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That Championship Season

Twenty-five years ago, a remarkably talented group of golfers came together on the Furman campus — and won the university's first national title.



Members of Furman's fabled 1976 AIAW championship team included, from left, captain Cindy Ferro '76, Leigh Coulter '79, Betsy King '77, coach Gary "Doc" Meredith, Beth Daniel '78, Holly Hunt '79 and Sherri Turner '79. At right, King, Daniel and Ferro (left to right) were back on campus again this spring, participating in the 20th incarnation of the Furman LPGA Pro-Am.

IN THE SPRING OF 1976, TULSA WAS THE TEAM TO BEAT IN WOMEN'S COLLEGIATE GOLF.

The Hurricane, led by freshman sensation Nancy Lopez, won six of the nine tournaments it entered that year. Although the program was in only its second year and women's athletics in general was still in its infancy, Tulsa's golf team was already something of a juggernaut, rolling along with the irrepresible Lopez (she was medalist in six tournaments) and a full allotment of scholarships.

Only one team appeared capable of pushing Tulsa to the limit. But it was, at best, a juggernaut with a couple of wheels missing. The team, from a small, Baptist-related liberal arts college in South Carolina, had almost no scholarship money for its players. It had no recruiting or travel budgets. The team didn't even have a full-time coach the previous season, and the players spent a good deal of their time in the president's office asking for enough money just to keep the program together.

But what Furman did have — and what the last 25 years have confirmed — was perhaps the greatest collection of golf talent in the history of women's collegiate athletics. Four of the players on the team would go on to play the Ladies Professional Golf Association tour. Three of them would win Player of the Year honors at some point during their careers, and the No. 1 and No. 2 players would win 66 tournaments (and counting) between them and gain entry into the LPGA Hall of Fame.

So even though Tulsa was favored to win the 1976 Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women tournament that took place in June of that year at the Michigan State University golf course, it was not surprising that Furman took home the championship trophy. The Lady Paladins edged Tulsa by one shot when Beth Daniel, the reigning U.S. Women's Amateur champion, made a nervous par on the 18th hole.

It might be worth mentioning that Lopez won the individual championship, but in looking back, Daniel says that she will take the team title any day. Besides, it did nothing to lessen the grief that Daniel still gives Lopez and the other members of that Tulsa team.

"We're always talking about our college days," Daniel says today, "and we constantly remind the Tulsa players about what happened that year. You better believe we give them a hard time."

Furman's 1976 national championship golf team, which consisted of Daniel, Betsy King, Cindy Ferro, Sherri Turner and Holly Hunt (Leigh Coulter and Candy Miller were also members of the team but didn't make the trip to East Lansing), should be remembered for a long time — not only because they won Furman's first national championship and went on to outstanding careers afterwards, but because of the sheer fortune that came into play for such a confluence of talent to meet in one place at one time.

Hundreds of highly organized college coaches spend their careers scouring the junior ranks for that perfect talent and yet don't find one future Hall of Fame golfer. So what are the odds of having two of the greatest players in the history of women's golf — King and Daniel — simply show up on the same campus within a year of each other?

"That was a heck of a team to be put together by accident," says Ferro, a 1976 graduate who captained the squad. "I think we all realized that as time went on."

Ferro and King were the first to arrive on campus, in the fall of 1973. A three-time New Jersey State amateur champion, Ferro came in as a sophomore after transferring from Ithaca College. New York, she says, was too cold for her, and she had discovered Furman's name in a *Golf Digest* article about schools that had golf programs.

King arrived as a freshman. She grew up in Reading, Pa., and enrolled at Furman without ever setting foot on the campus. Her parents had visited Furman while returning from vacation at Hilton Head Island and thought it might be a school she would like, especially since it had its own golf course.

Daniel followed in the fall of 1974. She was from Charleston, S.C., and was already one of the top amateurs in the country. She considered Furman and two schools in Florida, but decided on Furman because of its small size and because she had family living in the area.

The next piece of the puzzle wasn't a player, but a coach. Gary "Doc" Meredith, who served as the Furman men's coach and director of the golf course, was asked to assume the additional duties of coaching the women's team prior to the 1975-76 season. The Lady Paladins had lost their coach two years earlier and had spent the previous season under the guidance of a health and physical education professor who didn't play golf.

"I knew there was a lot of talent on the women's team," says Meredith, who left Furman in 1980 to become men's golf coach at Mississippi State University. "I saw them playing at the golf course and I knew how good they were. But they weren't organized, and they needed some kind of direction."

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place when Meredith convinced Sherri Turner, a Greenville golfer and Carolina Junior champion, to enroll at Furman, even though she had no inclination to do so. "She didn't want to come," he says, "and it took me a while to talk her into it. But I knew she was good enough to be the one player we were missing."

Furman actually began the 1975-76 season as the favorite to win the national title. Despite their various problems, the Lady Paladins had finished third in the 1974 AIAW national championship and fifth in 1975, and they had just about everybody back. But it didn't take long for Tulsa to supplant Furman as the country's most dominant team.

"We could beat anybody east of the Mississippi River, but not Tulsa," Meredith says. "We won every tournament we played when Tulsa didn't show up, but they always beat us head-to-head." Tulsa even flew into Greenville that spring and won the Lady Paladin tournament on the Furman course.

But Furman had an edge entering the national tournament. The Lady Paladins had played the Michigan State course earlier in the year when they had participated in the school's invitational tournament. Tulsa had not. Meredith had even talked a local booster into flying the team up on a private plane for the tournament.

"We usually drove a borrowed Winnebago everywhere we went," Ferro says, "so it was really something to fly to a tournament."

Furman trailed four teams after the first round, moved into a third-place tie the next day, and was in second place behind Florida after round three. But by the time the teams reached the back nine of the last round, everybody had faded with the exception of Furman and Tulsa.

It all came down to Daniel, who was playing in the last group and was standing on the tee of the par-3 18th hole when she was informed that she needed to make par for Furman to win.

"I was fine until somebody told me that," Daniel says, laughing. "I knew it was close, but I didn't think it was that close. I remember Doc saying, 'What in the world did you tell her that for?' And then I missed the green to the right with my tee shot."

But, befitting a two-time U.S. Amateur champion and future LPGA Hall of Famer, Daniel chipped the ball within three feet and made the putt. "I can remember standing by the green and watching Beth get up and down," King says. "It was all pretty exciting."

Twenty-five years later, King, Daniel and Turner are still making a living on the LPGA tour. King and Daniel have received so many accolades that it's impossible to list them all. But King has won 34 times (including the Shop-Rite Classic July 1) and Daniel 32, and it is not surprising that they have chased each other into the professional record books.

"They were completely different personalities and were very competitive," says Meredith, now retired and living in Bay Minette, Ala. "But they were competitive in a friendly way, a good way. They pushed each other."

Turner has also enjoyed an outstanding career on the LPGA tour, winning three times and being named Player of the Year in 1988. Ferro, who no longer plays the tour full time, has been a teaching pro at the famed Baltusrol Golf Club in New Jersey since 1989.

"That national championship season was a great experience," Ferro says. "We had our differences, like any team, but that was actually good. I have a lot of great memories from that time. It's just hard to believe it's been 25 years." ●

Deep Impact

Since its humble beginnings 20 years ago, the Furman LPGA Pro-Am has become a major success story.

By Vince Moore

It started as a simple and modest idea.

Betsy King, a 1977 Furman graduate who was early in her career on the LPGA tour, had seen firsthand how pro-am tournaments could be a good way to raise money. So why not convince a few of her fellow Ladies Professional Golf Association players to attend a pro-am at the Furman golf course that would benefit the university's golf programs?

King contacted Moffett Kendrick, Furman's vice president for development at the time, and verified that it was something the university would be interested in pursuing. She then went to Beth Daniel, another Furman graduate playing on tour, to see if she would participate and help secure a few fellow pros to play.

"I thought it was a good idea and I wanted to be a part of it," Daniel says. "I thought it was something that could work. I always get credit for helping put the Pro-Am together, but Betsy really did most of the work that first year."

That first year was 1982, and 17 women professionals and 51 amateurs showed up to raise a total of \$9,500. There were about as many spectators as participants.

It might not have been the grandest beginning, but it was a beginning.

Things were still a little lean the next few years — the playing spots didn't always sell, and members of the Furman golf teams were usually recruited to play — but the Furman Pro-Am eventually began to catch on. More pros and amateurs began to commit to play, and major sponsors like Slazenger, Belk, Bi-Lo, Pepsi and the Hyatt Regency signed up to support the tournament. An annual breakfast at the home of Bill and Connie Timmons also became a tradition.

"The Pro-Am was getting progressively better those first few years, and then it really began to take off in the late 1980s," says