

CONNECTICUT GOLF LEGEND MARCIA DOLAN DIES

By Bruce Berlet

HARTFORD, Conn. – Few players in Connecticut golf history have been more resolute, popular and respected than Marcia Dolan.

Dolan was a stalwart on the local and national golf scenes for more than 50 years, winning a record-tying 10 Connecticut Women's Golf Association Championship titles, three Connecticut State Women's Amateur Championships, three New England Women's Amateur Championships, three Hartford Times Tournament of Champions, the International Four-Ball twice, the Women's North and South Amateur, the Florida Women's Amateur, three Endicott Cup crowns, the Bermuda Mixed Foursomes and dozens of other state events, including the women's club championship at Ridgewood Country Club in Danbury 13 times.

Dolan was inducted into the Connecticut Golf Hall of Fame in 1976, ranked fourth in the country among female amateurs by Golf Digest in 1977 and received the Connecticut Sports Writers Alliance's highest honor, the Gold Key, in 1987 while being an advocate of "count your blessings, treasure moments and be kind to one another."

After overcoming numerous challenges on and off the course, Dolan died on Saturday at 82.

"As you can imagine, my family is still processing such a loss, so I ask for grace as we try to navigate this without her," Pam Spiewak, one of Dolan's three daughters, said on her Facebook page. "It's hard to find words to describe her. She was everyone's mother, a true champion, a survivor and a class act. She was unapologetically and authentically herself at all times. I will do the best I can to continue her legacy of kindness and be the best mother that I can to (daughters) Paige and Ali."

Dolan was born in Danbury but didn't start taking golf lessons until age 18 at Sunset Golf Course in St. Petersburg, Fla., where the family lived for 12 years. She reached the CWGA Championship final a record 18 times, including 12 in a row in 1966-77, and played several LPGA Tour events while in Florida during the winter. Whether in victory or defeat, Dolan was usually the most amicable person on the scene.

After losing to future LPGA Tour player and official Heather Daly-Donofrio in the 1992 CWGA final, an era apparently ended. Dolan decided to concentrate on doing "all the grunge jobs" as owner and president of the Connecticut Golf Center in New Milford that she and her husband, Bernie, bought in 1988. She also helped run a driving range they leased in Southington from 1991-96 and gave golf lessons, joining the LPGA Teaching Division for six months in 1994.

"Whatever it takes, I do it, from picking balls out of the mud to selling and regripping clubs," Dolan said at the time. "I just try to stay away from macho men who say their clubhead speed is 288 mph and wonder why they have to buy clubs from a woman."

In typical fashion, Dolan laughed.

But after needing 2 1/2 years to regain her amateur status on April 5, 1997, Dolan became a familiar face on the golf course again. After the lease at the Southington range expired, she didn't have to spend 80 to 90 hours a week at two facilities, so she used more spare time to practice.

"It's fun seeing families having fun at the ranges, especially at the miniature golf course we opened," Dolan said. "But I told Bernie I wanted to give playing another try, so I worked hard and actually started to get the ball moving forward."

When Dolan returned to competition for the first time in nearly four years, she teamed with Carolyn Creed to shoot 1-under 69 and finish third in a scramble tournament at the Country Club of Waterbury.

"I had to start over somewhere and hit shots I never remember hitting," Dolan said. "The first time I played I don't think I broke 90 from the men's tee, but what else should I expect? I have to accept what I'm going to see for a while because I basically have to learn to play again. But I appreciate things more than ever. It's not so business-like now. I think there's still some potential there, and I'm going to work at it for two years. If I'm not competitive, I'll just concentrate on playing fun golf."

But in 2000, Dolan faced her toughest battle when she learned from a longtime friend, Dr. Peter Jameson, that she had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. When Jameson informed Dolan of her diagnosis, he cried and then made her first appointment with Dr. Carol Portlock at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

As usual, Dolan proved to be a survivor. She had made it through her daughter's own health problems that led to her death, and a football-sized tumor in her abdomen wasn't going to stop Dolan, even though it was inoperative.

"I'm not saying I wasn't emotional, but it was like, 'OK, I've got to carry this water for 225 yards. Are you going for it or not?' " Dolan said. "I just looked at it as a challenge. My responsibility was to find out everything I could and get to the best doctors, so that's what I did. I let them put the floor plan together."

Dolan had countless tests and visited "every doctor imaginable" while demonstrating the resolve that helped her win so many tournaments. She underwent six chemotherapy treatments in 18 weeks and returned to the game she loved as a teaching pro at the Country Club of Farmington.

But within two weeks, Dolan learned the lymphoma had resurfaced. She returned to Sloan-Kettering to see Dr. Portlock and to find out if she could have stem-cell transplants. The procedure involves a form of bone marrow transplant and essentially replaces a cancerous blood-producing system with a healthy one, and it temporarily proved to be successful.

Unfortunately, the cancer eventually began to ravage her body again, but a year later, she won her only CWGA Senior Championship appearance and played her last State Women's Amateur in which she was paired with Liz Janangelo, who would win the first of a record five consecutive titles before becoming a four-time All-American at Duke and then play on the LPGA Tour.

In 1999, Dolan returned to run the range in New Milford, but more physical problems soon began to develop. She sold the New Milford range in February 2000, about a month after she began taking a new medication to try to relieve stomach pain. But when the pain continued, she went for another CAT scan that showed the large mass in her abdomen.

Dolan went to work for longtime friend Gail Appell, winner of the 1975 State Women's Amateur who owned a company in Avon that did background checks for jobs. She got the itch to get back into the game and became a teaching pro at the Country Club of Farmington under John Murphy.

"We had been buddies for years, and people were just so in love with her, the men as much as the women," Murphy said. "She was such a wonderful teacher and such a kind person, and people were so comfortable taking lessons from her. She was so analytical, and there was a kindness to her, which is what teaching is all about."

Not surprisingly, Dolan had a constant smile on her face while often lauded by her students.

"I can't be any other way," Dolan said. "I didn't want to be depressed. I wished I could turn the clock back because I would have appreciated my golf more. I would have appreciated walking the golf courses more. I would have appreciated all those sunrises, sunsets, acquaintances, friends, meeting new people. I really would have paid more attention, but you can't look back. You've got to look forward and make it better."

Such sentiments demonstrate why, despite her numerous trials and tribulations off the golf course, that you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who didn't appreciate, like and respect Marcia Dolan.

Funeral services for Dolan will be for family only, but there will be a celebration of her life in the spring at Ridgewood Country Club. In lieu of donations of flowers, her daughter Pam asks well-wishers to treat themselves to something nice, which is how her mother would have wanted it.