

Tahoe celeb golf tourney not just about the guys

By Susan Wood

The American Century Championship at Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course could be called a quasi battle of the sexes this year.

That's because the women golfers are coming out in full force this year when the premier golf tournament is in play July 19-24.

Three big guns in the world of golf will be on hand to compete.

Heather LeMaster, the 2013 Women's World Long Drive champion, will make her first appearance in a big way by trying to establish a Guinness Book of World Records mark for the longest drive by a woman at an elevation above 6,200 feet.

Blair O'Neal, a former member of the LPGA Symetra Tour and Golf Channel television host, is also taking a shot at the record in her inaugural run.



Lisa Cornwell is returning to the ACC tournament next week. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

Lisa Cornwell, who hosts “Golf Central” on Golf Channel, played collegiate golf and hopes to improve in her third attendance at the championship.

It’s one thing to have the U.S. Women’s Open, the premier event for female golfers, return to Northern California after last being held in 1982 in Sacramento and now for the first time in the Bay Area at CordeValle Golf Club in Santa Clara. But it’s quite another to have such a showing for women in a

typically male-sanctioned event as the American Century Championship.

Having such high-profile female competitors following in the footsteps of soccer great Brandi Chastain in addition to Tahoe local and former pro golfer Annika Sorenstam is gaining notice from tournament stakeholders. U.S. women's soccer team Olympic star Abby Wambach will be the latest soccer phenom to try her hand at driving a ball instead of kicking it.



The American Century Championship celebrity golf tournament will attempt to establish a Women's Long Drive at Elevation record as part of a competition involving champion long ball artists Heather LeMaster and Blair O'Neal. The competition

will take place July 19 at Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course in advance of the 27th annual American Century Championship. LeMaster's winning drive in the World Long Drive competition in 2013 at Mesquite was 306 yards. The tournament has consulted with the Guinness Book of World Records and there is no category for long drives at an elevation above 6,000 feet. Therefore, the longest drive of the competition will be submitted for consideration to the Guinness Book of World Records in London, with evidence of authenticity.

"The great thing about the American Century Championship is that the field is diverse in many ways and creates interesting dynamics. With a record number of women playing this year, it's surely one of the more diverse player lists we've seen

and will prove to be a source of competitive fun for both players and spectators,” Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority Executive Director Carol Chaplin told *Lake Tahoe News*.

That’s what Gary Quinn, NBC Sports’ vice president of Programming and Owned Properties, is counting on. Quinn has said the network has tried for years to “get as many female celebrities as it can,” but the quest has been “a bit challenging.”

Persistence pays off. The golf tournament has traditionally tuned in a viewership profile made up of about 65 percent men and 35 percent women. These percentages could change with this year’s dynamic.

“It could be one of the most entertaining golf events,” Quinn told *Lake Tahoe News*.

When asked how the men who don’t play, say up to par, will handle getting beaten by women who play professionally or competitively, Quinn projected the egos should be in check.

“If these guys come out and participate to play in front of 40,000 fans, they’ve got enough confidence in themselves,” he explained.

Ninety competitors in the tournament’s 27th year are celebrities in their own professional sport – football, baseball, basketball, hockey or are stars in the world of entertainment.

This year’s gender profile just might make the event more exciting to watch – especially when there’s a record to beat.

“It’ll be interesting to see how far Heather (LeMaster) hits the ball,” Quinn said.

With the higher the elevation and thinner the air, the more the ball travels.

“Believe it or not, if my calculations are correct, I can expect to hit a golf ball over 380 yards, possibly over 400 yards. This will not only be my personal best, but so much fun. I’ve always wanted to show the world that girls can go far too. I like to call it #ladylong,” LeMaster told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Beyond being a nine-time world equestrian champion and African safari enthusiast, LeMaster’s golf game is in her blood. Her grandmother played golf with Mildred Ella “Babe” Didrikson Zaharias.



Brandi Chastain in 2015 played with the fans on the 17th hole. This year it will be fellow Olympian Abby Wambach’s turn to

trade a soccer ball for a golf ball. Photo Copyright 2016
Carolyn E. Wright

Aside from the bloodlines, LeMaster will carry a distinct strategy to compete against the men at Edgewood.

“Although long off the tee, I make sure I still have a full shot into the green. This course won’t be playing very long, so I feel that our wedge shots could be landing closer because we can use the full swing, as opposed to (having) to try and finesse the swing to produce the correct distance,” LeMaster told *LTN*.

The pro golfer quickly lightened up though with a quip implying perhaps the women’s advantage lies in “when we walk up onto the tee box our natural beauty and sweetness might distract (the men.)”

Cornwell added to the tongue-in-cheek responses on the subject of women’s golf game advantages by declaring confidence is her competitive edge.

“I am confident that I can beat Charles Barkley and Larry the Cable Guy,” she said of the basketball star and comedian. They are notoriously the cellar dwellers.

The sports stars have varying talents beyond golf, as in the case of Cornwell, who told *LTN* she also sings and plays guitar – but only around people she knows.

She’d like to add getting on a boat on the lake and ziplining in the forest as outdoor activities to take in while visiting Tahoe this month.

“I always say (the championship is) my favorite week of the year for so many reasons,” Cornwell added.

Fun and friendly competition aside, the women golfers added to the list this year expressed the event is also about advancing

the golf world for more female competitors.

“In many ways, golf is still a man’s world, but thankfully, it’s getting better. Augusta (Georgia) now has female members. The LPGA tour is in a very good place. Hopefully, the ladies out on tour will continue to get more and more exposure because they are so incredibly talented,” Cornwell said, adding: “I always tell the men that if they want to get better by watching, watch the ladies. They get more out of their swings than the guys because their tempo is so good.”

Ditto from O’Neal.

“Amateurs often tell me that they learn more from watching professional female golfers than they do from the men. They like watching the smooth tempos,” said O’Neal, who also can claim modeling to her list of talents.

The television host admits it’s a tough balancing act between her public image and golf game, but insists she’s been “fortunate to blend” them.