

## Looking back at Princeton women's golf and their struggle for varsity status

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Originally published in *The Daily Princetonian* on May 4, 2018 and reprinted with permission

Website link: <https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2018/05/looking-back-at-princeton-womens-golf-and-their-struggle-for-varsity-status>



*A look at the first Princeton women's golf varsity team posing with the men's team in their 1991 team photo.*

More than forty years ago, Princeton Associate Athletic Director Sam Howell '50 floated the idea of forming a new club sport to baseball coach Eddie Donovan. Just a few months later, the Princeton women's golf team became a reality. After several decades, the team has grown into one of the premier teams in the Ivy League and a force to be reckoned with at tournaments throughout the Northeast. Their triumphs include back-to-back Ivy League titles this year and last.

The team achieved success through both individuals who left lasting legacies and perseverance during trials that stymied the team's growth. The women's golf team is currently

celebrating its 40th Anniversary, so the Daily Princetonian is taking a look at how these Tigers evolved and came to dominate the Ivy League.

### **A team is born: Betty Whelan leads the charge to create women's golf**

Following Howell's remark, Donovan called local women's golf legend Betty Whelan in the hopes that she might accept the post. Whelan boasted an impressive golf resume, holding the Ladies Club Championship for nearby Springdale Golf Club — the current home for both Tiger golf teams and the site of the Princeton Invitational — for fifteen years. Whelan also founded the Garden State Women's Golf Association and was a participant in two National Amateur Championships. Whelan accepted the offer to become the coach of the team; in January 1978, the women's golf team became a reality.

Whelan immediately went to work fundraising for the club, organizing the Princeton Friends of Women's Golf group to raise money. Led by Susan Blair and Anne Poole, the group used the help of Springdale Members and other friends to raise over \$3,000 a year.

The team found immediate success.

“We scraped together four golfers for our first away match at Rutgers,” Whelan said. “The players met at Dillon Gym wearing cut off jeans and sneakers. We loaded an assortment of clubs into my car, headed to New Brunswick, and won the match! An inspiring beginning!” Later that season, the Tigers took second in the Scarlet Knight Invitational — their first tournament appearance.

The team was certainly fueled by its coach, especially during the early years.

“Mrs. Whelan was an excellent role model,” said Ellen Longmire '82 in a letter to the Friends of Princeton Golf. “She made the game look so easy.” Whelan would remain the catalyst for team growth over the next decade as the team grew in size and strength. Just two years after its formation, the team was looking forward to having nine players on the roster; a significant increase and an indication that women's golf had taken hold at Princeton.

### **Women's golf and the struggles to achieve varsity status (late 1980s)**

Throughout the 1980s, because the University had not granted the women's golf team varsity status, the team was funded solely through the efforts of the Friends of Women's Golf Group. In the spring of 1980, Whelan made her first attempt to convince the Princeton Athletic Department to grant the team varsity status.

Despite assurances that the team would become a varsity level team once they grew in size, according to Princeton Alumni Weekly, Whelan and the rest of the team were denied this coveted status. Correspondence between Whelan and then Princeton Athletic Director Robert Myslik '61 indicate that despite her efforts and the continued growth of the team, the University would not consider the women's golf team for varsity status “for the foreseeable future.” With Whelan acting as a voluntary coach throughout the process, the team spent the entire decade

struggling to become a varsity sport. In 1988 — after nearly ten years of fighting for the cause — Whelan retired from her position as the women’s golf coach.

“She was the force that kept the team breathing,” said golfer Shena McLenaghan ’87, reflecting on Whelan’s retirement.

With their first leader gone, the Tigers were forced to turn to a new face to keep the fight alive.

### **Paget Berger, Title IX and the ACLU converge on women’s golf, rewriting the narrative**

The next four years would prove to be crucial in the club’s advancement and the culmination in their struggle for varsity status. But the situation would not be resolved quickly and quietly; it would take the efforts of numerous Princeton alumni, local politicians, and even the American Civil Liberties Union to earn women’s golf the status it deserved.

The first step was made in 1990 by Princeton golf alumna Lisa Olson ’80. In June 1990, Olson wrote a letter to University president Harold Shapiro ’64, urging him to help fight gender inequality in collegiate sports. Olson first argued that, as a self-financing club sport, the elevation to varsity status would come at no cost to the University. Furthermore, Olson noted that the team’s elevation would enhance the team’s reputation and convince more women to join and not the other way around, like the University claimed.

“This subtle form of sexual discrimination is all too common in college sports, where women’s teams are routinely relegated to secondary roles, with the implication that in this, as well, women are inferior,” Olson said.

A lackluster response from the University followed — one that argued women’s golf could only be considered varsity if it was already a varsity sport at more than four other Ivy League institutions.

“The threat of an embarrassing lawsuit seemed the only way to get the University’s attention,” Olson explained. Olson recruited the help of Deborah Ellis — Legal Director of the New Jersey ACLU — who immediately went to work advocating for the elevation of women’s golf at the University to the varsity level.

Ellis and the rest of the women’s golf supporters needed the help of Title IX to support their cause. Whelan had laid the groundwork for this angle, corresponding with then-U.S. Senator and Princeton alumnus Bill Bradley ’65 regarding Title IX and its relation to women’s golf at Princeton. Ellis then implemented Title IX into her argument.

In letters to the University general counsel, Ellis wrote that “The club status hampers recruiting, hampers fundraising, deprives the team of access to facilities and perks provided to varsity members, and, most fundamentally, denigrates the athletic endeavors of the team members.” In 1991, Ellis made an official request to schedule an appointment between the University and the ACLU to discuss and solve the matter.

At the same time, the women's golf team struggled to find leadership with Whelan retired. Relying mostly on the determination of its players, the team desperately needed a new voice to navigate through tough times. This voice turned out to be Paget Berger '90, a graduate student at the Woodrow Wilson School and a passionate golfer. Captain Jennie Thompson '90 and player Barbara Armas '92 encouraged Berger to assume a role with the team. Within weeks, Berger became the team's newest coach and travel coordinator, as well as — most importantly — the team's fighter for varsity recognition.

Berger began her new job by speaking out against the words of Peter McDonough, who at the time served as the University General Counsel. McDonough had contacted the women's golf program through their ACLU representatives in a series of letters, which explained that women's golf would be “considered” for varsity status if the threat of legal action was neutralized. Berger replied with a letter signed by the team, denouncing the decision to wait and see, and presenting the current unequal state of affairs between the men's and women's golf team, especially when it came to fundraising.

“The bottom line is that women cannot be denied the same status as men in a University sponsored activity,” Berger concluded in her letter.

An imminent legal clash seemed inevitable, but the women's golf team finally prevailed. On June 19, 1991, correspondence from the Office of General Counsel to the team indicated that a program would be adopted over the summer to transition the women's golf team to varsity status. Less than a month later, on July 12, the University officially recognized the women's golf team as a varsity sport. The long-awaited dream had finally become a reality.

### **Onward and upward: the emergence and continuation of an elite program**

Even before the Tigers became a varsity program, they were on a quick path to elite status. Once they became a varsity team, that growth only intensified. Just four seasons in, the Tigers were recognized by the Ivy League and the Eastern College Athletic Conference as one of the best teams in the Northeast. Multiple players were recognized as all-Ivy or all-ECAC caliber golfers.

The team had one of their proudest seasons in 1997, when they not only hosted the first ever Betty Donovan Alumni Tournament (Whelan married Eddie Donovan in 1989), but also celebrated the senior season of perhaps their best player in school history: golfer Mary Moan '97. Moan qualified for the NCAA Championship three years in a row and was one of the best golfers in the Ivy League during her four-year campaign. She remains one of the best golfers to have ever been a part of the program.

Today, the Princeton women's golf program remains alive and well, thriving among their competition. The team has won back-to-back Ivy League Tournaments and are set to make an appearance in San Francisco in the NCAA Regionals on Monday. The team is also very young, being led by sophomore teammates Maya Walton and Alison Chang. They are set up well to continue their success for the foreseeable future.

The women's golf team continues to celebrate their success on the course, made possible by their victorious struggle to attain varsity status. Since their inception as a varsity team, they have positively changed the lives of hundreds of female athletes who are able to compete against the nation's best.

“Golf was not the only reason why I chose Princeton, but the memories I have of my time on the team will be among the most vivid I have of my four years as a Tiger,” said Caitlin Sullivan '07.



*(Details about the team's rise to varsity status come from AC 194 Box 1 Folder 1 in the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library Archives at the University.)*

The original paper on which the above article was based is provided courtesy of Elaine Armas:

***The Story of Women's Golf at Princeton University* by Carol Welsh '92 and Lisa Olson '80**