

VAL'S PALS



LPGA great and New Jersey native Val Skinner has a team of experts working on behalf of her own charitable foundation

BY MARK CANNIZZARO

Val Skinner won six times on the LPGA Tour, was a key member of the victorious 1996 U.S. Solheim Cup team and, before turning pro, was a highly decorated junior golfer and an NCAA All-American at Oklahoma State University. Born in Bay Head, New Jersey, her family moved to Nebraska when she was a child, but she has since come back to the Garden State, where she lives for much of the year. With these accomplishments among a litany of others in golf, the 47-year-old Skinner could have easily rested on her laurels and been satisfied with being hailed and praised by her friends, family and peers as a resounding success.

But that was never enough for Skinner, and perhaps a young, inspirational woman named Heather Farr, who never made it to her 29th birthday, should be thanked for her profound affect on Skinner. Farr was a rising star on the LPGA Tour in the 1980s, around the time the likes of Skinner, Nancy Lopez and Juli Inkster were burnishing their own tournament résumés. It was a jolt to everyone when Farr fell victim, first to an errant diagnosis, and then to the insidious effects of breast cancer.

Farr's cancer was detected in 1989, and Skinner recounts Farr's four-year battle against the disease with a mixture of admiration and sadness. "Heather found a lump and

went to the doctor, who told her, 'It's nothing. You're 24 years old. Go back out and finish your season and come and see me in six months,'" Skinner recalled. "She did that, and it allowed the cancer to progress from Stage 1 to Stage 4, and it cost Heather her life. It was heartbreaking.

"Before Heather died she said, 'Val, younger women are clueless. They have no idea. If they hear they have a lump and should wait six months, they should follow their instincts and question it.' The more I learned about her situation the angrier I was about what she had gone through." It was that realization and fear that spurred Skinner to do something more.

Skinner founded an eponymous foundation that led to her annual LIFE charity golf tournament, named for "LPGA pros In the Fight to Eradicate breast cancer." The event, held for the eighth time this past May at Ridgewood Country Club in Paramus, New Jersey, has raised \$4 million for breast cancer research.

Skinner positioned the event to be the Monday after the LPGA's Sybase Classic, held at Upper Montclair Country Club in Clifton, N.J., and her fellow LPGA players line up to play as if it were a major championship. Many of the young guns of the LPGA Tour who participate in the event never knew Heather Farr personally, but thanks to Skinner they all know about her.

The Power of Golf

"I knew the power of golf and what you could do with our sport to raise money — we did it back then for [Farr], trying to raise money to pay for her treatments," Skinner said. "It was one of the biggest things I've learned in golf — how to appreciate the game. You know we all love to hate it."

It is golf's tremendous and far-reaching financial impact that has inspired Skinner's fellow pros to line up in an effort to be invited. Skinner's event is different than your average charity outing — Laura Diaz joked that she doesn't dare miss out on the LIFE event one year for fear she "won't make the cut" to get back onto the invitation list the following year. The day is less about the golf and more about the tugging of emotions that takes place during the post-round banquet, during which Skinner introduces her "heroes" each year.

Those heroes are sometimes breast cancer survivors who tell their respective stories, doctors who make a difference and other compelling people who are critical in fighting this

Skinner at the LIFE Center with (from far left): Kim Ranieri, genetic counselor; Dr. Joseph R. Bertino, interim director of CINJ; Dr. Deborah Toppmeyer, Director of LIFE Center; and Dr. Susan Goodin, Director of Pharmaceutical Sciences.



This year's LIFE outing at Ridgewood (above) drew a typically strong group of top LPGA pros. Below: From her home office, Skinner works the phone to line up support and participants for the event.

battle. Many who have been a part of the event are touched in profound ways every year by the stories they hear from Skinner's heroes. In 2002, a woman named Lisa Musillo spoke at Metedeconk National Golf Club in New Jersey, where the event took place that year, and there isn't a person who was there that day who has forgotten it.

"She was diagnosed at 27 with Stage 4 breast cancer, same as Heather," Skinner recalled as tears welled up in her eyes. "She stood up in front of our audience and she was dying. She knew she was dying and she talked about it. It was so raw and it was so real.

"Her words stopped you. There was someone standing there and saying, 'Don't give up

on this. Keep doing this. You're doing this for someone like me and I'm not going to be here a year from now to find out how you did.'" Before Skinner left Metedeconk that day, every sponsorship partner in the event approached her and told her they'd be back the next year with an open checkbook. Musillo survived the disease for four years and died at 31. "I'd walk through fire to find money for those young women after experiencing that," Skinner said.

LPGA Involvement
Tour pros have a lot on their plates, and they get invited to hundreds of events each and every year. The demands on their time are numerous, and so the turnout among top professionals at the LIFE event is that much more impressive.

"It's the first thing we put on our calendar every year," Meg Mallon said. "You meet people who are passionate in their professions, and Val is definitely passionate in her profession. But you don't often meet people who can transfer that passion into a whole other venue. As passionate as she was about golf, she has dedicated her whole life to this cause."

Mallon adds, "So often you do charity functions where you don't really know where the money being raised is going. Val has made sure it's going directly into research." Visible byproducts of Skinner's work in raising awareness are two interactive educational traveling vehicles, called Big Pink and Little Pink, that go around the country to colleges, cities and events. The program is called "Komen on the Go," as it is part of the Susan G. Komen for the Cure program. The vehicles have gone



TOP: COURTESY OF ALDAY COMMUNICATIONS; BOTTOM: JEFF WEINER

Tee it Up for Charity

Go to just about any private golf club during the heart of the Met Area's season, and chances are there is some kind of charity outing being played. "You can probably play in a charity event every day of the week if you had time," former New York Jets defensive end Marty Lyons said. The time, and the money.

Lyons, shown here with Joe Namath along with ex-Jet Kenny Schroy (far left) and North Fork Bank's Mario Caracappa, retired from the Jets in 1991 and has for the last 23 years hosted the Marty Lyons Foundation Celebrity Golf Tournament to benefit children who have been diagnosed with terminal or chronic life-threatening illnesses. The event has grown so large that it now takes place on two Long Island golf courses — Old Westbury and Sands Point. Lyons, of course, participates in his own event, and estimates that he plays in another 15 outings during the summer, often to reciprocate the efforts of other New York athletes and celebrities who play in his event.



In fact, the state of charity golf events has progressed so far that there are people who spend most of their time organizing the outings and lining up attendees. Mark Yusko, a sales representative for WGCH-AM in Greenwich, began running a celebrity charity event nearly 20 years ago. He now runs 10 events during the spring and summer, which make up as much a part of his work life as his "day" job. There are challenges in the largesse, says Yusko: "Even if you have a good event, it's becoming more and more difficult to schedule celebrities because there are so many opportunities for them to play."

The celebrities bring in dollars, and there is a staggering

amount of money raised at events across the Met Area. According to MGA member club surveys, approximately 300 clubs have an average of 10 outings per year, which attract an average of 100 golfers. That translates to more than \$50 million in annual gross revenues raised for charities at area clubs.

In the case of Lyons, the event has become a labor of love. In fact, he conceded that his foundation had become such a passion for him that it kept him living on Long Island after he retired from the Jets as a player in 1991.

"I started the program in 1982 and if I didn't have the foundation here I probably would have gone back to Alabama or Florida, but I couldn't walk out on the kids and I couldn't walk out on the volunteers," he said.

While so many of these events are about raising money for benefiting charities, for Lyons the reward comes from the look in the children's eyes at his events.

"For 25 years, I've been working for kids who aren't supposed to live to see the age of 18," Lyons said.

"With every child I meet they give you a whole new value of life. We can always make more money, but sometimes we can't make more time. The least we can do for these kids is to try to make more time for them."

To help inform Met Area golfers about the wealth of charity golf events available in the tri-state area, the MGA introduced a new online feature called Charity Corner. Clubs and charities can post their events, and the public can search for events to support a favorite charity and perhaps get to play a terrific course they might not otherwise see. Visit Charity Corner on www.mgagolf.org to find out more.

from making 35 stops a year to 150 stops across the country in 2007.

Karrie Webb, who never knew Farr, called the LIFE event "such an inspirational day," adding, "Val is so passionate about it and you just feed off of her enthusiasm, because breast cancer touches so many people."

It has touched many lives on the LPGA Tour. Morgan Pressel's mother died of the disease in 2003. Cristie Kerr's mother was diagnosed that same year. Sherri Steinhauer, one of Skinner's close friends, found a growth in her right breast in a mammogram. It ended up not being cancerous, though she gets tested regularly, and for that she thanks Skinner. "She's made the awareness of breast cancer so much more highly visible."

Bricks and Mortar

Just off the main entrance of the Cancer Institute of New Jersey at the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in downtown New Brunswick, you can hang a left, proceed down a hallway, and see yet another real-world example of Val Skinner's impact — the LIFE

Center. The clinic, within one of the country's foremost cancer research institutions, specializes in breast cancer screenings for women in their 20s and 30s. It has become an immense source of pride for Skinner, who praises the doctors and clinicians at every opportunity.

"These folks are experts in their field, and are the real heroes," she says. Inside the LIFE Center is a small display case with photos from the LIFE event, and the ever-present LIFE bear, a pink head cover and stuffed animal that helps to raise money and awareness for the foundation's work. They are a small but important symbol of Skinner's true goal — being part of a movement that someday eradicates the disease. "What we're doing is going to ripple if we can tip off the younger generations with good strong messages," she said. "That's what drives me."

Despite all her on-course success and tournament victories, it's easy to call that drive the best one of Val Skinner's life. ■

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