

## In Honor of Marilyn Smith

### LPGA Founder Pushed the Women's Game Forward

By Debbie Waitkus • May 13, 2023

*Editor's Note: Debbie Waitkus was a close friend of Marilyn Smith, one of the 13 original LPGA founders. Inspired by their connection, Waitkus co-founded the Marilyn Smith & Founders' Legacy Foundation in 2020. Waitkus is also the founder of Golf For Cause, a consulting business that helps companies and organizations with golf-related charitable giving and outreach plans.*

*In this short letter that coincides with the LPGA Cognizant Founders Cup being played this week in New Jersey, Waitkus describes their friendship and why Smith will forever be remembered in the women's game.*

My first introduction to Marilyn Smith was from afar, sitting in the audience at the 2006 World Golf Hall of Fame induction ceremony. I listened to her story and was hooked by her trailblazing spirit, inquisitive nature, and passion for adventure and sports.

Marilynn, I learned, was already a leader at age 10. She couldn't play on a boy's baseball team, but with visions of pitching for the St. Louis Cardinals, she started her own team and was pitcher, coach and manager.

Consider, for a moment, when she did this – it was the 1950s, a time when women were supposed to be home raising a family and making cookies while wearing high heels, long skirts and pearls. Marilyn *did* wear long skirts and was known for wearing her pearls – while playing golf.

My next encounter with Marilynn was after she moved from Dallas to Phoenix, where she hosted the Marilynn Smith Charity Pro-Am that benefitted her golf scholarship fund. Being a passionate member of the Phoenix golf community, I signed up to play. Two days later, Marilynn called me. It was one of those “I’ll never forget where I was” moments.



Marilynn Smith (right) won 21 professional tournaments playing against players such as Betsy Rawls (from left) and Louise Suggs between 1954 and 1972. *Photo: USGA Museum*

I was in my car at the bag drop at Troon North Golf Club in Scottsdale, Arizona. Marilynn knew I had signed up, who my playing partners were and that we needed a handicap for one of the players. With me being an author and knowledgeable about the

women's game, she asked if I could help her get some media attention for the event. And then she asked me what my home course was and if I thought they would provide a foursome of golf for the tournament's auction.

After I gave a noncommittal answer, there was a long pause.

“Well, are you going to ask them, or should I?” Marilyn said.

I then understood completely how the LPGA got off the ground and kept going. Marilyn was not one to wait around for action — she would dig for what she wanted until she found it.

With that entrepreneurial spirit as a backdrop, our friendship blossomed. In 2010, I became the tournament director of her charity pro-am and have kept that position since. And we worked together closely to grow women's golf in a number of ways over the years.

During the inaugural RR Donnelley Founders Cup in 2011, which took place at Wildfire Golf Club in Phoenix, Marilyn and I were together at the tournament. She asked me to pick her up at her room at 6 a.m., so that we could have breakfast with LPGA star Paula Creamer at 6:15 a.m.

“Would that be OK?” she said. Clearly it was more than OK. Smith held court that morning in the players' dining room. Those conversations rapidly developed my relationships with LPGA members, past and present.

Another experience I had was driving her around the CME Group Tour Championship in Naples, Florida. I appreciated and respected

the way Marilynn would greet and thank the volunteers, remembering their names and something about their families or where they were from. After her passing in 2019, I returned to CME with my husband not only to reminisce, but also to make new memories.

Marilynn's influence came through as many volunteers greeted me with open arms. "We were wondering if you'd come," they would say.



Marilynn Smith (bottom row, second from left) is a member of the LPGA Teaching and Club Professional Division Hall of Fame. *Photo: USGA Archives*

Marilynn was truly a trailblazer, impacting golf as a sport for women. She was, of course, an LPGA co-founder, but her legacy

does not stop there. The LPGA Teaching Division was voted into existence under her watch as LPGA president; she became the first woman broadcaster of a men's professional golf event (U.S. Open); she hosted the first women's senior LPGA event (now known as the Legends of the LPGA); and she created a scholarship fund to send young women to college.

That scholarship fund is just one part of Marilynn's legacy that connects the LPGA story with younger generations. Preserving and forwarding the legacies of all 13 founders is important. In fact, as part of the application process for that scholarship, each candidate must watch "The Founders Film" and answer an essay question related to the founders. In this way, even those not awarded a scholarship learn about the founders' history. The evergreen lessons from their trailblazing days are still relevant today.

In 2020, a group of like-minded friends and Marilynn's family members founded the nonprofit "Golf It Forward," the public face of the Marilynn Smith & Founders' Legacy Foundation. The foundation fundraises for Marilynn's scholarship fund, caretakes memorabilia and facilitates a mentorship community of scholarship recipients who are known as "Marilynn's Pearls" — all in the name of forwarding the legacies of the founders.

Maintaining tradition, this week's Cognizant Founders Cup features a "perch" on the 18th green where LPGA legends watch the action. As players exit the green, they have the opportunity to visit with these players. This year, one of Marilynn's Pearls will join the legends on the perch, highlighting and honoring the past, present and future of women's golf.

While many golf fans will be focused on the play in between the ropes, that spirit of remembering the founders is ingrained in the spirit of this week's tournament.

I know Marilyn would be beaming.