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New Guard Takes Over

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

New Guard Takes Over

Three student invitations to the inaugural Augusta National Women's Amateur help raise Furman's profile around the country.

BY VINCE MOORE

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Paladin golfers Haylee Harford '19 (top), Alice Chen '18 (middle) and Natalie Srinivasan '20 represented Furman at the inaugural Augusta National Women's Amateur.

By the time **Haylee Harford '19** reached the 18th green of the famed Augusta National Golf Club, she was already part of history. She was one of only 30 players to have qualified for the final round of the inaugural Augusta National Women's Amateur, and she had played well enough to see her name posted on those iconic leaderboards much of the morning and afternoon.

But while being part of history was nice, there was still the matter of a final 12-foot birdie putt on No. 18 that would give Harford a one-under-par 71 for the round. The green was surrounded by the same number of enthusiastic spectators the Masters tournament would see a week later, so why not give them something to celebrate?

"When I made that putt and turned around to see all those people cheering, that's something I'll remember the rest of my life," says Harford, who graduated from Furman in the spring. "I just wanted to take it all in for a moment. Shooting under par on this golf course is not an easy thing to do."

It was a historic day for Harford, who finished the tournament in a tie for seventh, and it was no less historic for the women's golf program at Furman. Of the 72 amateurs invited to make up the international field, two were Furman students and another had graduated a year earlier.

Alice Chen '18 and **Natalie Srinivasan '20** also received invitations, giving the university one of the best collegiate representations at the tournament. While Chen didn't advance past the first two rounds played at Champions Retreat Golf Club in Augusta, Srinivasan joined Harford in the final round.

No school, in fact, was better represented than Furman at Augusta

National. The other universities who had two players qualify for the final round were Arizona State University, Duke University, the University of Florida, Florida State University and the University of Texas.

"It was an awesome and unbelievable experience," says Srinivasan, who shot 73 at Augusta and tied for 17th. "I've been to the Masters and even played the course once before, but it was a totally different experience to play it in the tournament. I was fortunate to make the cut and have this opportunity."

Furman's head women's golf coach, Jeff Hull, was there to watch his players compete, and he was well aware of what it meant to women's golf in general and the Furman program in particular.

"With the kind of tradition Furman has in women's golf, it was fitting that we be at this tournament," says Hull, citing the contributions and accomplishments of former Paladin golfers like **Betsy King '77**, **Beth Daniel '78** and **Dottie Pepper '87**. "It is only appropriate that the new guard take over and continue that tradition. I am proud of Alice, Haylee and Natalie for being invited to the tournament and representing Furman well."

The Augusta National Women's Amateur was indeed a historic event that will no doubt lift the trajectory of

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women's golf both in the U.S. and around the world. The tournament drew crowds that none of the women amateurs had seen before, and the final round was televised live on NBC Sports. And while it was fun to compete on the world's most recognizable golf course and meet people like former LPGA great Nancy Lopez and former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the players knew they were involved in something bigger than themselves.

"Growing up, I never once thought I would be playing at Augusta National in a tournament," says Srinivasan, whose father, Ajai, caddied for her. "It wasn't something I could even dream about when I was learning to play. But now that has changed. It's great to be part of women's golf history, and being part of this tournament's first year will always be special."

Playing in a prestigious amateur tournament at Augusta National wasn't on Harford's to-do list, either, since she had no reason to imagine such a thing. But she saw a lot of young girls in the gallery, and all of them were surely dreaming about playing in the tournament one day.

"It was an important week for women's golf," she says. "The tournament went above and beyond any expectations I had."

History aside, what was it like to tee it up at the golf course that has produced champions like Ben Hogan, Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods? To make one's way through such familiar places as Amen Corner and try to avoid the disasters

that have routinely crushed the dreams of the best players in the world? Because even if the women amateurs never imagined they would play Augusta National, it didn't stop them from watching the Masters on TV and being familiar with its traditions.

"I usually don't get nervous when I play," Srinivasan says. "But I was pretty excited standing on that first tee with all those people around me. I just wanted to hit that first tee shot and get going."

Harford says she was nervous getting started but calmed down after that and played a strong round of golf. That included making back-to-back birdies on the par-3 12th and the par-5 13th, two of the most famous holes on the planet.

Harford is likely to be playing professionally by next

year's Augusta National Women's Amateur, but Srinivasan has one more year at Furman, and getting an invitation to next year's tournament will be a high priority for her.

Of course, there is room in the field for more than one Furman golfer.

"It was especially nice having three players invited to the inaugural tournament," Hull says. "It's good for recruiting and it raises Furman's profile around the country. Being invited to this tournament should be a goal for all women amateurs." ♦



Srinivasan, Harford and Chen gathered for a photo with the tournament trophy. Harford also met with two-time Masters champion Bubba Watson prior to teeing off in the final round at Augusta.