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PLAYING HER Shots



## AFTER FAILING TO EARN HER LPGA TOUR CARD, FORMER ALL-AMERICAN GOLFER CINDY DAVIS FIGURED SHE WAS OUT OF THE GAME FOR GOOD.

### NOW SHE'S HEAD OF NIKE GOLF.

BY TODD SCHWARTZ

#### 1. ADDRESS THE ball.

Oregon has entire towns smaller than the world headquarters campus of sports giant Nike. On a lush green site in the Portland suburb of Beaverton, gleaming buildings named for such Nike luminaries as Michael Jordan, Mia Hamm and Tiger Woods rise amid fountains, rolling lawns and a man-made lake. It's a stunning place to work.

Too bad Cindy Davis' office isn't there.

A short swoosh to the west, in a pale-by-comparison building called The Rogue, is where Davis calls her shots. No matter. One of the golf industry's most respected executives, friend to links legends including Nancy Lopez and Arnold Palmer, former top NCAA Division I golfer and, since January of this year, the U.S. general manager of Nike Golf, Davis doesn't care that much about her office, anyway. As she has since she was the only girl on her high school golf team — and as she has since she was captain of the Furman women's team in the early 1980s — Davis saves her focus for results.

And focus is something this 43-year-old business leader knows how to do.

"She's somewhat of a workaholic," says Palmer, her mentor and former boss. "She's also very smart and very talented."

Which is how you get to be one of the brightest lights in the golf industry — without ever once actually looking for a job in the golf industry.

#### 2. TAKE THE CLUB BACK LEVEL AND steady.

On those long warm days, when her family had come down from their home in Bowie, Md., to summer in Myrtle Beach, S.C., Davis was as bored as only a 13-year-old separated from her friends can be. They were staying next to a golf course, so, motivated by ennui and exercise, she and her sister took up the game that their dad played.

Blessed with a lot of athletic ability — which wags and certain John Daly fans might claim has little to do with golf — Davis was immediately good at a game in which few people are immediately good. Soon she was on the only golf team her high school fielded: the boys' team. By 16, she was playing on the pre-eminent junior amateur golf tour,

the American Junior Golf Association. A few colleges began to take notice.

"My dad told me that if I wanted to go to a school out of state, I'd better find a scholarship," says Davis with a smile. "We looked at several opportunities and chose Furman because it was such a strong academic school."

It also didn't hurt that one of Davis' heroes, Beth Daniel, now a Ladies Professional Golf Association Hall of Fame member, was a 1978 Furman grad. And that the Furman women's team had won the national championship in 1976. And that one day her phone rang and it was Betsy King '77, then a fast-rising pro and today another LPGA Hall of Famer, calling to personally recruit her.

"That was very exciting," Davis says, "and I liked the fact that Furman was a small school with very high standards. Not to mention nice weather and its own golf course! Everything just seemed to fit."

So, in 1980, Davis found herself on the Bermuda-grass fairways of the Furman Golf Course, with the Blue Ridge foothills and some very good golfers around her. By the time she graduated with

an economics degree in 1984, she had been named an All-American three times, shot a series of great rounds to finish second in the 1983 NCAA tournament, and found one of her first and fondest mentors: coach Mic Potter.

"Cindy is one of my all-time favorite student-athletes," says Potter, who this summer left Furman after 23 years as women's coach to take the same job at the University of Alabama. "She worked hard and excelled at everything she did, whether it was school or golf. Cindy was instrumental in turning our program around in the early '80s. Her scores were a major factor, but her leadership and recruiting ability helped give Furman the total package."

"Mic really developed me as a player," Davis answers, "both as a swing coach and a mental coach. He also helped me develop as a human being. He's very good at what he does, and he stands for all the right things."

Davis also discovered something else that would follow her through life: Team was her thing. "I loved playing college golf, and the part I loved the most was being part of the team," she says. "I really enjoyed our mission, our tradition, our community."

What came next? Since her teens, Davis had thought about turning pro. Watching tournament players on television, particularly Nancy Lopez, who would one day become a close friend, Davis "couldn't help having those aspirations."

After leaving Furman, she played on the mini-tour, a group of second-tier tournaments where many young pros go to find their games. After a few months she went to qualifying school, a sort of trial-by-fire during which, if you play well enough, you earn your LPGA tour card, a one-year passport to the big leagues of women's golf.

Davis missed the cut — the first in a series of lucky breaks in her career.

"It was a blessing in disguise," she



*As a college junior Cindy Davis placed second in the NCAA golf tournament.*

says. "At Furman I had taken the tests to go on to business school, which is what happened. I never get wistful about not playing on the tour. The business side was the right path for me. Better for me than going out there and teeing it up every day."

The path took her to the University of Maryland, where she earned an M.B.A. degree in 1987, concentrating on marketing and finance. Her first job was in sales and promotions with Hallmark Cards. By 1992 she was the director of marketing and communications at American Indemnity, part of the Dun & Bradstreet Corporation. Beyond kicking a few surprised male behinds at corporate golf events, Davis was out of the game.

"I really wanted to establish myself as a business person, not a golf person," she recalls. But without any encouragement on her part, golf was coming back into — you could even say rolling perfectly onto the bentgrass green of — her life.

### 3. KEEP YOUR HEAD *still.*

In graduate school, Davis' favorite class was entrepreneurship. She was drawn to the challenge of starting from an idea, building a team, thinking strate-

gically. So it's little wonder that when not one but two people (who didn't know each other) called and said that they'd heard about a new job at the LPGA and thought of her, she couldn't say no.

"At that time," Davis explains, "almost all of the LPGA staff was dedicated to running and marketing the pro tour. There was a less known and less emphasized part of their business, a division for women who are club and teaching pros, and they needed someone to come in and build that side. My first thought was, 'What fun!'"

"I hired Cindy, and she did a great job," remembers former LPGA commissioner Charles Mechem, another of the people Davis cites as a mentor. "What you see upon first meeting Cindy is what you get. She's intelligent, decisive, direct and very professional. All of those traits came through."

Davis set to work creating education and training programs and other events for club and teaching pros. She was successful enough that in 1994 she was asked to take over marketing and communications for the pro tour as well.

"I remember the first player meeting I went to," says Davis. "I saw all these amazing golfers, including people I'd competed with in college, some former teammates even. I was struck by how magical it was to marry a business career with the game that meant so much to me growing up. I'd really been blessed."

By 1997, 13 years after leaving golf behind, Davis was vice president of the LPGA. Then, a little more entrepreneurial serendipity: She received another opportunity to create something from scratch.

The Arnold Palmer Golf Company was looking for someone to develop, build, brand and market a new equipment division. And it didn't hurt that it would be built around one of Davis' golf icons, Nancy Lopez.

She accepted the job as executive vice president and general manager of Nancy Lopez Golf in June of 1997. By



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October, she was deep in the corporate equivalent of a buried lie in a nasty sand trap.

#### 4. TURN YOUR SHOULDERS AND HIPS TO THE *target.*

“As you only find out when you get inside, the company had a lot more fires going on than were apparent,” Davis says in her characteristically considered way. “Four or five months after I was hired, the president of the company was let go — only a few weeks before we were set to launch the new product line. We went ahead with our launch, and not long after that I was asked by the board chairman and by Arnold Palmer to take over the entire business.”

And the business was in trouble. Arnold Palmer Golf consisted of the

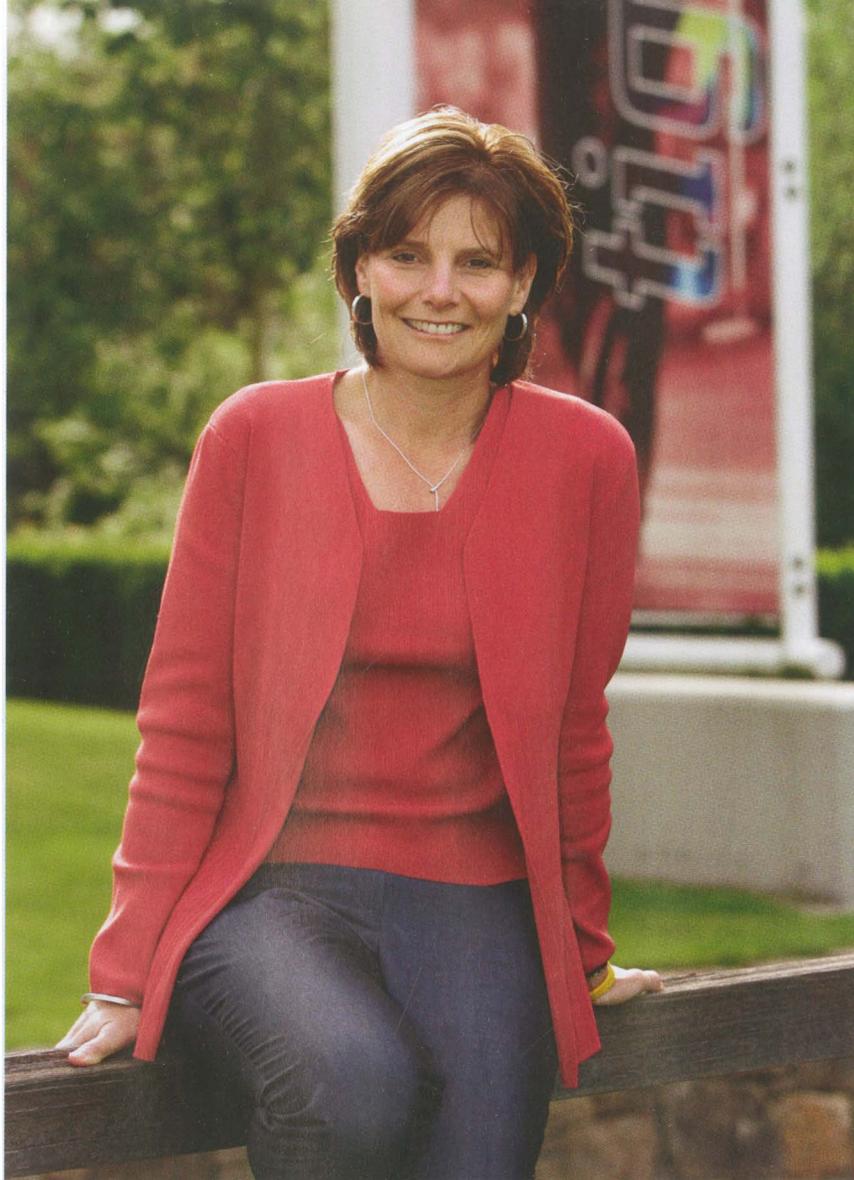
Palmer equipment line, a golf bag division and the new Lopez line. At the time, Davis concluded the company had but one viable option: rapidly build value in those product lines and preserve the good names of the people involved, with the eventual goal of selling the business. After less than a year at the company, Davis knew that if she did her job right, she’d be unemployed in 12 months.

“I classify that experience as my second M.B.A.,” Davis says. “To this day I will say that it was the best business experience I’ve ever had. The company was in distress, and you often discover the best business people when the situation is tough. My colleagues and I at Arnold Palmer took a journey together, went through a tough experience and came out on the good side of it, I believe. It certainly wasn’t easy.”

The worst of times was when she had to shut down one of the company’s two factories, the one in Tennessee that had been making clubs for Palmer for decades.

“That was very difficult for Arnold,” Davis recalls. “In those days building golf clubs was a handcrafted art, forging and grinding these gems, and some of those people had worked there for 30 years or more. I remember Arnold got very emotional that day. It was tough. And I had to have police protection, which was pretty daunting.”

For his part, Palmer remembers her strength: “Cindy impressed me as being a very smart, astute businesswoman who made many personal sacrifices to accomplish her goals. She was very efficient and thorough. Her honesty and intelligence helped her tremendously.”



STEVE DIPAOLA

“I’ve always felt that I know how to generate revenue,” Davis explains. “The key to anything is having all the right people on the same team, and I’ve always been fortunate to work with a lot of really talented people.”

In the end, Davis, as president and CEO, managed to bring the Arnold Palmer Golf Company back to the point where all of the divisions were successfully sold. It was the kind of turnaround that could make good television. Which is where Davis went next.

##### 5. STAY BALANCED AS THE CLUB ACCELERATES INTO THE **ball.**

In some 100 million homes on four continents, it’s now possible to watch golf 24 hours a day. Who could have first believed that anyone would want to?

That would be Mr. Palmer and cable TV entrepreneur Joe Gibbs, who co-founded The Golf Channel in 1995.

As the century made the turn, Gibbs had noticed what Davis was doing for Arnold Palmer Golf. When she became available in late 1999, he offered her the next job for which she hadn’t been looking.

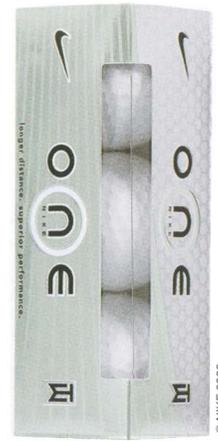
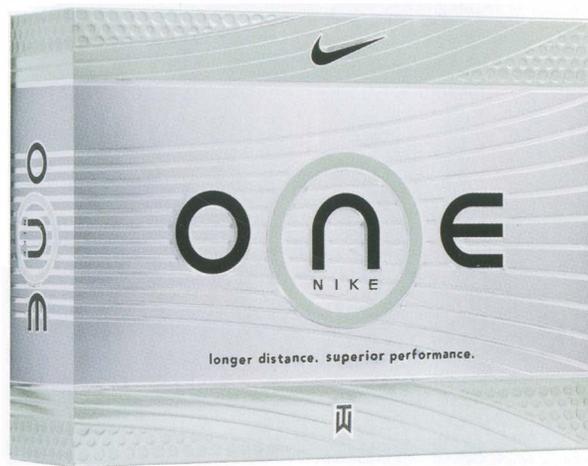
“On the surface it was a completely different business, and yet in many ways it wasn’t so different,” Davis says. “What I liked was that it was a media business. I was responsible for overseeing all our advertising sales, our pro-tour relationships and events, our other special events and our Web business. Once again, I couldn’t say no.”

Once again, she was often the only woman in the room. Which brings up the point of being one of the few females in a

male-dominated industry — a point Davis dismisses quickly.

“I want to see more women in leadership positions in every industry, not just this one,” she says. “I feel a responsibility to help that happen in any way I can. But personally, I’ve been blessed with so many great opportunities — and terrific mentors who haven’t cared about my gender, only that I have delivered the goods. In my opinion, it always comes down to this: If you don’t produce, if you don’t make it happen, it doesn’t matter who you are.”

Davis made it happen over four successful years of growth at The Golf Channel, serving a client list led by major golf and travel companies. One of those clients, an up-and-coming enterprise called Nike Golf, eventually came to know her well enough to offer her a dream job.



## 6. FOLLOW THROUGH *high.*

With the exception of Hootie and Augusta, just about everything in and around golf is changing. Not so many decades ago, nearly all golf courses were private. Now 80 percent are public. Today, one of every five golfers is a woman.

Technology in every aspect, from balls to clubs to clothing, is making the game easier and more accessible for the average player, although the median handicap remains about the same. If he played the game today, Mark Twain might amend his take on golf from “a good walk, spoiled” to “a good walk, made only slightly frustrating, in some very comfortable shoes.”

For professional players, the new technology and their growing athleticism mean towering 330-yard drives (and that’s just Michelle Wie) and rampant grousing from traditionalists that their beloved game is going to hell in a carry bag. Courses designed for the players of yesterday are beginning to look like pitch-and-putt layouts to today’s pros.

But modern golf is also somewhat stuck. Participation has remained flat, at around 25 million players, for several years. Golfers who stop playing cite expense, difficulty and time commitment as their chief complaints.

It was into this environment that Nike, the 8,000-pound gorilla of global sports, strode less than a decade ago. Today, thanks to its legendary marketing

acumen and a certain Eldrick Woods, Nike is No. 1 globally in golf apparel, No. 2 in footwear, and gaining on the leaders in balls and clubs.

It also doesn’t hurt when magic happens.

Remember this year’s Masters? Tiger’s storied victory? His chip on 16, the close-up of the golf ball, Nike “swoosh” front and center, teetering on the lip, then falling into the cup under a blazing, branding sunshine?

If you don’t remember, it is Cindy Davis’ job to see that you will.

“This job is the culmination of all my experience and interests,” she says, smiling in front of the framed bib worn by her caddy (and father) at the 1983 U.S. Open. “I have an exceptional opportunity to take the Nike brand and bring it to the business in a way that resonates with golfers. I’m overseeing the U.S. golf business, which really means overseeing five different businesses — footwear, apparel, clubs, balls and bags, and accessories — which are all at very different stages in terms of market share and growth. That’s interesting just in itself.”

It should be clear that Davis is not given to overstatement — probably a result of spending her formative years in the usually decorous quiet of the golf course. In person, a close observer can tell that, indeed, this seems to be her dream job.

Then comes what, for Davis, passes as a virtual outburst: “Let everyone know I’m still a proud Furman Paladin! And that

one of my colleagues at Nike Golf, Stan Grissinger, is also a Furman alum [Class of ’87]. Two Furman alums in the same company out in Portland is pretty cool for a little school in South Carolina.”

Today Davis plays golf only occasionally, and under new rules: “It has to be great people, a great course and great weather. I enjoy the experience in a different way now, because I’m sure not the player I used to be!”

She spends more of her limited free time training for her new sport: marathoning. Good choice for somewhat of a workaholic, one might posit. “It’s a kind of crazy habit, I know,” Davis concedes with detectable pride.

“It is no surprise to me that Cindy has accomplished all that she has in the business world,” says Mic Potter. “She is one of the best students ever to go through the Furman program. Combine that with a knack for making the right decision at the right time, and tremendous people skills, and you have a leader.”

“She will be successful in whatever endeavor she tackles,” adds Arnold Palmer, going not very far out on the limb.

So look for the Cindy-and-Eldrick team to take Nike Golf to the head of the pack. Then we can see what job that she isn’t looking for will come next. ●

*The author is a free-lance writer in Portland, Ore. He claims he would be a decent golfer if only golf courses curved endlessly to the right.*