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Sargent latest Furman product to challenge LPGA tour

MARK ASSHEW/THE GOLF CHANNEL

**Sarah Johnston Sargent '04** has had a very eventful last few months.

In October, the former Paladin golfer made her national television debut on The Golf Channel's "Big Break VI." In December, she was one of only 15 women to earn fully exempt playing status on the Ladies Professional Golf Association tour. And then, for good measure, she got married in January.

A psychiatrist would likely tell you that's enough stimuli to overload anybody's nervous system, but the 25-year-old Sargent doesn't appear to be showing the strain. In fact, she's enjoying this whirlwind of a trip.

"I've been overwhelmed with everything that's been going on lately, but it's exciting and it's a lot of fun," Sargent says with a laugh that you will hear more often than not whenever she is around. "I've managed to handle it all, somehow."

The Sarah Express just keeps rolling along. She married Herbie Sargent, a former pro at the Furman course, on January 13, and, a month later, she was in Hawaii playing her first LPGA tournament of the 2007 season. She plans to play as many as 30 tournaments this year, which means she and her husband and their two dogs will be on the road more often than not. Herbie will be a caddie on the LPGA tour, but not for his wife.

"I think we'll see enough of each other as it is," she says, again with a laugh. The two of them will reside in Williamston, S.C., just down

the road from Furman, when they're not traveling to tour events.

When Sarah arrived at Furman in the fall of 1999, nobody would have predicted that she would end up on the LPGA tour. She walked onto the golf team with an average score in the low 80s and no thought of what she might ultimately want to do with her life.

But her game improved steadily, and by the time she graduated she was among the finest players Furman's storied program had ever produced. In 2004, she was Southern Conference champion, league Player of the Year and the university's Female Athlete of the Year. She led the team to the NCAA Championships, where she was named All-America.

She didn't qualify for the LPGA tour right out of college, so she spent two years on the FUTURES tour, which serves as the LPGA's minor league system. She finished 18th on the money list in 2005, which allowed her to automatically reach the final stage of the LPGA qualifying school and brought her to the attention of The Golf Channel's "Big Break" program.

"Big Break VI," which was telecast in the fall and featured nine women and nine men battling one another in a series of quirky challenges at Trump National Golf Club in Los Angeles, was an experience she finds hard to describe. For two hectic weeks, she and her fellow contestants were up at 5 a.m. and didn't get to bed before 1 a.m. In between

she experienced all the stress one could ever ask for.

"Everybody was extremely nervous the whole time," says Sargent, who was eliminated after the third show. "It was like nothing I've ever felt, and probably nothing I'll ever feel again."

Her fragile state of mind was largely due to some tragic news she received as she flew to California to begin taping the show. Sargent's best friend and traveling companion on the FUTURES tour, Gaelle Truet, had died in a car accident on her way to a pro-am in Ohio.

"I learned about it when I changed planes in Atlanta," Sargent says. "I was devastated. I didn't know what to do. I never had anybody close to me die before. But I knew she would have wanted me to stay out there and be part of the show."

The Big Break experience, complete with the nervous exhaustion and a broken heart, did have its benefits. It prepared her for the stress of December's LPGA qualifying school, where she played five exceptional rounds and finished in a tie for 10th place.

"I wasn't at all nervous until the last four holes of the final round," she says. "It was then I remembered what I felt like when we were taping the show."

By then it didn't matter. She was good enough to get that big break on her own.

— VINCE MOORE