walked or bicycled to school.
 - In 1969, 41 percent of children in grades K–8 lived within one mile of school; 89 percent of these children usually walked or bicycled to school.
 - In 2009, 31 percent of children in grades K–8 lived within one mile of school; 35 percent of these children usually walked or bicycled to school.
- Source: SRTS Guide by the National Center for Safe Routes to School (guide.saferoutesinfo.org).

I’m happy I walked to school, despite some memorable brutal winter mornings. It gave me some exercise, helped me clear my head (and wake up in the mornings), and was part of the process of learning to be indepen-

dent.

Sadly, in today’s seemingly ubiquitous “sprawl” development pattern, parents who choose driving or bus-sing over walking or biking are often making rational choices within a difficult situation. In a survey by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, parents cited “distance to school” (61.5 percent) and “traffic-related danger” (30.4 percent) as the two biggest barriers to walking or biking to school (from the SRTS Guide by the National Center for Safe Routes to School: guide.saferoutesinfo.org). Those parents get an A+ and a smiley sticker, because they are absolutely correct. True neighborhood schools are an endangered species. Schools are now built on giant campuses that are often a long distance from residential neighborhoods. (This is sometimes due to state governments that require a minimum acreage for a school.) And even when a family lives close to a school, the streets often lack the sidewalks, low vehicular speeds,

crosswalks, etc., that make walking a safe and viable option.

These are big problems that will not be solved quickly or easily, in part because we’ve built so much sprawl that it will take a while to dig ourselves out of this hole. In 2005, the U.S. Congress passed transportation legislation that created the Safe Routes to School program. This ultimately resulted in nearly \$1 billion in federal funding for safe routes to school. It’s encouraging to see the successes of this program, as well as other efforts. At the same time, I feel like this is “parsley on a pig” until we stop repeating the same mistakes with how we build schools and neighborhoods.

Speaking of repeating the same mistakes, let’s look at our home in Walton County as an example. Years ago, when my wife and I were active in our daughter’s school, the administration told us that they were not buying land or building schools because they were not expecting much growth in South Walton. We knew at the time that such thinking would prove to be a mistake. The area continued to grow (with a brief slowdown during the Great Recession), and we are now

dealing with a rather predictable influx of new residents in booming South Walton and, of course, overburdened schools. Now the school district is looking to build some new facilities. Where are they planning to buy land? The short answer is “wherever they can,” because large tracts of undeveloped land are now expensive and increasingly difficult to find. If the new plans are anything like recent school construction, they will place the school far from existing neighborhoods in a big undeveloped field. A little planning for future growth could have helped this situation immensely.

But we can overcome a lack of foresight. New schools can be built within the context of a neighborhood, whether that neighborhood exists today or not. It works very well for a school to be an early anchor for a new neighborhood. It’s considered an amenity and selling point in many new developments. But the school district, the county government, and the surrounding landowners and developers need to make a plan to integrate the school into future development. That neighborhood

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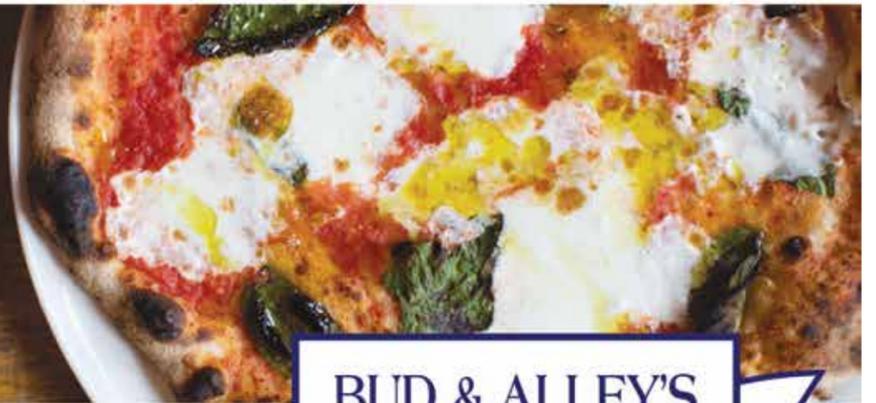
The Seaside Neighborhood School (grades 5-8) was built with the idea of kids being able to walk or bike to school. Photo courtesy Seaside archives

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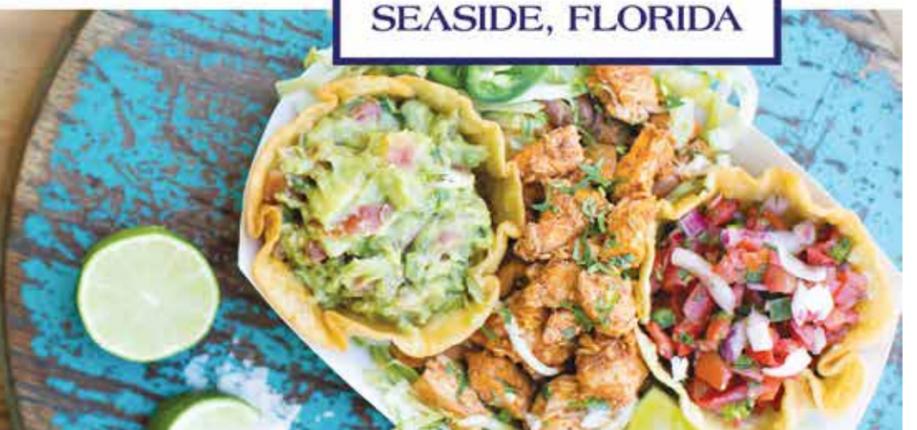


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Back to the Basics

Keeping the fundamentals of tennis in mind is still the best way to excel at your next match

By Tracy Townsend



Tennis is a great game. It is complex, confusing and overwhelming. And it is exhilarating and rewarding and just plain fun. I think that to really enjoy the game, you need to revisit the basics from time to time. Here are my ideas.

“Turn, step and swing” is about as simple as it gets. But when all these components come together at the right time, your game gets better. Watching your opponent hit the ball tells you which way to turn. The next move is to move that direction to the ball and step into the shot. And finally, a complete swing of some sort needs to be decided on and made as smoothly as possible. I’d be a wealthy instructor if I could get you to do this every time.

“Turn.” It sounds so simple, and yet it seems almost impossible for you to do over and over. I probably say “turn” about 20 or 30 times a day to my clients attempting to hit the ball. They stick their arm and racket out to the side on a volley, and I think sometimes they hope the ball hits the racket. If you don’t turn your upper body toward the contact position, your arm is just out there by itself. Your eyes aren’t even able to see the ball clearly because you are facing forward and the ball is out to your side.

Try this fix: Line the racket up with your nose in front of your face, and as the ball comes over the net, turn your whole upper body toward the ball with your nose pointing at the ball. You have now turned everything and can see the ball better to stick your arm out toward the volley.

“Step.” In so many sports, you need to get your body weight involved in forward movement. Tennis is no exception. In a perfect world, you would be so much better off if you could step forward into every shot. It’s almost impossible to always step forward, though, as the game

has gotten faster. Shots now have to be hit from awkward positions, while you’re off balance and when you’re falling backwards. But, if you have time, it would greatly increase your effectiveness if you could step forward into the shot. Keep your shoulders square to the ground and push your body weight into the direction of the shot.

“Swing.” There are so many ways to swing at the ball. Topspin is created by swinging low to high with a closed racket face. Slice is created by swinging high to low with an open racket face. A straight, flat swing with a flat racket face hits a straight, flat ball. And then there are about a million variations. Watch Rafa. Watch Roger. Both have full swings, but they are very different. Some swings have short backswings. Some have long backswings. The point is to choose the correct swing for you, at the correct time, and commit to making a good, smooth pass through the ball. Not to the ball and stop, but swing through the contact position into the proper finish position.

My job security is that, no matter how many times I explain these simple tips to people, they don’t always remember them or do them correctly. Bottom line, keep the basics in mind. “Turn, step, swing.” And come see me for more help! 🍎

Tracy Townsend is a resort tennis expert, and his company, 30A Tennis, manages Seaside Tennis on behalf of the Seaside Community Development Corp. Reach him at tennis@seasidefl.com or call (850) 231-2214. For news, events and court conditions, find Seaside Tennis on Facebook.

Fall Pro Shop Hours:

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must be designed in such a way that children can safely and comfortably walk or bike to school. It simply doesn’t work to drop a giant school into an isolated field and hope that the surrounding development connects to it in a useful and safe way.

We have a couple of excellent neighborhood schools in South Walton, so we are not without models. The Seaside Neighborhood School is well integrated into Seaside, thanks to the community’s visionary plan. And the private Ohana Institute is an innovative and unconventional school that eschews the “campus in the isolated field” model and essentially uses the town of Rosemary Beach as its campus. These are small schools in resort towns, but they demonstrate the right principles. None of this is to say that an especially high number of children walk to these schools, but a child could reasonably walk or bike to them because they are within a truly walkable neighborhood, and that’s the goal. Bay Elementary is nicely embedded in the Point Washington, and could be very walkable with some pedestrian infrastructure improvements. Currently, there aren’t even sidewalks on County Road 395 near the school.

Why worry about whether kids can walk or bike to school? There are plenty of reasons. We are dealing with a childhood obesity epidemic in America, and this can be traced back, in part, to lack of basic exercise like walking. All of these parents shuttling their children adds traffic to already clogged streets. And that driving also translates to pollution and energy consumption.

Reducing bus usage could save money for school districts. And finally, walking to school helps teach kids how to navigate the world on their own.

In Florida, we don’t have many hills, so we don’t need to worry much about walking “uphill both ways.” And we certainly don’t have much snow. So we are completely out of excuses. We need to build schools and communities that encourage kids to walk and bike. 🍎

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrave Beach. Among his most prominent projects are three new urban beach communities on the Texas coast: Cinnamon Shore, Palmilla Beach and Sunflower Beach. Learn more about his firm Schnell Urban Design at SchnellUrbanDesign.com.

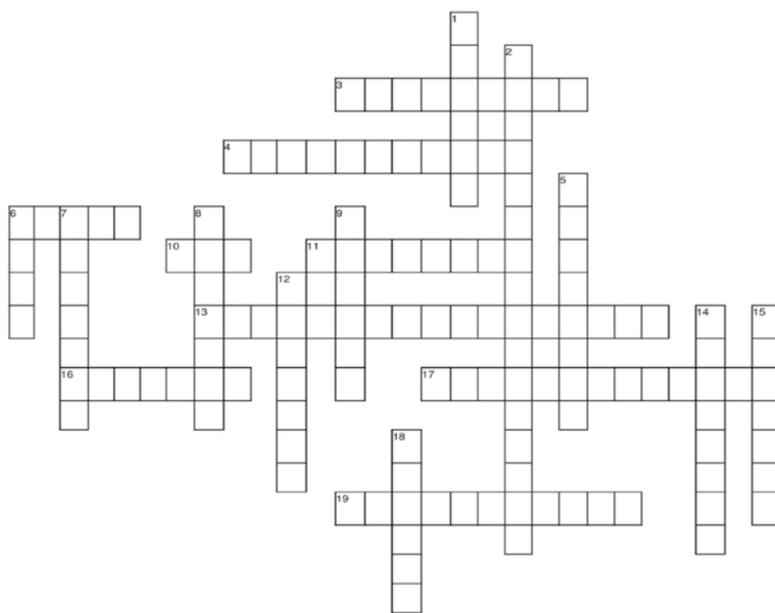
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SEASIDE® Crossword Puzzle



Across:

- Favorite area wine tasting and festival, The _____ Wine Festival (two words)
- Special performance from the Pensacola Symphony Orchestra in Seaside on December 17
- Cold-blocking neck ware often worn with a jacket during the winter
- Big-screen holiday favorite starring Will Ferrell as one of Santa’s helpers
- Sentimental or decorative item hung on a tree during Christmastime
- Traditional holiday ballet with a Seaside twist (two words)
- Four-side spinning top enjoyed during Hanukkah
- Annual holiday lighting event in Seaside (four words)
- The third ingredient of the favorite fall campfire food s’mores: graham cracker, chocolate and _____

Down:

- A great local spot for buying holiday gifts for the readers on your list
- Loveable, frozen man often celebrated in a famous holiday song (three words)
- Common side dish served at Thanksgiving; Turkey and _____
- White, fluffy precipitation that rarely visits Seaside during the holidays
- Local java spot, perfect for a steamy cup of hot cocoa
- Warm, fuzzy material often seen in plaid shirts during the colder months
- Circular holiday door decoration, often made of living greens and adorned with bows
- Anti-hero of Charles Dickens’ well-loved tale, A Christmas Carol
- Footwear hung by the chimney with care on Christmas Eve
- Jewish holiday symbol often lighted symbolically around Hanukkah
- Large, juicy bird traditionally shared by families at Thanksgiving

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