

Nathan Crace's

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It's a Man's World...Sort of.

By: Nathan Crace Date: January 23, 2003

There's something afoot that may make more strides for women in golf than any disruption by Martha Burke outside the gates of Augusta National could create. It's unprecedented, though not ground-shaking. It's been incredibly quiet (for the most part), though certain to make a lot of noise in the next six months. That's because a few months after the 2003 Masters has come and gone, PGA of America professional and club pro Suzy Whaley will step to the first tee at the TPC at River Highlands and tee it up with the big boys in the PGA Tour's Greater Hartford Open (GHO). The best part of this storyline? She's not playing because she picketed, complained, or threatened to sue. She didn't seek out the National Organization for Women to harass the Tour into letting her play. Instead, to borrow from a well-known television commercial, she did it the old fashioned way: she earned it. Her play already earned her a spot as the first woman to qualify for the PGA of America's Club Pro Championship in 2002. But, by winning the PGA's Connecticut Section Championship in September, she has earned the exemption for the GHO that comes with it.

Before you jump to conclusions, let's look at the big picture. Whaley, the mother of two daughters, used to be a non-exempt player on the LPGA Tour for two years. It's not like she just got lucky for a few rounds in September and now finds herself in a Tour event. She obviously has the skills required to compete—though she admits that her focus now is on family and her job as the Head Pro at Blue Fox Run Golf Course in Avon, Connecticut. But even with an obvious competitive spirit, she told *Golf Magazine* that it took some time (months in fact) to decide whether or not to take the spot in the GHO. And her reasons for considering not playing were as understandable as her reasons for playing are admirable. She realizes that the course will play some 500 yards longer than any course she has played in competitive events to date. After all, how much pressure could you stand if you were paired with Ernie Els, hitting four-woods into holes where the South African is hitting three-quarter 8-irons? In front of thousands of on-lookers? And on television? She definitely wouldn't be the first club pro to shoot in the 80's or 90's in a Tour event; but then again, none of the others have had the eye of the media placed so squarely on them as Whaley is sure to encounter. I hope they don't harass her as they are prone to do.

She has already appeared on CBS, CNN, and the Golf Channel. She also received a call from Hootie Johnson's friend Martha Burke. Although Whaley says she was thankful for Burke's call, she did not return the call for fear of the media's spin on the issue. Good move. This is a person keenly aware of the situation her good play has placed her in. She is not trying to "break onto the men's Tour." She's not trying to make a point, per se. She has already been on the LPGA Tour and says she likes her club professional job better. She even goes so far as to say that she wouldn't want to be the person keeping the lesser-known guys who grind it out on Tour every week from playing in an event and making a pay check. She is wise beyond her 35 years. She has been welcomed to the GHO with open arms. After all, the spot was available for her and she played her way there. But her reason (or actually two reasons) for playing is perhaps the most important: her daughters. She has already beaten the best club pros in Connecticut, so how would she explain to them that she didn't want to play with the "better boys"? She said that her 8 year-old daughter has even made the comment, "What's the problem? Mommy always plays against the boys." From the mouths of babes...

I don't think anyone honestly believes that the best female player in the world could compete day in and day out with the best male player in the world from the same tees on the same courses the men's Tour plays. I'm not knocking Annika Sorenstam, but men are simply built differently and wired differently than women (and speaking for most men that I know, we are utterly thankful for that). And considering this, Whaley's goal to shoot 75-75, realizing that more than likely it will not make the cut, seems like a smart goal given the course set up and her competition. A sound and realistic goal—remember the course will be 500 yards longer than she has played competitively so far. She says she'll be spending more time getting her upper body strength up and playing more competitive golf (her win at the 2002 LPGA Teaching and Club Pro Championship earned her a spot in the LPGA Tour's McDonald's LPGA Championship—one of the LPGA Majors).

Regardless of the outcome, she will be making strides for women in golf and for the game itself. She has already proven that, thus far, she can do more than just compete in the "man's world" of golf—she can win. I would love to see her make the cut, but I'm happy she's playing—not because she's a woman, but because she has earned it. And if I had tickets, I'd take my six-year old daughter, follow Suzy on every hole, and say, "See what you can do in the United States of America if you work hard for it?" I just hope the men running the tournament have the foresight to pair her on Thursday with someone at the lower end of the driving average stats so she's not 40 yards behind on every driving hole—that would be the gentlemanly thing for them to do.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2003.