

HISTORY OF WOMEN'S GOLF AUSTRALIA

By the late 1890's the game of golf was small but well established in Australia and the first official record of women playing the game seriously came with the formation of what is now the Royal Melbourne Golf Club in 1892. In August 1894 the Geelong Golf club organised the first Ladies Golf Championship of Australasia. Women also staged the first Inter-colonial match in 1897 when sides from Sydney and Victoria competed over the Sydney Golf Links in New South Wales. The woman behind much of Australia's early competitive golf was Miss Evelyn B. Mackenzie who won the first and three subsequent national championships.

With the increasing popularity of the game in the early 20th century, each state formed its own Ladies Golf Union. But while women had control at the state level, national events were organised by the men's Australian Golf Union until November 1921 when the Australian Ladies Golf Union was formed to control and co-ordinate women's golfing activities in Australia. The fledgling ALGU was run by delegates from New South Wales and Victoria, with Western Australia having a proxy vote. By 1925 all states were affiliated and Miss Rene Austin was appointed the first Honorary Secretary and Treasurer. An early goal of the ALGU was the establishment of a uniform national handicap system for women.

In the 1930's the ALGU made moves to have players compete at an international level, although individual players had competed abroad previously. South Australian, Florence Fowler, was the first Australian to claim an international title when she won the Italian title in 1931. Players have also competed in the British Championship from very early times, a number of them doing extremely well, but it was not until 1978 that 19 year old Edwina Kennedy from New South Wales, became the first Australian to win the coveted title.

In 1933 the first match against New Zealand was staged in Victoria and this biennial contest, the Tasman Cup, has continued ever since.

The first team from Great Britain and Ireland to tour Australia arrived in 1935, playing fourteen courses in five states. Two more Tasman Cups were played before the intervention of the Second World War during which all official competition ceased. The last Australian Championship before the War was played in 1939 and won by Miss Joan Lewis (later Mrs J.D. Fisher) and following service in the WAAF, she returned to golf and her winning ways by taking the first post-war title in 1947.

In 1950 Australia sent its first official touring team overseas. Captained by Miss Leo Wray, the team of Mrs Barbara Gowing (NSW), Miss Maxine Bishop (WA), Miss Pat Borthwick (NSW), Mrs Joan Fisher (Vic), Miss Joan Fletcher (Qld) and Miss Judith Percy (Qld) toured for three months, which included the sea voyage to England and back. The Australians performed well in official matches and Judith Percy made the semi-finals of the British Championship played at Royal County Down in Ireland.

Three years later Australia had its first encounter with South Africa in a series of matches played here. Between 1953 and 1969 Australia and South Africa exchanged visits and during this period both Margaret Masters (Vic) and Marea Hickey (Mrs M Parsons - NSW) won the South African Championship. Sporting relations resumed in 1995 with South Africa competing in the Commonwealth Tournament at Royal Sydney, and Australia sent a successful touring side to South Africa in 1996 with Western Australian, Tanya Holl winning the South African title in an all-Australian final.

The Commonwealth Tournament played every four years between Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, was started in June 1959 at St Andrews, Scotland. This event has been dominated by Great Britain. Australia has won twice, in Canada in 1983 and on its home ground at Royal Sydney in 1995.

The event that changed the face of world women's amateur golf was the Espirito Santo Trophy, presented by Portugal for the biennial World Amateur Teams Championship. The first tournament was played in France in 1964 with 25 nations competing. The host nation won but from then on the competition was dominated by the United States of America until Australia broke the stranglehold in 1978 when the team of Lindy Goggin (Tas), Jane Lock (Vic) and Edwina Kennedy (NSW) won at Pacific Harbour Golf Club in Fiji.

Apart from controlling women's amateur golf in Australia, in 1974 the ALGU introduced the Australian Women's Open Championship. During the 1970's this event, together with the Colgate Far East Tournament, also played under the auspices of the ALGU, allowed Australian golf fans to see some of the world's best women professional golfers in action and provided an opportunity to showcase our home grown talent.

Since then a number of Australian women have pursued successful careers in professional golf, both overseas and in Australia. Jan Stephenson (NSW) was the first to achieve super star status in the United States, where she has won 23 tour events, including the prestigious US Women's Open in 1983, and over \$2.5 million in prize money.

More recently Karrie Webb took on the mantle as the super star of Australian women's golf. In her rookie year on the United States tour she finished on top of the money list and earned \$1m in prize money alone. Since then Karrie went on

to become the youngest woman ever to achieve the Career Grand Slam by winning the McDonald's LPGA Championship (26 years, six months and three days).

The likes of Karrie Webb, and other professional golfers such as Katherine Hull, Sarah Kemp, Nikki Garrett and Lindsey Wright are establishing a significant role in women's professional golf.

A change of name and structural constitutional reforms occurred in the early 1990's to enable the organisation to continue to manage and develop the sport within the context of a contemporary sports business environment. Women's Golf Australia continued to maintain responsibility for the administration of women's golf in Australia. In association with its state affiliates it provided opportunities from grass roots activities to elite development and state and national championships as well as promoting participation through such initiatives as the Girls Golf Club, Business Women's Programs and Come 'n Try Days. In addition to developing and managing the women's handicapping and course rating systems, WGA organised national championships from club level through to the Women's Australian Open.

Women's Golf Australia was managed by a Board of Directors consisting of one member from each State (usually the President of the State body), with the capacity to appoint three additional independent members from outside the organisation. Three committees oversaw specific areas: Technical - handicapping, course rating, rules of golf, rules of amateur status, tournament conditions and match issues; Golf - junior and elite development, national ranking, Girls Golf Club, the AIS program and adult participation programs; and PR and Marketing - all related activities, including merchandising and publications, including the Year Book.

In 2006 Women's Golf Australia merged with the Australian Golf Union to form Golf Australia.