

KATHY WILLIAMS PLAYING IT FORWARD

A second shot at golf led to a Hall of Fame career and another chance for others in the game.

• BY JOSEPH OBERLE •



Rarely do people start playing golf alone. A parent, sibling, mentor or teacher will often introduce a prospective golfer to the game. Even great players have had help along the way, and in the case of former University of Minnesota Lady Gopher Kathy Williams, a Hall of Fame career might never have happened without support from those around her.

Williams grew up on a farm in La Crescent, and when her uncle sold his nearby farm, it was developed into the nine-hole Pine Creek Golf Course, where her mother, Marie, eventually went to work. Williams' family later sold their farm as well, and Marie wanted something for Kathy (the youngest of seven) to do, so she invited her to the course. The owner offered to teach Kathy the game, but his brusque, impatient and less-than-encouraging "teaching style" quickly discouraged the shy 8-year-old.

"I told my mom, 'I'm never coming to this golf course again. This isn't me,'" Williams says.

Undaunted, Marie played the long game and suggested taking a year off. When the 9-year-old returned the following season, she was "adopted" by a small group of senior golfers who taught

her the game. The hook was set, as Kathy copied their swing to learn mechanics and read and watched everything she could find on the game.

"The seniors made it fun every day," Williams says. "After playing, they would treat me to a bottle of pop and a bag of Old Dutch potato chips while they enjoyed their beer."

"By age 13, golf became the center of Williams' life, working as a staff member at the pro shop or caddying at Valley High GC near Houston, using the money to compete in tournaments."

A decent athlete, Williams played basketball and volleyball, but only to stay in shape for golf. By age 13, golf became the center of her life, working as a staff member at the pro shop or caddying at Valley High GC near Houston,

using the money to compete in tournaments. It paid off, as Williams made the Le Crescent High School boys team as a freshman in 1975 and became the first girl to compete in the boys state tournament.

"It was quite the adventure," Williams says of the state regionals that were held at Rochester G&CC, where she defeated her coach's son in a playoff for the state bid. "You talk about the quietest ride home."

Actually, La Crescent head coach Matt Dahl was excited about Williams making state, as the duo was wading into uncharted waters. Williams played for Dahl two more seasons until her senior year when La Crescent created a girls team and Minnesota held its first girls state tournament (A and AA)—which Williams won. Dahl had been Williams' biggest supporter and encouraged her



to apply for an Evans scholarship, which would become another first for Williams.

"It was the right time because of Title IX and equal opportunity," Williams says. "And, my goodness, if you have girls out there caddying and you are offering a scholarship, they should have access to that. Now it's come full circle—look at all the women in that program."

At the U of M, the small town girl came to the big city with nervous apprehension, yet took it by storm. When Williams was on the course, her comfort level increased, and she set a school record (that still stands today) of six victories that first year.

"I was on fire, and I had a blast," Williams says. "I just went out there and played—no pressure—because I was a freshman and just teed it up and let it go."

Williams was a member of the Gophers' first Big Ten champion golf team in 1978. She captained the team for her final three seasons, which included 11 more victories—a record of 17 career wins that also remains intact. As a senior in 1981, she earned AIAW All-America honors, was named the Minnesota Women's Athletics Senior Athlete of the Year, the Evans Scholar Athlete of the Year, the U of M Senior Athlete of the Year, and was a Patty Berg Award recipient. She appeared ready to go pro.

After some time on mini-tours, Williams earned her LPGA tour card, but then took some bad advice from a pro at a San Diego club where she worked as an assistant. He convinced her to change her swing from a fade to a draw and "it all went downhill from there." Although she won the 1986 Reno Classic before leaving the Tour after one season, Williams was never able to find her old swing.

"It's a life lesson I always tell people as a teacher: 'You're not changing a thing if it's working,'" Williams says.

Teaching and coaching golf became Williams' next move—another successful one. She returned to the U of M to coach the Lady Gophers from 1991-



"As a senior in 1981, Williams earned AIAW All-America honors, was named the Minnesota Women's Athletics Senior of the Year, the Evans Scholar Athlete of the Year, U of M Senior Athlete of the Year, and was a Patty Berg Award recipient."



99 and led her charges to three NCAA Regional Tournament invitations, becoming the 1992 Big Ten Coach of the Year. In 2005, she received HOF honors from the university for her contributions as a player and a coach.

Still in love with the game and always on the lookout for the next adventure, Williams moved to West Chicago, Ill., for a teaching job at Prairie Landing Golf Club (which she continues in today). In 2002, she became the golf specialist at Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital in Wheaton for its Golf Medicine and Therapeutic Programs. She began working with patients who wanted to get back into golf, and it set her on a new career path.

"You name it and I had it: traumatic brain injury victims, stroke survivors, amputees, patients with new hips, knees, any kind of physical ailment," Williams says. "They wanted to get back in the game, and I was their go-to person."

When funding for the program dried up in 2005, Williams and her boss Donna Strum recognized the need for their services remained, so they created a not-for-profit called RevelationGolf that helps veterans and their families get back on the golf course.

"We have all the VA hospitals in the Chicagoland as clients," Williams says. "We have a PTSD program, a female vets program, one for active duty personnel and military children programs. We hold clinics every week for these VA hospitals."

RevelationGolf works with more than a 1,000 veterans a year, and the programs are free of charge. Fundraising is the biggest challenge, but Williams also dreams of expanding the program.

"The model we put together works, and we would love to share that with other places," she says.

It's all about giving someone a second shot in the game. Something Williams knows well:

"I think about the beginnings and how my life started with golf. It put me on a path to where I am today. So, I have been blessed with that." **MG**