

ONE HUNDREDTH ISSUE

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**Mario
Vilardi**

EYES ON AUGUSTA

POWERED BY



Photo by Louisa Vilardi

Mario Vilardi: Headed to Augusta National

A YOUNG GOLFER'S JOURNEY TO THE DRIVE, CHIP & PUTT FINALS

By Jeanne Cotroneo Darrow and Lauren Fitzgerald | Photos by Louisa Vilardi



At just 10 years old, Mario Driviano Vilardi is headed to Augusta to compete in the Drive, Chip & Putt National Finals.

It's an early Sunday morning in East Fishkill, but the Vilardi garage is already abuzz—the golf simulator humming beneath the steady thump of club against ball. A 10-year-old boy resets his stance with a seriousness beyond his years. This is Mario Vilardi's daily routine—many miles from Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia but where the dream of reaching it has taken root.

In April, Mario will step onto one of the most iconic venues in all of sports to compete in the Drive, Chip & Putt National Finals at Augusta National. Only 80 children nationwide earn that honor each year across all age divisions after advancing through a demanding series of local, subregional, and regional

qualifiers. Mario, competing in the 10–11 age division, is one of just three children from New York to qualify and the only boy.

It's fitting for a young man whose middle name is Driviano. When his mother, Louisa, was pregnant, she and her husband, David, struggled to decide on the middle name for their first child.

Louisa recalls that David suggested the name Drive, hoping his son would grow up to love golf. Wanting a more natural pronunciation for her Italian-speaking parents and quietly hoping he might reconsider, Louisa suggested several names. But then David proposed an Italian twist on Drive itself. A playful idea at the time, the name Driviano now feels almost prophetic.

MAKING PAPA PROUD

Golf came into the picture early. David, an avid golfer, introduced Mario to the game through family mini-golf outings and casual practice sessions in the garage, where father and son chipped balls into a net long before the simulator was installed. By age 3, Mario was going to the driving range with David and his father, another dedicated golfer named Mario but affectionately called Papa. “Even at that age, he consistently made good contact and chipped the ball surprisingly well,” says David.

By age 5, Mario was hitting solid shots on the course, and his interest remained strong. “If it involved sports, he was all in,” adds Louisa.

As Mario’s skills advanced, his competitive opportunities increased. He began playing mainly through U.S. Kids Golf and also participated in Drive, Chip & Putt competitions starting at age 7. The Drive, Chip & Putt initiative—a partnership between the United States Golf Association, Augusta National Golf Club, and the PGA of America—is designed to introduce young players to the game’s basic skills while encouraging sportsmanship and fun. Open to boys and girls ages 7–15, the program is highly competitive.

Every year, thousands of young golfers compete in local qualifiers, but only one winner per age group advances from each of the 10 regions across the country to the final at Augusta National, held each year on the Sunday before the Masters Tournament. This year, the championship will be held Sunday, April 5 and broadcast live on Golf Channel and NBC Sports digital platforms.

While Mario competed in Drive, Chip & Putt events each of the last four years, he didn’t advance beyond the subregionals. This year, everything aligned.

“Mario performed exceptionally well in driving,” David recalls. Chipping proved more challenging, but Mario stayed composed—a trait his parents have seen develop as he’s matured in the sport.

When it came time to putt, the pressure was unmistakable. Mario sank his 6-foot and 15-foot putts. The third, a 30-footer, rolled just past the hole. It was enough.

When the scores were tallied, Mario had secured first place.

“He couldn’t stop smiling or sit still,” Louisa recalls. “He was beyond excited, and we were incredibly proud.”

One of Mario’s favorite moments came soon after—surprising Papa with the news that he was going to Augusta. “That was really fun,” says the grinning young Mario.

NEVER GIVE UP

Ask Mario what it feels like to play golf at such a high level, and his answer is honest and direct. “Nerves are at your highest peak,” he says, “and you always have to follow through even when you’re really nervous.” It’s advice he offers other kids, too, along with the young man’s very grown-up mantra: “Never give up.”

He leans on that mental resilience in other sports, too. Mario plays soccer with the East Fishkill Scorpions and travel basketball through Saint Mary’s CYO, giving him experience in both team and individual competition. Golf, however, is different. “In soccer and basketball, you rely on teammates,” David says. “In golf, it’s just you. That’s helped him grow in a different way.”

So too are Mario’s brothers. Charlie, 8, is a competitive golfer in his own right, often playing in the same tournaments as Mario, just in different age divisions, and they practice together frequently. Angelo, 3, has taken on his own role at the course. He loves riding in the golf cart, eating snacks, and playing on the putting green.

Most tournaments fall on weekends or during the summer, minimizing disruption to schoolwork. The family also makes a point to turn competitions into shared experiences. “Traveling for golf has allowed us to build family vacations around tournaments,” Louisa says. “It makes it about more than just the sport.”



Mario practices every day using the golf simulator in the garage of the Vilardis’ East Fishkill home.

Mario being interviewed by the Golf Channel after winning the regional qualifier at The Ridgewood Country Club.



Mario is the namesake of his grandfather, pictured here with Mario’s grandmother, Susan Vilardi, and his brother, Charlie (left).

Papa often caddied for his grandson Mario, as pictured here at the U.S. Kids Golf World Championship.



PROUD MOMENT IN PINEHURST

Mario's proudest moment so far was at the U.S. Kids Golf World Championship in Pinehurst in 2022. "I shot one-under par in the first round and was in the final group for round two," he says.

Pinehurst also holds a special place in his heart. "The most fun course is The Cradle," he says, though his favorite competitive course remains Ridgewood Country Club in New Jersey. When asked about dream courses beyond Augusta, his answer is immediate: "Pinehurst #2."

Like many young athletes, Mario admires professionals who embody his style and intensity. His role model is Bryson DeChambeau, known for his power and analytical approach to the game—traits Mario respects and, in some ways, imitates.

As April nears, excitement grows. Augusta National coordinates every detail of the experience, allowing the Vilardis to concentrate on the experience itself. For the family, the location means even more. In 2016, David and Papa attended the final round of the Masters together. Now, returning—this time with Mario competing at Augusta National—feels like coming full circle.

What would a win mean? Mario doesn't hesitate. "a LOT," he smiles.

Yet his parents are careful to keep expectations grounded. "It's too early to tell what his future in golf looks like," David says. "His favorite sport changes with the seasons, and ultimately it will be his decision depending on how hard he wants to work as he gets older."

What they do want Mario to gain from this experience has little to do with trophies or scores. "We hope it shows him the opportunities that come from hard work, focus, and determination," says Louisa, "both on and off the course."



The Vilardi family—Charlie (8), David holding Angelo (3), Louisa, and Mario (10)—pose at the iconic Putter Boy statue in Pinehurst, N.C.

The 2026 Drive, Chip & Putt National Finals will air live on Sunday, April 5, on the Golf Channel and across NBC Sports digital platforms. To learn more, visit drivechipandputt.com. ♦

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