


 Donna Orender, WNBA Commissioner, is shown from the waist up, sitting on a tan couch. She is smiling and holding a Spalding WNBA basketball with both hands. The basketball is orange and white with the WNBA logo and her signature. She is wearing a dark blazer over a red top. The background is a large window with a view of a city skyline at dusk.

She's Got Game

Donna Orender is a sports renaissance woman with a long track record of success

BY REED RICHARDSON

For WNBA Commissioner Donna Orender, heading a women's professional sports league whose very initials constantly invite critical comparisons to its male counterpart is, in a way, nothing new. She's been challenging stereotypes about what women can accomplish for most of her life, whether in the boardroom, on the basketball court or, occasionally, on the golf course.

Sitting in her Manhattan office high above Fifth Avenue, the 49-year-old Orender recalls one such instance. "I'll never forget the first time I played golf in a business setting," she says, a grin slowly growing across her face. "The cigar-chomping, older guy looked at me thinking, 'I'm going to play on a team with her?' and, truthfully, I kind of relished it because I think golf's a great equalizer, I really do. He was one of those guys who loved to talk about the game and how good he was, but then I get out there and I out-drive him on a couple of holes and I certainly scored and contributed to the team. That was one of those moments where I thought, 'Ha, I can do this.'"

As the oldest of three daughters to Jerry and Sherry Chait, Orender experienced quite a few of these same epiphanies while growing up on Long Island. A six-sport athlete at Elmont High, she competed on the track, field hockey, volleyball, softball, basketball, and boys' tennis teams. (The school had no girls' tennis team, and she had to play her way on by beating a boy she had a crush on.) Still, her initial attraction to sports, she acknowledges, was rooted more in the passions of her father, a former semi-professional soccer player. "My dad didn't push me into sports," she notes. "But I saw how much it meant to him and I knew if I would become fluent in it, it would be a way to connect to him."

Of all her athletic endeavors, though, basketball soon emerged as the clear favorite, and though she stands only 5'7", Orender quickly made up for her lack of height with an overabundance of hustle and tenacity. "Donna had that typical point-guard mentality," says Donna Lopiano, who coached Orender in the early 1970s on the New York Chuckles, the local AAU team. "She made the other players around her play better and lifted up the team with her level of energy."

But while Orender's athletic appetite seemed boundless, there was one notable exception — golf. "Although my uncle played golf, my dad didn't play, and we didn't belong to a country club," she explains. "So, it just wasn't something that was part of our family." In fact, she acknowledges that the first time she did play golf, it didn't leave that much of an impression. "Maybe I was still in college?" she ventures. "I went with friends, I know that. I kind of thought it was fun."

That golf didn't immediately strike her fancy isn't surprising, since by the time Oren-

Right: Orender and Carol Blazejowski of the New York Liberty cut the ribbon of a new learning center during the 2006 WNBA All-Star weekend in New York. Below: Orender received a Sports Leadership Award from the March of Dimes.



der began attending nearby Queens College, her focus was fixed squarely on becoming one of the best female basketball players in the country. By the time she graduated in 1978, she had succeeded, earning All-America honors.

After graduation, Orender initially headed to graduate school, believing that her athletic career was over. But when the professional Women's Basketball League started up later that same year, she jumped at the chance and dropped out of school, despite her parents' concerns. "It's funny, I don't know that I looked at it as a risk, it was just something that I loved so passionately that I wanted to do more of it, so I did," she says. "Although I still say to my parents on occasion, 'you see, it didn't turn out that bad.'"

During her three seasons in the WBL, she played on three different teams, scoring nearly 1,300 points. In her second pro season, with the New Jersey Gems, she was named an All-Star and ranked among the top ten players in points, steals, and free throw percentage. But from its outset, the league was plagued with problems: players' checks bounced, games were postponed, teams folded mid-season. After the 1980-'81 season finally sputtered to a close, the WBL officially dissolved.

Writing in *The New York Times* a few months later, Orender described the experience of being "washed up at 24." And while she counted herself lucky to have "lived the dream" for three seasons, she also railed against

shortsighted owners who had cut corners when it came to marketing and public relations. "No one promised that the WBL would be an easy sell," she wrote, "but no one promised that it could sell itself, either."

Contemplating where to go next, Orender says she was naturally drawn toward the media. "I said to myself, 'If I can't play sports anymore, this is something that keeps me close to the business.'" Her athletic credentials allowed her to hop on board with ABC Sports, and she followed that with a stint at the fledgling SportsChannel America and later developed her own TV production company, PrimoDonna, before the PGA Tour recruited her to Jacksonville to build its broadcast productions unit in 1989.

"That was probably a bigger risk than going to play basketball," she says. "PGA Tour Productions was kind of a startup, but I figured it was a chance to really shape something new." Despite her somewhat unorthodox background, Orender had an advantage even within the male-dominated atmosphere of the PGA Tour.

"I understood sports from the inside," she says. "Because I did, I built relationships with the players very quickly and very easily." She credits this with helping her overcome the doubts of many players when the Tour began bringing even more TV cameras onto the golf course and into the clubhouse.

In addition to its professional benefits, Donna Orender's move to Florida also had a significant effect on her personal life. The pre-

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Power Couple

Asking someone to describe – honestly, and in public – their spouse's personality on the golf course is easy. Answering the question, however, can be as tricky as draining a downhill par putt at the U.S.

Open. So when I put the question to M.G. Orender, Donna's husband of 13 years, I offered up two distinct personalities as examples to get the ball rolling: Is she more Ben Hogan or Lee Trevino?

"I'd say she's a combination of Lee Trevino and Tommy Bolt," replies Orender, laughing. "Donna's very gregarious and talkative on the golf course, but she's also a fierce competitor," M.G. explains. Still, discretion being the better part of valor, he still feels compelled to add, "Of course, Donna's nothing like Tommy Bolt off the course."

Back when the pair first met, Donna had just begun to play seriously. "She got her first lessons from our good friend Peter Kostis," M.G. recalls, "and it was clear she was a great athlete with good hand-eye coordination because she was already making terrific contact."

And when it comes to golf, Orender knows his stuff. He has spent his entire adult life immersed in the game,

starting with eight years working as a teaching professional in Florida in the 1970s and early 1980s. By the time he had met his future wife in 1988, Orender had moved from teaching the game to



M.G. Orender with wife Donna and their twin boys, Zachary and Jacob.

growing it – mentoring club pros on improving their business operations and promoting the game to young boys and girls while a member of the PGA's Junior Golf Committee.

In 1995, M.G. Orender began a three-year term on the PGA of America's Board of Directors. Then, while serving as PGA secretary in the late 1990s, he

branched out into golf course development and co-founded the golf properties venture Hampton Golf. After a subsequent stint as PGA vice president, Orender was elected president in 2002. By late 2003, with M.G. atop the PGA of America and his wife an executive in PGA Tour's Office of the Commissioner, the Orenders' vast influence on the game prompted *Golf Digest* to name them the Most Powerful Couple in Golf.

Although bringing the sometime competing interests of the PGA Tour and the PGA of America into the same home might seem like a recipe for domestic friction, Orender says just the opposite was true. "I was very fortunate to be the PGA of America president while Donna was working at the Tour," he says, noting his wife's invaluable support and counsel in helping him launch the PGA's Play Golf America campaign. "Her experiences gave me a different look... I got to see how golf is viewed from the networks' and the marketers' perspective. That's the kind of insight that the rank-and-file PGA members don't often get. It was tremendously helpful." —R.R.

vious year, when the PGA Tour was a client of Donna's production company, she met M.G. Orender at a winter meeting in Florida (she was still living in New York at the time). The following year, Donna moved to Jacksonville, where M.G. worked with the North Florida PGA section. He would later serve on the Board of Control at the PGA of America and become president of the association. The two bonded over their love of golf, and in 1994, they married.

Marriage and a growing family did not slow Donna Orender's career rise one bit. By 1997, she had been given the responsibility of putting together the Tour's initial draft of what would become a landmark, \$500-million broadcast rights deal, one that forever changed the landscape of golf on TV. Riding the momentum of Tiger Woods's electrifying Masters victory that year, Orender stayed on to finalize the negotiations even while eight-and-a-half months pregnant. Then, four years later, as the PGA Tour's senior vice president for strategy, she topped that by overseeing an even larger broadcast and cable TV deal, this

one worth nearly \$1 billion.

As both an accomplished sports executive and a former women's pro basketball player, it's no surprise that when the WNBA's top job opened up in the fall of 2004, Orender's name was first on NBA Commissioner David Stern's list of candidates. But there was still one person he had to convince that she could do the job: Orender herself.

"When this all came about, I was sure this was not something I was going to do," says Orender, laughing. "I had a great job. I had a phenomenal lifestyle. My family was really happy. So any kind of move was going to impact all of that." Eventually, though, and with the urging of her family, she deemed it an offer she couldn't refuse. But it hasn't come without a personal price.

Splitting time between New York and her family's home in Jacksonville Beach, Florida in 2005, her first season as commissioner, was tough, she acknowledges. This past year, though, she's more permanently established herself in the Met Area; her 9-year-old twin boys Zachary and Jacob now go to school

COURTESY OF THE ORENDER FAMILY

Right: Donna Orender presents a jersey to Seimone Augustus, the first pick of the 2006 WNBA Draft.

here full-time, although her husband still spends most of his time in Florida to be near the golf properties he owns [see sidebar, page 28]. And since she's no longer living in a place with the kind of climate that welcomes year-round golf, she admits her golf game has suffered, too.

"My kids play golf now and I want them to grow up to be good players," says Orender, who increasingly lets her game take a backseat to that of her boys. "Now when we're at the range, every time I want to go hit, they say, 'Mom, are you watching me? Mom, did you see that one?'" Drawing upon her own childhood experiences, her use of sports as a cross-generational bridge is no accident. In fact, it is something she feels is vital to success in her day job. "It's interesting, even today, as WNBA Commissioner, I see more and more how sports are such a great link between dads and daughters."

Now in its twelfth season, the WNBA has helped to forge millions of those links across the country, although, as a business venture, the league is still very much a work in progress. In 2005, the league added a new



expansion team, the Chicago Sky, only to watch the Charlotte Sting, one of the WNBA's original eight franchises, fold over the winter. And last year's record-high WNBA Finals attendance numbers and media coverage was tempered by the fact that regular season attendance had hit at an all-time low.

Despite this, Orender remains upbeat, pointing to the inroads that women's basketball has made in terms of more equitable TV coverage of the college game as well as more mentions of the WNBA during ESPN's *SportsCenter* and on the front page of *USA Today*. In addition to the business side, there's an even more compelling reason Orender wants the WNBA to succeed and prove itself profitable — to inspire the next generation of girls. "That's why I'm so absolutely passionate about the WNBA," she says. "I think its sheer existence speaks to this whole notion that nothing is impossible. I'm not looking for little girls to feel entitled in the same way that boys do, but in a way I am. I don't want them to have to first climb up the mountain of 'Am I able to do this?' I want them to start from the foundation of 'I can do anything.' When you approach life from there you're just so far ahead already."

That enthusiasm, coupled with her executive experience, are Orender's strongest assets, says her former coach Lopiano, who is now the CEO of the non-profit Women's Sports Foundation. "Donna's willing to give whatever it takes and, because she knows sports from both the player and executive sides, everyone respects her," Lopiano says. "She's proven she can play with the boys." ■

Reed Richardson is a Westchester-based writer for TPG Sports.

5 Questions for the Commish

Who have you taken lessons from to help your game?

Other than M.G., I took some lessons from [Century Country Club head professional] Nelson Long that really had a big impact on me. I just liked taking lessons from him, he made me feel much more comfortable with my game.

Have you had the chance to play much around New York? If so, where?

I play very few rounds a year now, in fact, I can count them on one hand (she claims a Handicap of around 21). But whenever I get the chance I fall right back in love with the game.

Since coming back to New York, I like playing at Old Oaks, because I know Bobby Heins. I love Bobby.

Where are some of your favorite places to travel for golf?

Early on in our marriage, my husband and I played a round at Pebble Beach with [former USGA president] Reed Mackenzie and his

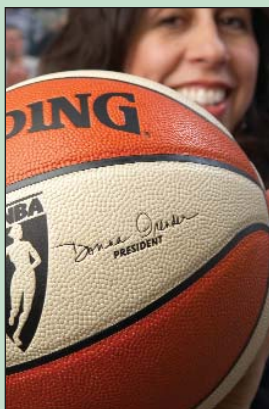
wife Jane that definitely sticks out as being among my all-time favorites. And playing in Hawaii with my family at Poipu Bay in Kauai is definitely a yearly highlight now. Also, I really enjoy playing the courses in Kohler, Wisconsin, especially The River Course and Whistling Straits.

Any strange habits or golf superstitions?

Tall, white tees. You throw me a different one and I'll throw it back at you. That's kind of my superstition. Also, my girlfriends and I tend to play high-numbered golf balls, generally a 4.

What's your favorite club in the bag?

Without a doubt, my 3 wood. I love my 3 wood. So much so, I rarely hit driver. Even M.G. says, 'Why play the driver, you hit your 3 wood so perfectly?' It's an old Callaway and I don't think I will ever swap it out. As a matter of fact, if I have to travel and I'm not going to take my clubs, I will still take my 3 wood.



TOP: ERRENCE VACCARONBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; INSET: JEFF WEINER