

The Story of Women's Golf at Princeton University

By Carol Welsh '92 and Lisa Olson '80

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It is well known that Princeton University was founded in 1746 and that women were first admitted as degree candidates in 1969. Equality between the sexes was not a reality in all aspects of campus life. Women's golf is a surprising example of a program that was ignored even as women became an increasing percentage of the student body. It took more than a decade of pressure by alumni, friends, students, and parents, and ultimately, the threat of a lawsuit, to persuade the University to confer varsity status on the women's team to equal that of the men's team. From humble beginnings as a club team in the late 1970s to a steady powerhouse in the Ivy League in the 21st century, the development of women's golf at Princeton is a compelling story.

Betty Whelan Creates the Women's Golf Team

In 1977, Sam Howell '50 (D), the Acting Athletic Director, invited long-time baseball coach and sports instructor Eddie Donovan into his office to ask whether he would be interested in starting a women's golf team at Princeton. Mr. Donovan replied that he was not interested, but he knew someone who would be. Mr. Donovan referred Mr. Howell to Betty Whelan, who had been a member of Springdale Golf Club since 1947, was Ladies' Club Champion for fifteen years, had played in two National Amateur Championships, was a founder of the Garden State Women's Golf Association (whose tournament she had won twice) and was the New Jersey State Seniors Champion. Mrs. Whelan accepted Mr. Howell's offer, and in February 1978, she launched the Princeton University women's golf program.

Since the team was to be a club sport, not financed by the University, Mrs. Whelan's first order of business was to organize a Friends Group to raise money to support the team. She recruited Susan Blair and Anne Poole to lead the Group. Garnering support from members of Springdale Golf Club and Bedens Brook Club, as well as the many friends of the three women, the Friends Group was a great success, raising about \$3,000 per year toward the team's expenses, a considerable sum in the 1970s.

Mrs. Whelan recounted: "We scraped together four golfers for our first away match at Rutgers. The players met at Dillon Gym wearing cut-off jeans and sneakers. They loaded an assortment of clubs into my car, headed to New Brunswick – and won the match! An inspiring beginning!"

With money from the Friends of Women's Golf, the first purchase of the fledgling team was black sweaters with the Princeton logo. Mrs. Whelan asked the players to wear tan pants or shorts, and suddenly they were a real team. In 1979, the team not only won their match against Rutgers, but also took second place to Penn State in the Scarlet Knight Invitational at Rutgers. Ellen Longmire '82 remembers Mrs. Whelan as an "excellent role

model, making the game look so easy.”

Mrs. Whelan reminisced about the early years: “Since we weren’t restricted by NCAA rules, we had a few of our own. They included a bit of wine and cheese after the matches were over, and since we were existing on Friends’ money, we enjoyed good food! Susy Wenz Prosapio '82 S82, our ball of fire, was addicted to vanilla milkshakes, so we never passed by a Friendly’s without stopping. Jennie Thompson '90 had never tried lobster, so one weekend in New England the team showed her how to eat lobster!”

The Request for Varsity Status is Rebuffed

The team grew from four to six players, and then to eight. Mrs. Whelan had been assured that with the increased roster, the team would be elevated to varsity status. It didn't happen. On May 15, 1980, in a letter to Mrs. Whelan the University even withdrew the modest honorarium it had begun to pay her the previous year, purportedly due to the “budgetary situation.”

By July 1980, she reported to Robert Myslik '61 P88 P90, the Director of Athletics, that the budget had never materialized, her salary was short lived, and according to what she had been told, women’s golf at Princeton would not become a varsity sport in the foreseeable future. This discouraging news came despite the fact that in the 1980-81 school year, two talented freshmen were coming in, five players were returning, and two others had expressed an interest in joining the team. Having nine students from which to field a team of six or seven was a situation Mrs. Whelan had worked hard to achieve.

Mr. Myslik informed Mrs. Whelan that future interest was not a basis for upgrading the team to varsity status, and that he had not made a proposal concerning women’s golf to the University Priorities Committee, which was responsible for making recommendations to the President and Trustees concerning varsity status. By 1987, after seven more years of pleading with the Athletic Department and serving as a voluntary coach, Mrs. Whelan was still unable to persuade Princeton to create a varsity women’s golf team. During that time, she was the “force that kept the team breathing,” as one player, Sheila McLenaghan '87, attested. Mrs. Whelan wrote to Sam Howell, Acting Director of Athletics, stating, “I had hoped that after ten years, this situation could be resolved in favor of a varsity Women’s Golf Team. But it looks as if Mr. Myslik’s mind cannot be changed.” Mrs. Whelan told Mr. Howell that nevertheless, the “co-captains, Denise Lohrey Gammal '89 and Jennie Thompson '90, and the rest of the players are determined, against all odds, to keep the Women’s Golf Team at Princeton a viable sport.”

In 1988, Betty Whelan married Eddie Donovan and served her last year as the women’s coach. Without the new Mrs. Donovan, the team was held together only by the tenacity of the students determined to keep it alive. Then events took a fortuitous turn.

The ACLU Pressures the University

While making plans to attend her tenth reunion in 1990, Lisa Olson '80, a member of one of the first women’s golf teams, learned from Betty Donovan that the University had still not conferred varsity status on the Women’s Golf Team. Ms. Olson, an attorney with the

U.S. Department of Justice, wrote to Princeton President Harold Shapiro in June 1990, urging that he confer varsity status on the team and set an example of gender equality in sports. She explained that the team had been financially self-sustaining since 1977 and therefore could be elevated to varsity status at no cost to the University. She further pointed out that the University's logic -- that women had allegedly shown insufficient interest in the team -- was circular, because if the team had varsity status, more women would be enthusiastic about joining it. According to Ms. Olson, "This subtle form of sex 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."

The University's response to Ms. Olson was disappointing. The Assistant Director of Athletics, Amy Campbell, wrote on July 20, 1990 that for Princeton to consider a sport "varsity," at least five Ivy League institutions must support it at the varsity level. According to the University, golf did not qualify because only Dartmouth and Yale recognized women's golf as a varsity sport.

It was clear that even after a decade of good-faith efforts, the recruitment of promising teams, and a steady interest among female students in playing varsity-level golf, the University had failed to budge an inch. Ms. Olson therefore turned to a last resort: legal action. Ms. Olson said, "The threat of an embarrassing lawsuit seemed the only way to get the University's attention." Ms. Olson wrote for help to Deborah Ellis, Legal Director of the ACLU in New Jersey. Ms. Ellis agreed that the University's reason for denying varsity status -- because too few Ivy League institutions recognized golf as a varsity sport -- was a Catch-22. She also noted that the University's purported intention to reduce and upgrade existing programs rather than to add new teams should be directed at the disproportionately large number of men's varsity teams rather than the smaller number of women's teams.

Ms. Ellis contacted Thomas Wright '62 of Princeton's Office of the General Counsel to ask that the University work with the ACLU to remedy the long-standing problem of sex discrimination with respect to the women's golf team. In a December 1990 letter Ms. Ellis wrote, "The club status hampers recruiting, hampers fundraising, deprives the team of access to facilities and perks provided to varsity athletes, and, most fundamentally, denigrates the athletic endeavors of the team members." She noted that the women had satisfied each of the conditions set by the University -- established funding and a sustained interest -- yet action by the University had continued to lag, and as of the beginning of the 1990-91 academic year, the matter was put on hold indefinitely. Ms. Ellis asked the University to meet with the ACLU to discuss the situation and work towards a prompt resolution.

In a January 4, 1991 response to the ACLU, Mr. Wright indicated that he needed to discuss the matter with the Athletic Department and that he was undertaking a comprehensive study of athletics at Princeton. The prospect of further delay was unacceptable to Ms. Ellis, who quickly responded that the women and their coaches at Princeton had already waited twelve years. Ms. Ellis informed Mr. Wright that with golf plans already underway for the 1991-92 academic year, the matter was urgent, and she indicated that the failure to grant varsity status by spring would result in legal action.

The ACLU coordinated with the local law firm of Pellettieri, Rabstein & Altman, which

had volunteered its services to help. The University Counsel, Peter McDonough, wrote to the firm in March 1991 to explain that while Princeton would like to see a women's golf program equal to the men's, women's golf must nevertheless undergo further analysis and meet certain conditions, including the requirements that a sustainable interest in women's golf continue, that the number of Ivy League schools currently offering women's golf as a varsity sport not diminish, and that members of the women's golf team engage in fund-raising activities. Mr. McDonough concluded: "Upon your confirmation in writing that neither the ACLU-NJ nor the representatives of the women's golf club will pursue legal action against the University or publicize the threat of such legal action if this proposal is implemented, I will cause the University's Department of Athletics to send a letter to the women's golf club advising the club of the resolution of this issue on the terms set forth above."

The Leadership of Paget Berger

Jennie Thompson '90, the team captain, and Barbara Armas '92 had a chance meeting at Springdale Golf Club in the winter of 1988 with Paget Berger '90, a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson School. Ms. Berger, a golf enthusiast and a woman known for her dedication to helping others, embraced the team. Between her leadership as coach and travel coordinator and the relentless pressure she placed on the University, Ms. Berger was the catalyst for the eventual awarding of varsity status.

In response to Mr. McDonough's letter, Ms. Berger accused the University of remaining essentially unchanged in its position with respect to women's golf since 1980, and of placing a continuing burden on the women to satisfy an arbitrary notion of commitment. In a letter signed by the team to the University, the women's team members pointed out that their parents were paying the same tuition as the men's parents, but that women were not being given an equal opportunity. They explained that a sustainable interest in women's golf had been present at Princeton since before 1980; that Princeton should set an example for other Ivy League schools that lacked varsity teams; and that the members of the men's varsity team did no fundraising whatsoever and reaped all the benefits of the June alumni tournament. The women asked for an immediate resolution and said, "The bottom line is that women cannot be denied the same status as men in a University-sponsored activity."

At this point some of the parents of the women's team members, including Delbert Smith P94 and William W. Welsh, Jr. P92, offered Ms. Berger their support. And as Ms. Berger stated in one letter, "The Friends of Women's Golf have been, along with the team, strong and enthusiastic supporters of all my efforts." Ms. Berger kept the ACLU advised of her dealings with the University and also kept parents informed. In mid-May 1991, the University met with Ms. Berger and the team members, yet it reiterated many of the same arguments and still made no commitment to establishing a varsity team. The University subsequently held another meeting with Ms. Berger and the team as well as with concerned parents and alumni. At long last on June 19, 1991, Mr. Wright of Princeton's Office of the General Counsel wrote to Ms. Berger that "Bob Myslik is working with his colleagues over the summer to attempt to devise as promptly as possible a course of action that will lead to parity between the women's and the men's golf

programs.”

Varsity Status and Beyond

On July 12, 1991, the University announced the formation of the “Princeton Men’s and Women’s Varsity Golf Program,” in which the men’s and women’s programs would henceforth be combined. Princeton also promised to discuss the possible sponsoring of an official Ivy League championship tournament for women, and a possible Ivy League golf championship that would have a combined men’s and women’s format. The teams would travel together on inter-regional trips, and both varsity teams would be eligible to compete, if invited, in the respective season-ending NCAA championships.

The roster of the original varsity team was: Barbara Armas '92 (Captain), Laura Hood '93, Melissa Smith '94, June Lee '94, Ryn Wu '94 and Carol Welsh '92. It was an exciting transition year – from a spring break trip to Orlando (including a round at Lake Nona and tours of Bay Hill and Innisbrook and a great team bonding day at Disney World) under Ms. Berger's leadership, to the team's first match as a varsity squad on September 21, 1991, at the beautiful and challenging Dartmouth course with coach Eric Stein at the helm.

By 1995 after just four varsity seasons, the Princeton Women’s Varsity Golf Team had become one of the best teams in the Northeast with an ever increasing number of All-Ivy and All-ECAC Academic golfers. Throughout the years, supporters of women's golf felt they were creating a team base that would be an asset for future Princetonians both in their college and post-college careers. Ms. Berger knew from her own experience in the corporate world that developing a good golf game in college can “go further than helping fill idle time” because as she stressed in a 1990 interview, “a woman who plays a good game of golf really has a good foot in the door.” Indeed, Tiger alumnae have gone on to work in many aspects of golf, from playing on the professional tour and in the corporate setting to coaching, representing Princeton long after graduation. The outstanding success of graduate Mary Moan '97 highlights this legacy. Ms. Moan qualified for the NCAA championship three years in a row and remembers Coach Stein walking “every step of the way” with her in the NCAA Regional and Championship tournaments her senior year. After Princeton, she has made her mark as the coach of two collegiate teams.

All who struggled for a thriving University-sponsored golf program can see the fruits of their labors in the words of Caitlin Sullivan '07, who summarizes what it meant to her to represent Princeton as a varsity golfer:

Playing golf at Princeton had two related but distinctly positioned sets of advantages: internal and external. I absolutely loved the internal, everyday dynamics of being on the women's golf team. Walking over to Springdale after class for practice, connecting with other varsity athletes, working on my mental game, balancing out intense academics with an enjoyable sport, making life-long friends on the men's and women's squads, the list goes on. And when we went on the road (or in the air) to tournaments, the external honor of carrying an orange and black golf bag was even greater. I was always proud of our spirit and conduct on the course; I feel as if we made it a collective priority to leave a favorable impression on our competitors and host club. And I frequently remember other teams commenting on how positive and tight-knit our team was-- a tone Coach Stein set.

Golf was not the only reason I chose to attend Princeton, but the memories I have of my time on the team will be among the most vivid of my four years as a Tiger. It was a complete privilege to integrate two things that had and continue to shape who I am: working hard in school and playing golf.

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

April 1, 1978: clipping from an unknown local newspaper announcing the formation of the "new women's golf team" at Princeton

1979: letter from Friends of Women's Golf (Anne Poole and Susan Blair W'61) to ask for support of the fledgling women's program (includes the tentative 1979 Fall Schedule on the reverse page)

June 19, 1979: letter from the athletic department thanking Betty Whelan for her work as coach

September 7, 1979: letter from Senator Bill Bradley '65 in response to Betty Whelan's letter about Title IX.

1980: Betty Whelan's personal notes on her resignation as volunteer coach

May 15, 1980: letter from Bob Myslik to Betty Whelan re "We are unable this year to fund any portion of a coach's stipend for Princeton's club varsity golf team"

June 13, 1980: letter from Robert J. Myslik '61 to Henry Aplington II '39

July 14, 1980: letter from Betty Whelan to Bob Myslik re setting the record straight about her not continuing as coach

August 1, 1980: letter from Bob Myslik to Betty Whelan about text of fundraising letter and his view of the overall interest in women's golf

October 20, 1980: Princeton Alumni Weekly, pages 4-7, letters from Henry Aplington II and Bob Myslik

1980: Princeton Alumni Weekly, page 6, letter from Susan Blair in response to Bob

Myslik

June 17, 1987: letter to Sam Howell from Betty Whelan about the upcoming season

Spring, 1988: Daily Princetonian article by Jon Sussman titled "Princeton golfers tee off against Team China"

April, 1990, Princeton Packet, page 6B, "PU Women's Golf Making Progress" by Rich Fisher

Spring, 1990: Daily Princetonian article by Dan Klein titled "Women golfers rebuild program under leadership of grad student"

June 19, 1990: letter from Lisa Olson '80 to Harold Shapiro on the ten-year anniversary of her graduation

July 12, 1990: letter to Sam Howell from Paget Berger re "women's golf program 1990-1991"

July 20, 1990: letter from Amy Campbell, Assistant Director of Athletics, to Lisa Olson re the number of varsity teams at other Ivy League schools

August 10, 1990: letter from Lisa Olson to Deborah Ellis of the ACLU asking the ACLU for assistance

December 14, 1990: letter from ACLU to Tom Wright with request "to discuss this situation and work towards a prompt resolution"

January 24, 1991: letter from ACLU to Anne McHugh and Paget Berger re the initial contact with the university

January 25, 1991: letter from ACLU to Tom Wright re initial contact

March 18, 1991: letter from Peter McDonough, University Counsel, to Anne McHugh re threatened legal action by the ACLU

March 27, 1991: reaction from Paget Berger to Peter McDonough's letter

April 7, 1991: letter written by the golf team to Peter McDonough voicing their outrage

April 11, 1991: letter from Peter McDonough to Anne McHugh re response to ACLU requests

April 16, 1991: letter from Paget Berger to Del Smith

April 25, 1991: letter from Paget Berger to Anne McHugh and Deborah Ellis about Peter McDonough's position

May 10, 1991: letter from Tom Wright to William W. Welsh, Jr. stating Princeton's position

May 14, 1991: letter to Paget Berger from Anne McHugh re submission of budget

May 16, 1991: letter from Tom Wright to Barbara Armas '92 about the recent team meeting

May 16, 1991: letter from Paget Berger to Del Smith re status of the current situation and some history

May 31, 1991: letter from William W. Welsh, Jr. to Tom Wright about Mr. Wright's reply to Barbara Armas

June 10, 1991: letter from Paget Berger to Tom Wright regarding the University's position

June 19, 1991: letter from Tom Wright to Paget Berger re devising "as promptly as possible a course of action that will lead to parity between the women's and the men's golf programs"

June 24, 1991: letter from Paget Berger regarding Tom Wright's letter

July 12, 1991: interoffice memorandum from Bob Myslik re the "formation of the Princeton Men's and Women's Varsity Golf Program"

July 16, 1991: notice from ECAC to announce four All-Academic golfers from Princeton: "Barbara Armas, Laura Hood, Melissa Smith, and Carol Welsh"

September 24, 1991: Daily Princetonian article by Jeff Amy titled "Men duffers take second place; women place fifth out of eleven"

October 23, 1991: Letter of appreciation from Lisa Olson to Anne McHugh and Deborah Ellis of the ACLU

1992: Golf Program brochure featuring player profiles of Barbara Armas, Laura Hood, and Melissa Smith

1993-1994: Golf Program brochure featuring player profiles of June Lee, Sarah Snyder, Mary Moan, Carrie Simons, Laura Metz, Patti Meeker, and Abby Hamilton

January 10, 1995: letter from Lisa Olson to Marsha Wenk of the ACLU-NJ to inform her of the earlier success of the ACLU in the golf matter

April 13, 1996: letter from Carol Welsh to Dorothy Bedford re correction for the 250th Anniversary calendar

April 30, 1996: response from Dorothy Bedford re the correct date of the inaugural tournament for the women's team

1997: golf team newsletter with the results of the 1st Annual Betty Donovan Alumni Tournament

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