

ALMA PEPPERELL

For the first twenty five years after the Club's re-formation, if your name wasn't Smith, Dwyer or Pepperell, then you just about weren't allowed to win the Ladies' Championship. Twenty three times these ladies' names appeared on the honour board with Alma contributing six of them. Importantly, she was the very first Ladies' Champion. Palmer, Player and Nicklaus formed fierce rivalries on the world stage at this time while here at home we had our very own epic struggles.

Alma was introduced to the game at the relatively late age of 39 when she arrived in the district from Melbourne. The new Golf Club had created quite a bit of interest and she thought she would give it a go. From the very first she was hooked. What is there about the game that has this effect? The small margin of error that can deliver glory or disaster? The equality of the handicap system that always allows you to be competitive? The supreme test of character it provides? The sociability provided by good company while still testing the limits? Whatever, it provided an absolute pleasure for Alma for the next 34 years.

At her best she played off a handicap of ten which for a woman in those days was quite an achievement. Apparently her game was solid rather than spectacular but with one outstanding characteristic: her determination. She says, "I was consistent and rarely had a bad day." Betty Nottage, a three time Club Champion herself, said, "You never ever thought you were a winner until the final shot. She just never was beaten." Given that the format of play for these important events was stroke qualifying rounds followed by elimination match play it is easy to see how this fierce determination made her such a champion. Of course she did not have this quality alone. You might win one event by having a day out but to repeat the effort requires something else and usually it is a competitive streak. Eileen Smith and Kath Dwyer had it; undoubtedly Alma had it as well.

No doubt one of the championships that gave her great pleasure was the time she won while son, Stewart, won the Club Championship the same year. Kath Dwyer and Shane did it one year too. Alma also won the mixed Championship with Stewart. Again it would have been special feeling to triumph in this manner. It would have been fascinating to watch too. Would Mum be the team captain directing play? Would Stewart have to watch his mouth? Would there be chores for Stewart to do at home if he acted up? No doubt there would not have been any issues at all. They would just have been two golfers trying as hard as they could and enjoying the moment.

Stewart wasn't the only one of the brood to be a good golfer. Her daughter, Cecily, won the Junior Girls Championship. She probably came through the system initiated by Jack Kerr and others that saw at one stage in the late 60's, 88 junior players on the Club books. Given the dearth of juniors, especially girls, today, it would be interesting to know the reasons for their success.

She was triumphant in many Club events. She particularly remembers winning the Stroud Trophy with Von marking her card. Another notable achievement was holding the record of 76 gross when the course had a rating of 70.

Her ability drew the attention of the West Gippsland Country Week selectors on numerous occasions. Playing the top Melbourne courses was a marvellous experience but nothing could top the joy of winning their division when she was captain. She attributes it to the luck the purchase of new uniforms provided. More seasoned judges say it was the ability of the ladies and the inspiration provided by their captain.

Clearly, Alma was a champion golfer but her story doesn't end there because she threw herself into administration as well. She occupied just about every position on the Associates' Committee and then became involved at the West Gippsland level as well. Not only was she Captain but she served as a selector. Edna Cropley made some interesting observations about this role. "Alma had to be

good at negotiating with aspiring contenders, with sorting out the claims of other districts (West Gippsland was often linked with South and East Gippsland for Country Week) and with looking after the welfare of her players while also playing as part of a team – quite a formidable task.”

In recognition of this work the Alma Pepperell Encouragement Trophy was created in 1976 with the inaugural event played at Drouin. It was designed to, “Encourage newer players to not only participate in golf, to strive to improve their game but also importantly to put something back into the sport.” It really isn’t hard to see why Alma might have been chosen for this honour.

There were light hearted moments in golf too. Playing the fifth (now 14th) one day with Alice Cuthbertson, Alma spotted a snake going down a hole. She didn’t say what club she used but she clouted it on the head and killed it with one blow. Of course today given snakes are a protected species you would have to notify the appropriate authorities and get an official snake remover in. We all know that this happens all of the time today.

Goannas also posed a problem as they ran up the fairways and trees – well not a problem for Drouin players because they were used to them but for visitors. What needs to be remembered here is that when the course was established at Matthew Bennett Park it was carved out of bush on what was basically a swamp. It was no surprise that there should be unfriendly wild life to keep the golfers company. Of course it makes our complaints today of the swooping magpies in spring or the waddling ducks soiling the greens seem a bit lame.

On another occasion, Alma was playing the third (now 10th) with Monica Butler. Then as now the damn presented a challenge. The tee was elevated. For most ladies the only shot was to follow the dog leg bend and keep it in play. For Alma that play was for the faint hearted – she drove over the water and thereafter for many years the tee was known as “Pepperell’s Peak.”

Today, Alma doesn’t play but she still takes a keen interest in the performance of her daughter and daughter-in-law at Wynyard, Tasmania. No doubt though whenever she is near a golf course she must sniff the breeze and feel the competitive juices fire up. Once a competitor, always a competitor and Alma was always one of Drouin’s best.

Written by George Shand