

Tom Cade: Hello, this is Pod for the Course and I'm Tom Cade, the senior director of communications for Washington Golf. Today we have with us Erin Szekely, who is the tournament director for the Northwest Women's Open. Erin, thanks so much for joining us today.

Erin Szekely: Sure, happy to be on.

Tom Cade: I think everyone's happy just to be able to have some opportunities to play competitive golf these days, I think, yeah?

Erin Szekely: Yeah, for sure. I know that PNGA canceled all of theirs, so I got a lot more amateurs this year than I normally get.

Tom Cade: Yeah, I'll bet. In fact, when the PNGA canceled the rest of their season, the events that they had left remaining were the women's amateur, the junior girls amateur. So there were quite a few events that they had coming up. And they were all full and they all had waiting lists. Lots of really good players looking for places to play. And I know that you have the Northwest Women's Open coming up this month, July 20-22 at Twin Lakes Golf and Country Club in Federal Way, Washington. Yes?

Erin Szekely: Yes, that's correct.

Tom Cade: Well, first of all, let's just talk a little bit about your background, Erin. How long have you been the tournament director of the Northwest Women's Open?

Erin Szekely: Well, it started out 24 years ago. I started it at a Willows Run as the East Side Women's Open. And then I did that for several years and then it morphed into the Washington State Women's Open, and did that for a number of years. The last, I don't know, 10, 12 years it's been at Twin Lakes as the Northwest Women's Open. We've got people that come in from all over the world, people from Japan and New Zealand and all over.

Tom Cade: And for you, you've got a lot on your plate as it is even without the Northwest Women's Open, as I understand, you are the head coach for the boys and girls teams at The Bush School. Is that correct?

Erin Szekely: That's correct. And the middle school. I'm developing so they can move into the varsity. Yeah, that's right.

Tom Cade: And where is The Bush School located?

Erin Szekely: It's over by Madison Park on Lake Washington. It's a K through 12 school.

Tom Cade: Was the season for the kids there at the school, the spring season, was that canceled? Is that right?

Erin Szekely: I have the boys in the fall and then the girls in the middle school in the spring. I had a two weeks with the middle school and one week with the varsity girls, and then it was all canceled.

Tom Cade: I see. That's too bad.

Erin Szekely: Yes, it was disappointing. I had five seniors on my varsity team. And so that was disappointing, I'd had them last year and was really looking forward to this year. And so that was all canceled.

Tom Cade: Yeah, that's really unfortunate. You think about kids like that in the situation that we're in, they lose a year's worth of playing and for someone at that age that's a big loss for them.

Erin Szekely: Yes. So a lot of my students, because the school is so small, I usually have mostly brand new kids. And so I kind of groomed them last year. And then this year was going to be our year. They were getting better and better. And so that was disappointing. I have a lot of good players on the boys team, but because the state open is in the spring, they didn't get to play the ones that had qualified for our districts. And then of course the state. So they missed out on that.

Tom Cade: Yeah. Erin, you are also a LPGA professional and a life member of the LPGA. Is that correct?

Erin Szekely: That's correct.

Tom Cade: Where are you from originally?

Erin Szekely: I grew up here. I went to Blanchet High School and I graduated from the University of Washington and I've been LPGA member for the last 24 years and then teaching all that time. And right now I'm at Twin Rivers Golf Course, out in Fall City. I live in West Seattle. So with the bridge down it's been quite the commute.

Tom Cade: Yeah. That's a challenge right there. What is the home course for your school?

Erin Szekely: Jefferson Park.

Tom Cade: Okay, very nice. So the Northwest Women's Open, the defending champion is who?

Erin Szekely: Jessica Maynard.

Tom Cade: And where is she from?

Erin Szekely: She is from Petaluma, California.

Tom Cade: Is she going to be in the field again?

Erin Szekely: She is, thank goodness. She's not from Canada because I lost a lot of Canadian players because the borders closed and we were hoping it was going to open on the 21st, which is Tuesday, the first day of our tournament. On Monday, we have a program and then on Tuesday and Wednesday, it's the tournament proper. And we were hoping that maybe if they opened it on the 21st, they could drive down early, but it's not going to happen because I just heard today where it looks like they're going to keep it closed until August 21st.

Tom Cade: Yeah, I think I saw a headline as well saying about that. It's really unfortunate. What is the size of the field going to be you suppose?

Erin Szekely: Well, this year there's 31 players and it's almost half and half with professionals and amateurs. In the past I couldn't seem to attract amateurs to the tournament. It is a true open, so they have to play gross score. But I had to change things around a little bit this time because I had such a huge field of amateurs. So even though they're separated a bit, but they will be mixed into the field on the second day, according to their score. So it's a true open and I've got, I think 17 Am and 14 professionals. And lost a lot of Pros because a lot of them traveled from Texas and Florida and California, locked in California and none of them really were able to come...

Tom Cade: Yeah lots of restrictions and hesitations about traveling just because of the situation. Correct?

Erin Szekely: Absolutely, Yeah. That's the only reason. It's really a shame because we really could have had a pretty big field this year.

Tom Cade: So how many years again, is this going to be held at Twin Lakes? Is it the 12th year?

Erin Szekely: Yeah, I think so. I don't even know what day it is, honestly. But at least for the last 10, 12 years it's been out at Twin Lakes and their membership has been very supportive of the tournament. It's a great venue. The course, I played it the other day and of course it's in fabulous shape. It's not an easy course to play. I don't know if you've played it or not, but it's a very challenging course. But I have the tees set up so that it's real playable. And we're not playing it from the tips. And even though the yardage might look shorter playing it around 5600 yards, it is challenging.

Tom Cade: I have been there and I know that there are some out of bounds there just because it does wind through a housing development a little bit. So very few places to play these days for the competitive golfer. And I think that seems like the response has been fairly good to something like this and the fact that it's a local event and people don't have to travel. I think that might be sort of a good thing sometimes, for the local player anyway.

Erin Szekely: Yeah, absolutely. And we're taking all the precautions. Last year was the last year we had, we called it the Kusak Cup. Kusak Crystal has been wonderful to our tournament, has sponsored and donated crystal. And I had a match play event, it started out as the Canadians and the Americans. So I had five on each team. I had four pros, one am and we did a Rider Cup or Solheim Cup event, before the Pro-Am on Monday. And that was really, really fun, but the Kusaks retired. But they had done it for almost 20 years. So last year was the last year.

So that was unfortunate to see that go. And then in the afternoon on Monday we would have Pro-Am and so it would be a shotgun start, but this year, because of COVID-19, we're doing tee times so that we don't have any big gatherings at all. So there'll be tee times for the Pro-Am, and of course all the players will go off in threesomes on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Tom Cade: Okay, makes sense. So are you doing anything particular for course setup or policies for the players just to stay safe on the golf course?

Erin Szekely: Well, they definitely have to wear their mask around the pro shop and in the clubhouse. We'll be checking them in outside, so they won't have to go inside. And then out on the golf course, I'm trying to set things up so that there'll be a couple of walkers maybe and somebody in a cart. So they need to keep social distance and they won't need to wear their mask on the course, if they maintain that social distancing.

Tom Cade: What about gallery? Are they going to be allowed?

Erin Szekely: You know, I got a couple of messages from people asking if they could come and watch. And I said they could come and watch if they wore masks the entire time. So, generally we don't have a huge gallery because it's a tough walking course, but younger players, I think parents might be coming out and stuff. So they're going to need to wear masks in order to watch and they have to stay on the cart cap. They can't speak to the players or anything.

Tom Cade: Okay, so again for yourself, Erin, did you play at all competitively when you were in school or out of school?

Erin Szekely: Well, honestly I didn't start playing until I was 35 years old.

Tom Cade: Really?

Erin Szekely: But I got hooked really, really fast. My husband played not real well, or I shouldn't say that, but anyway, I've dealt with him and played and I thought "Well, how hard can this be?", because I was fairly athletic, played softball and basketball and volleyball, that stuff. And so I thought "This can't be that difficult." And then I found out that, "Okay, it kind of is." And I started out playing and I went to put golf and just picked out some clubs. I had no idea what I was doing, got tips from this person, that person, this person, which wasn't all

that helpful. But in spite of that, I got myself down to a three handicap and I played amateur golf here in the area a bit up in Snohomish and at the Snohomish golf course, as a member up there. Where I'm a member of the ladies club.

And then somebody talked me into turning Pro and probably wasn't a great idea. I did buy some mini tour events. I had a couple of top 10s, but nothing spectacular. I won as an amateur, I can't remember even what it was. It was a tri city kind of thing. So I played that and then I decided I wanted to teach. And so I got into the LPGA. And so I've been teaching ever since.

Tom Cade: So at age 35, you just got into it and you just went all in, yes?

Erin Szekely: I have a husband and three sons. They're all grown now, but when my youngest was in kindergarten, I thought, "Well, I have some time." I also work part time at Alaska Airlines. I've had a whole bunch of different part time jobs. And I worked at the golf courses, so I get free golf, that kind of thing. If this game is addicting and it is frustrating and it's wonderful and I just got hooked on it.

Tom Cade: Well, it sounds like you're hooked on it in a really good way, because it looks like you're doing even great stuff at the school with the kids programs. And now with this annual tournament, the Northwest Women's Open, giving people a place to play and that's what people want.

Erin Szekely: Exactly. Well, when I started the tournament, I had played in the Washington State Women's Open years ago when I first started kind of playing golf myself, and I got to play with a professional and I was just so intrigued with watching her and what she was doing. And I thought this is awesome. It would be great if other amateurs got to play with some professionals. So that was my original intent with the tournament, was to... And that's what I did at the beginning, was pair up an Am with a couple of Pros, so they could get the experience of observing a professional. And then I also liked to have lots of games. So we have prizes on closest to the pin. I have a leap of the day, so if you screw up on the first day, you've got the second day to come back and I have a senior division, which pays a separate purse. And so I like to have lots of games going on. So I brought all that to it.

Tom Cade: Very nice. Erin, I appreciate you taking the time today to talk about this. I know you've got a lot going on with getting ready for the school. Actually, let's talk about the school. When does that start up again in the fall?

Erin Szekely: Well, it usually starts at the end of August, but I've just got a word from my athletic director that it was going to start on the 24th of August. My season, I don't know when they're starting school or what's happening with that at all. I don't think exactly they're waiting to hear what the Seattle schools and stuff are going to do. But now they said that we're going to start on September 5th for the golf season. So we're two weeks behind. So if we go at all, I don't know. We

provide transportation to matches into the practices from Bush to Jefferson Park. I don't know how we're going to do it, but we'll figure something out.

Tom Cade: All right. Erin Szekely, thanks so much for joining us today. Again, Erin is the director for Northwest Women's Open. And if anyone has any questions about the tournament, they can go to the website, which is Northwest Women's Open.com. Erin again is the head coach for the varsity teams and also middle school teams at the Bush school for the both the boys and the girls. Erin, I know you have a busy day and busy life. And thanks again for taking the time to be with us today.

Erin Szekely: You bet, Tom. Thank you for having me.

Tom Cade: Talk to you soon.

Erin Szekely: Okay.

Tom Cade: Bye-bye.

Erin Szekely: Bye.