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Past Is Prologue

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Notes From The

FIELD

Past Is Prologue

After years of struggle and disarray, Furman's women's golf program is returning to its roots—and its identity—as a powerhouse.

BY RON WAGNER '93

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JEREMY FLEMING '09

A photograph of three young women sitting on a grassy hill, dressed in early 20th-century golf attire. The woman on the left wears a dark blue checkered dress and a red hat. The woman in the middle wears a light green dress with a blue bow and a brown hat with a large bow. The woman on the right wears a red jacket over a black and red patterned dress and a dark, textured hat. They are all smiling and looking towards the right. The background shows trees and a clear blue sky.

GREEN MACHINES

What better way to be reminded of what Furman's women's golf team was, and is fast becoming again, by dressing in period costume? From left: Jacqueline Bendrick, Alice Chen, Taylor Totland, Mary McRaney, Valentina Romero, Laura DeMarco, and Reona Hirai.

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n September 23, 2014, Taylor Totland '17 and the Furman women's golf team dominated their home tournament, the Lady Paladin Invitational. Totland crushed a field of 96 by seven strokes with the best score in the event's 42-year history as she and her teammates routed 17 other schools—including the likes of Wake Forest, Texas Tech, Florida State, and Yale—by 22 shots.

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DEMURELY DANGEROUS

To many, women's golf is inarguably the sport that defines Furman athletics and the arena where the university has achieved its greatest success as an incubator of professional talent. In addition to the players, the above photograph depicts coach Kelley Hester and assistant coach Jeff Hull.

To casual fans, the reaction was probably one of yawning satisfaction—Furman has been taking pride in women's golf for years. But many would be surprised to learn the victory was Furman's first at the Lady Paladin since 2005, or that the team hadn't won a competition of any sort since 2009—also the last year it won the Southern Conference. In fact, Furman's last appearance at the NCAA tournament, which from 1974 to 1999 it competed in 80 percent of the time, is going on seven years and counting. All of which reveals an unsettling

truth: The sport that arguably defines Furman athletics and inarguably the sport where the university has achieved its greatest success has been in a steady decline for more than a decade, bottoming out with the firing of a coach and concerns that the school wasn't funding the sport adequately.

LEGENDS ON "THE FALL" Furman's slide was watched with dismay by the legendary alumnae who formed the bedrock of the program. "I lived in the area until 2002. I practiced there and I saw the way

things were going," says **Dottie Pepper '87**, a three-time All-American who finished second at the 1985 NCAA tournament. Pepper is one of the most famous former Paladins in any arena, a well-known golf analyst who has worked for The Golf Channel, *Sports Illustrated*, NBC, and currently ESPN, after an outstanding pro career highlighted by 17 LPGA Tour wins, including two majors; 110 top-10 finishes; and the 1992 LPGA Player of the Year award. Remarkably, she's only one of several highly decorated former Furman golfers.

Betsy King '77 won 34 LPGA tournaments, including six majors. **Beth Daniel '78** posted 35 victories with a major of her own. Both are in the World Golf Hall of Fame.

These women's dominance—earning five of the six LPGA Tour Player of the Year honors from 1989 to 1994—is one no school will likely top. And Furman's professional golf resume doesn't end there: At least 17 former Paladins have competed at the sport's highest level, combining to win 94 times and more than \$30.5 million.

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JACQUELINE BENDRICK '18



ALICE CHEN '18



MARY MCRANEY '17

Women's golf began at Furman in 1972, and by 1974 the Paladins were a power. King, Daniel, and **Cindy Ferro '76** led Furman to third- and fifth-place finishes at the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) national tournament before **Sherri Turner '79** joined the fold in 1976, and they toppled Nancy Lopez and Tulsa to capture the first and only Division I golf national championship in school history.

The feat that year was all the more impressive considering Furman had almost no scholarship money and no recruiting or travel budget. In the ensuing years, Furman's women's golf survived the graduations of their early stars—as well as coaching changes from Gary Meredith to Willie Miller to Mic Potter—and remained a national contender.

From 1974 to 1999, the teams played in 20 AIAW/NCAA tournaments and

finished in the top 10 six more times, including a heart-breaking second in 1987. The closest thing to a constant for the program was Potter, who took over in 1983 and worked so much annual magic with a limited budget that it was easy to forget just how difficult it is to be so good so often with so little. But Furman was about to remember the hard way.

Potter coached the Lady Paladins for 18 years, leading them to eight NCAA tournaments in the 1990s alone. Around the millennium, however, cracks began to show. Furman, which had never missed the national competition more than twice in a row in school history, didn't make it past regionals for four straight seasons from 2000 to 2003. Whispers began that reality was catching up to years of getting by on a shoestring budget.

Furman found its way back to the NAAs in 2004 and 2005 behind Jenny Suh; another big jump seemed likely

in 2006 with the addition of outstanding freshmen Kathleen Ekey and **Blair Lamb '09**. Then Potter stunned the program by announcing he was leaving for Alabama. Suh and Sarah Sturm transferred to Tuscaloosa weeks later, and the unraveling began.

"I went [to Furman] for the pros that went there and women's golf history there, but the number one reason I went there left," says Lamb, who backed out of her Vanderbilt commitment to play for Potter. "I was an incoming freshman and I thought they're playing a prank on us. He said 'I'm leaving,' and I got off the phone

and I cried. I cried and I cried, and I didn't know what to do."

The Furman administration scrambled to find a replacement before settling on **Jen Hanna '98**, an outstanding player who competed on the Tour, but one with no coaching experience. In some former players' minds, it wasn't the best fit. Lamb and **Stefanie Kenoyer '11**, now on the Symetra Tour, captured SoCon individual titles, but the Paladins managed only one NCAA tournament in Hanna's eight years, in 2008. Worse, Furman wasn't signing the elite talent it once had. In Pepper's analysis, the lack of success in

FURMAN'S SLIDE WAS WATCHED WITH DISMAY BY LEGENDARY ALUMNAE. "I LIVED IN THE AREA UNTIL 2002. I SAW THE WAY THINGS WERE GOING."

—DOTTIE PEPPER '87, WHO HAS 17 LPGA TOUR VICTORIES



A STORIED CLUB

Along with her teammates, Reona Hirai '18 is part of a promising new generation of Furman golfers.

TO EXPECT FURMAN TO MATCH DOLLARS WITH BEHEMOTHS LIKE ALABAMA IS UNREALISTIC, EVEN IN A SPORT LIKE WOMEN'S GOLF, AND THE FINANCIAL ARMS RACE THAT BEGAN IN THE 1990s HAS BEEN DIFFICULT ON LIBERAL ARTS SCHOOLS.

recruiting in those years was detrimental. “The players who were there were not motivated and not happy,” she says.

Ekey followed Suh and Sturm to Alabama following the 2007 season, and in 2012, after Furman failed to qualify for regionals for the second season in a row, Hanna was let go—a little more than a month after Potter’s Crimson Tide won the national championship. With the talent level lower than it had ever been, it was critical to make the correct coaching call this time. But that wasn’t the only issue that needed to be addressed.

DOLLARS AND SENSE

To expect Furman to match dollars with behemoths like Alabama is unrealistic, even in a sport like women’s golf, and the financial arms race that began in the 1990s has been particularly difficult on small liberal arts schools. Potter never publicly blamed his leaving on lack of resources, but some of his players did.

“I think all of us figured he’d retire [at Furman]. I don’t think Furman ever really appreciated what Mic did for the girls on the golf team,” **Sarah (Johnston) Sargent '04** told

Alabama’s student paper, *The Crimson White*, at the time.

“To us, he was never given the benefits he could have been given.”

Furman athletic director **Gary Clark '74**, who has been on the job since 2000, admits the school embraced the status quo too enthusiastically. “Not so much cuts as the budget didn’t grow to keep pace with the additional costs to compete on a national level,” he says. “I do not think we had the resources in place, bottom line.”

Clark says Furman does not disclose the size of specific

athletic budgets, but the school estimated it would save \$375,000–\$400,000 annually when it proposed the elimination of the men’s golf team in February of 2014 as part of an effort to make up a \$6.4 million budget deficit. It’s likely more is spent on the women, which is a lot to be sure, but a drop in the bucket compared to what major Division I programs devote to the sport.

Golf alumni rallied to save the men’s program. Specifics weren’t released, though at the time of the announcement of the elimination Clark said

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it would take a \$9 million endowment to earn enough interest to pay for the program.

That's not as unusual as it may sound. All athletic departments rely on donations for the majority of their funding, and at a school like Furman, with a small enrollment and a small alumni base, those donations become even more important.

"Alums often ask: 'Why do you need our support? Isn't Furman supporting the program?' To be competitive at a high level, particularly a national level, it takes a lot of resources," Clark says. "Furman invests a tremendous amount of money every year in the athletic department. We're talking millions. [But] in this day and age, you cannot be successful without the passion, commitment, and investment of your alums and friends of the program in any sport at any level.... It's all Division I schools that find themselves in that position."

Kelley Hester was shocked when she was fired after five seasons by Georgia, her *alma mater*, a week before Hanna was let go. She reached out to Potter about the Furman opening. Hester had started the women's golf program at Nevada-Las Vegas and coached Stacy Lewis, currently the second-ranked woman in the world, at Arkansas before taking the Georgia job. Coaches with those credentials don't usually end up at places like Furman, but places like Furman don't usually have alumnae like King, Daniel, Pepper, and **Cindy Davis '84**, who finished second in the 1983 NCAA tournament and was the president of Nike Golf until she retired in October. They, along with longtime benefactor Scott Timmons Hipp, came up with the money needed.



VALENTINA ROMERO '16



LAURA DEMARCO '15

"I think with Furman's budget they were thinking there was no way they were going to be able to hire an experienced coach. They were largely looking at a pool of assistant coaches or people with not a lot of coaching experience," says Hester, who knew Furman's accomplished players mostly by reputation. "[They] pitched in so that it could even happen."

It wasn't the first time. But the question for the alumnae was: How much longer would they be supporting the program at this level?

In King's day, the concept of an athletic scholarship was a fantasy to women. Gary Meredith didn't even make the trip to Michigan to coach in the 1976 national tournament because there was no money to send him. This approach, however, made for a lot of parity. "When I was playing it wasn't unusual for

a small school to be able to compete with a larger school because at that time none of the colleges were putting a lot of money into women's athletics," King says.

Those times have passed, and King recognized early in her pro career that if Furman women's golf was to remain nationally relevant it needed help. Exactly how much alumnae have spent on the women's program over the years is not public knowledge, but it's safe to say the amount has been substantial.

King created the hugely successful Furman Pro-Am in 1982, and before it was discontinued in 2005 the tournament raised more than \$2 million and created an endowment that pays for more than two of the six women's scholarships. Significant individual gifts also built Furman's REK Center for Intercollegiate Golf.

"[The endowment] allows us to offer the full number of scholarships the NCAA allows us to offer," Clark says. "In addition to that, through donations we can enhance some salaries, some operating budgets, so that we can compete where we need to and we can attract the kind of coaching it takes to compete on that level. [Alumni] make the difference. Furman provides the basics, but it's the alumni giving, and that's true in cross-country and football and a number of our other sports."

Furman's golf alums don't mind giving. But they aren't sure they agree with the school's definition of "basics" when it comes to sustaining a nationally competitive women's golf program.

"Beth and Betsy and I donated significantly back in the mid-90s to get the REK Center and the practice facility up,



FORE!

Even when Taylor Totland '17 fakes a shot, she impresses.

Notes from the Field

and then we also contribute to the program to keep Kelley's compensation competitive," Pepper says. "There's going to have to be more money infused into the program. The guys' [team] faced that. Eventually, the girls are probably going to be in that same boat, and we're going to have to figure out a way to control the cost of a liberal arts education plus also raise more money in some sort of fashion."

Daniel agrees that the alumnae can only sustain the team at this level for so long. "The money is definitely not there for women's golf that we would like to see, [or] men's golf. All of us pretty much donate every year to the program to help them survive. It gets kind of frustrating at times."

King knows Furman will never have an SEC budget, but she also believes Furman can—and should—do more to keep its flagship program afloat.

"You always feel like you don't get the support that you need, but really a sport like golf is the only chance that Furman is going to have to be in the national spotlight. They're not going to have a national championship Division I basketball team or football team," she says. "We're not asking for parity with the larger Division I schools, but it would be good to have the tools that are necessary to stay [nationally relevant]."

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Three seasons in, the investment in Hester seems to be a sound one. "Kelley recruited me when she was at Arkansas," Lamb says. "I feel so lucky that she's at Furman. She's a great coach. She's turning Furman around, which really needed to happen."

Hester has made recruiting a top focus, with an emphasis on grabbing the best South

Carolina players that had started eluding Furman's grasp. "We've been able to get better by helping our current players improve, but at the end of the day the number one way to get good fast is to recruit better players than what you have," Hester says.

On the current roster, only **Laura DeMarco '15** is a senior. Totland finished the fall season with a sizzling 71.8 average, followed by freshman **Jacqueline Bendrick '18**, junior **Valentina Romero '16**, and freshman **Alice Chen '18**. After bottoming out in the 80s, the Paladins are 26th in the latest national poll, and Chattanooga's five-year stranglehold on the Southern Conference appears to be in serious jeopardy, as is Furman's NCAA tournament drought.

Even better, Haylee Harford, the second-ranked player in Ohio, joins the program next season, as does Annika Bovender, the third-ranked player in South Carolina. "We have four players in the top six in the conference, which is how it used to be," Hester says. "My goal is not just to win the conference but to have five of the top five players in the conference."

It's too early to think about the Lady Paladins getting another national championship or reopening an LPGA pipeline, but when Pepper received an award at the Mercedes-Benz Intercollegiate in Knoxville, TN, the players saw for themselves how much the program means to those who built it. "Dottie was tearful," Hester says. "She said, 'I just can't tell you how happy I am my Paladins are back in the top 30.'"

More difficult to quantify but no less important is the difference in the mood. Hester deserves credit for that as well. "For several years there was a

lot of negative energy around the whole women's golf deal here, and with what happened with the men, too, there was just kind of a dark cloud," Hester says. "This semester there's been like this rainbow that popped out."

The alumnae have noticed. "Every time I go by Furman, you can see it in their faces and just how much they enjoy being at practice," Kenoyer says. "It's a really neat thing to see. [Hester] is doing fantastic things."

"She's gone back to the foundation of what Furman was," says Pepper. "She really operates by the work-hard, play-hard philosophy. Kids are having a great time working their tails off. When I saw them in Knoxville, they were just flying high. I hadn't seen that in a while."

DeMarco, who is the lone holdover from the pre-Hester years, adds, "As soon as the fall season ended, we wanted the spring season to start. We hadn't won a tournament since I'd been here. That's probably the highlight of my college career thus far. It's the biggest motivator. It just makes you want to go out and keep doing it."

King, Daniel, and Pepper are nearly as rejuvenated. "If they make nationals, I want to be there. I'm a big supporter now," King says. Adds Daniel: "I feel very optimistic and actually I'm super excited about the women's program. I think it's awesome."

And they want to keep feeling that way.

"Over the last 40 years, what has brought more positive publicity to Furman: women's golf or any other sport that's existed at Furman?" King asks. "They're going in the right direction, and with just a little more support they can do it." **F**

Award-winning

FURMAN IN THE LPGA

Beth Daniel '78
(35 wins, 80 top 10s)

Betsy King '77
(34 wins, 86 top 10s)

Dottie Pepper '87
(19 wins, 110 top 10s)

Maggie Will '87
(three wins, 12 top 10s)

Sherri Turner '79
(three wins, 10 top 10s)

Diana D'Alessio '97
(12 top 10s)

Denise Baldwin-Killeen '84
(nine top 10s)

Ashli Price-Bunch '97
(five top 10s)

Jen Hanna '98
(three top 10s)

Caroline (Peek) Blaylock '95
(two top 10s)

Beth Solomon '74

Cindy Ferro '76

Melissa Whitmire '80

Joan Delk '83

Sara Anne (Timms) McGetrick '85

Brandi Jackson '03

Sarah (Johnston) Sargent '04

FURMAN BY THE NUMBERS

23

national tournaments

1

national championship

7

top-five finishes

13

SoCon team championships

13

SoCon individual championships

17

LPGA players