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Little did Coach Roy Richardson realize what he was getting into when he volunteered to teach an elective course at Alba Middle School back in 2004.

He only knew that his love for the outdoors and hunting should make a good match with the new Archery in Schools Program.

However, he never realized it would mushroom into the program that reaches beyond the school and into the south Mobile County communities that send students to Alma Bryant High School.

Because of a cut in funds, teachers who taught elective courses were in short supply in 2004 and Larry Mouton, middle school principal, asked Richardson to consider the archery program.

"I like to hunt, but I didn't archery hunt," Richardson admitted. "I thought I would give it a try and it just kind of took off."

Alba won state titles in team and individual competition in 2004 and 2005. When Mouton became principal at Alma Bryant, he asked Richardson to implement the archery program at the high school in Irvington.

Following the middle school tradition, Alma Bryant won state team titles in 2006 and 2007. The team also traveled to Louisville, Ky., for the national competition and finished ninth in 2006 and seventh in 2007.

The youths shoot an Olympic-style format with 15 shots from 10 yards and 15 shots from 15 yards at an 80-centimeter (31.5 inches) target. The yellow circle in the middle scores a 10.

The equipment in the program is universal. Shooters use Mathews Genesis bows with no sights. The arrows are the same type and length, giving every participant an equal chance.

"The highest score is 300, but it's kind of like bowling, a 300 score is rare," Richardson said. "There was one kid who scored 298 in the nationals, but that's the best I've seen."

"The thing our kids get a kick out of is a 'Robin Hood.' That's when you have one arrow in the 10 and then split that arrow with your next shot. You don't see that every day."

When Richardson got to the high school, he wasn't sure how well the older students would adopt the new program.

"When kids get to high school, they tend to go in all directions," he said. "But we haven't had any problems filling the classes. In fact, because we've won like we have, it's snowballed. It's an elective for half credit. They take it because it's hands-on. And we've got all kinds of kids who don't fit in with traditional sports who can shoot archery. I coached football for 22-23 years and gave it up to do this and coach basketball. The thing about archery that's different is the more relaxed you are, usually the better you do. It's a mental discipline. You slow down, breathe, consider your arrow flight and what to do to make it right. In the process of shooting don't jerk and try to see where the arrow lands. That's hard even for adults."

"The one thing about our program I've drilled into them is safety. One stupid, not-thinking action and the program could be shut down. The kids understand that No. 1 they've got to be safe."

Because classes are always full, an archery club was formed to accommodate others who want to shoot after school. Also a 3-D archery range was built behind the baseball field.

Now Richardson wants to take it a step further.

"We're trying to get funds to build an environmental building that can be used for archery, ROTC and environmental sciences," he said. "We're reaching a lot of kids that are taking a great deal of pride in this program. This facility would help us tremendously. I try to instill in the kids that no matter what you do, you've got to get after it like you're going to be the best. If you want to have success in life like we have in this archery program, you've got to work hard."

"I could go on for days highlighting the positive impact our archery program is having in this community. We owe a great debt of gratitude for continuing support from DCNR personnel such as James Altieri, Marissa Sasser, Ray Metzler, et al (Stuart Goldsby coordinates the archery program in north Alabama). They are doing a fine job of managing all of the 'growth pains' that come with running a program such as this."

For those who would like to check out the archery program first-hand, the Alma Bryant High School Archery Club will host a 3-D archery tournament from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Oct. 6. The 3-D range consists of 25 life-size targets of all types. Youth, seniors and traditional bow enthusiasts are encouraged to attend. Contact Richardson at 251-455-9192 for more information.

"It is our hope that some of our shooters will continue to enjoy this sport after high school and indeed through life," Richardson said.

Metzler, Hunter Education Coordinator for the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, said that's the department's goal, as well.

"This is a way for our agency to get kids into a life skill that they can do from the time they start this program until they are grandparents," Metzler said. "We assist the teacher when we implement the program. The kids meet us and get to ask about who we are and what we do. They get to see us in a positive way."

Metzler said Alba Middle School and Alma Bryant High School are just two of the schools that have excelled in the archery program.

“Charles Henderson Middle School in Troy has done really well and it actually has two volunteers run its after-school program,” Metzler said. “They have 40-something kids that practice almost the whole year. BTW Magnet School and Floyd Middle Magnet School also has excellent programs. Riverton Middle School in Huntsville is another one. Miss Kay Scott at Riverton wasn’t an archer at all. We introduced the program to them, and now she takes her kids to 3-D shoots in Alabama and Tennessee.

“The program has been more successful than I could have imagined. More than 100 schools in the program and we’ve had a steady increase. We didn’t know how well it would be received. Archery has been around for a long time, but we feel this has rejuvenated archery in the state.”

PHOTOS:

Top: The Archery in Schools Program has been a big hit at Alma Bryant High School in Mobile County as indicated by the number of students involved in the program.

Bottom: Bryant Hautau, reigning individual champion in the state Archery in Schools Program, takes a shot on Bryant High School's new 3-D range that is located behind the school's baseball field.

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