

Tom: Hello, this is Pod for the Course and I'm Tom Cade, the Director of Communications for Washington Golf. This year, 2022, is the Centennial year, the 100-year anniversary of Washington Golf. It was founded in 1922. And by no coincidence, it is also the Centennial year, this year, for the Washington State Women's Golf Association. It was also founded in 1922. And we are very happy to have with us today Sharon Johnston, and Sharon has a unique, I think, moniker of being the president of both golf associations. Quite an historic year for the game in the region. Very happy to have with us Sharon Johnston. Sharon, thanks so much for coming on today.

Sharon: Oh, it's my pleasure, Tom. Thank you for asking.

Tom: Yeah, you bet. So, what I want to do, Sharon, is just start from the beginning. Everybody has a story about how they got started in the game of golf, how they started playing. What is your story? How did you start playing the game?

Sharon: Well, I really started playing in 1975. I was 30 years old and we joined Fircrest Golf Club. We lived in Fircrest and drove by the course every day and it was so beautiful and my husband played infrequently, but he did play the game and we said, 'Oh, wouldn't it be great someday to be able to play golf there?' And that was kind of how it started. And our children were young at the time. I believe they were seven and nine and we thought, well, maybe now would be a good time to join. So, that's how we really started playing. I had played just a few times with a couple neighbors, ladies that played at Meadow Park in Tacoma. And so I'd actually held a club in my hands, but basically I wouldn't say I started golfing then. My interest was piqued when I was a physical education major at the University of Washington and always been interested in sports and been relatively lucky, having fairly good hand-eye coordination.

And so I liked to try everything and I was excited because in the spring I was taking a class and it was intro to a lot of different things. I remember it was volleyball officiating, and one of the things was going to be golf and I was excited about it and it was in the spring and I thought, 'Oh, I'll be able to learn a little bit about golf.' And that was back in the early 1960s, but I'd never really been exposed to golf before. So spring quarter came and, very disappointing, I ended up getting labyrinthitis, which was an inner ear infection. And as I was going to miss some classes, they made me drop that class and I never was exposed to the game. So I always had that regret. But the interesting thing to you, Tom, would be my teacher was Liz Culver. And I know what an important part, that's why I bring up that part of the story because she's been so involved with the PNGA and Washington Golf.

Tom: Yeah, let me interject here just real quickly. Liz Culver is, for the listeners out there, she is now a member of the Pacific Northwest Golf Hall of Fame, a longtime volunteer and administrator for the Pacific Northwest Golf Association and a huge influence on women's golf in general, I think in the state and the region, really. So go ahead, Sharon.

Sharon: That's exactly right. And that's why later, I mean, I didn't know anything about Liz at the time, other than she was my teacher, but I thought, 'Oh man, would I have liked to have started then.' But anyway, in answer to your question, 1975 is when I started.

Tom: And when you started, you kind of went all in. You played quite a bit and as I understand, you began to play competitively, correct?

Sharon: I did. You know, it was interesting. When I joined Fircrest, I had all of these women that were in the 18-hole division. I was naive enough to just start out, join the 18-hole division right away and become active. I was on committees that very first year. And so I learned a lot about the game and the different ways to score and the games you can play while you're playing golf and played in their regular Tuesday competitions. And so by 1979, I was really interested in playing, 'I think I'm going to play in the Washington State Women's Golf Championship.' And as it turned out, I did not play that year, but my first year to play was 1980 and I was the representative from Fircrest to the Washington State Women's Golf Association.

And so I went to the championship and I've been very involved in that group since its inception. But it was interesting because everybody, I remember when I first started golfing, everybody would say to me, 'Oh, Sharon, good shot. Oh, that was great. Someday, you're going to be a good golfer. Someday you'll make a good golfer.' So I got a lot of encouragement starting out.

Tom: So you say you became involved with the Washington State Women's Golf Association, and if you basically started playing consistently in 1975 and by 1984, you were president of the Washington State Women's Golf Association. So, that was a pretty steep curve you were working on there. Going from a golfer to a volunteer to an administrator basically of the Washington State Women's Golf Association – how did all that happen? Did someone say, 'Hey, Sharon, you should become involved with this? Or you just see a sign one day and said, 'Yeah, I'm going to do that.' How did that come about?

Sharon: Well, it was interesting because at the time the gal that was the representative from Fircrest, when they had a championship, you were really basically required to go because you only had two meetings a year, one was during the championship and then one would be early in the year making the arrangements. So, because they knew that I loved golf, it was 'Oh Sharon, would you go to that meeting for me?' I guess that's how it started. 'Oh, sure. I'll do that.' And so I ended up being the unofficial representative on the WSWGGA committees and then the presidency evolved when the championship was going to be at Fircrest that year. That's how it happened.

Tom: Okay. So did you serve on the board of the WSWGGA and then work your way up to be serving as president? Is that how that works?

Sharon: Well, not really because what they do, they call each representative from the member clubs, they call them a trustee and all of the trustees make up the board. They aren't necessarily just an executive board that's held aside from the overall board. So as a trustee, you're all, I would say, equal members. So I obviously served as vice president one year and president the next.

Tom: I see. Okay. So the Washington State Women's Golf Association has, again, this is its Centennial year as well, lots of history for that association and lots of, kind of a who's

who champions of their annual championship. It's a significant golf association and it's had a significant impact on the game in the region. And I would also have to say that when they were founded in 1922 with their first playing of the championship at Grays Harbor Country Club, they were organized from the get-go. They had it going on, it seemed like. Is that right?

Sharon: Absolutely. In fact, it's very impressive. And I think we should point out that the Washington State Women's Golf Association is a group of the private clubs in the state. There's also another organization called the Washington State Women's Public Links Association. And that would be for the public courses. So when they formed the WSWGGA, yes, it was the private clubs and the women involved did an extremely good job of organizing. And so they were up and running when they first started.

Tom: So in 1984, again, you served as president of the WSWGGA. How did you then become involved with the Washington State Golf Association? Did that just naturally move in that direction for you as a volunteer? How did that happen for you, Sharon?

Sharon: Well, it begins really with PNGA because PNGA was really the body that ran championships here in Washington. And didn't have women involvement on the board really, other than Liz Culver had a voice. But beyond that, there were no women really on the board. At the same time, 1984, when I was president of Washington State Women's, Liz was trying to organize a women's division for the PNGA. And so I was invited because to this original meeting to form this women's division because I was president of Washington State Women's. And so I went to that meeting and they said, well, we need to have a representative from each of these clubs from all over the state. So whether it was public or private or whatever, they wanted a rep and who would be the representative from Fircrest?

And as it turned out at that time, because I was at the meeting, I thought, oh, it would be pretty presumptuous of me to name myself as being the representative. So I knew that Joan Teats was a member of Fircrest and her husband was a PNGA director, and so I thought, wouldn't that be nice if Joan and her husband could both go to the meetings together and maybe she'd be interested in being the rep from Fircrest.

So what happened is I asked Joan, she says, 'Oh, sure.' And she was very involved, as probably a lot of you know, with forming junior golf in Washington. And so I figured she was very involved in that she'd be a great PNGA representative. Well, as it turned out almost every single year that we had a meeting for the women's division, Joan would come to me and she says, 'Oh gosh, Sharon, would you be willing to go to this meeting for me?'

And I said, 'Oh, sure. Sure, I'll go.' Sometimes it was close by, sometimes it wasn't so close, but sometimes it was during the championship. And so I was going to play in the championship anyway. So I thought, sure, I'll go to the meetings for you. So anyway, it was about four years later. And then she asked if I might like to be the rep from Fircrest since I was the one that was going to the meetings anyway. But that's how it happened. And at that time, Washington State Golf did not have a women's division. The board was

different. It was all men. And so, when they did the realignment with Washington State and PNGA and realized that PNGA was serving as more the umbrella association and each of the state or provinces would be the spokes to that umbrella. Then it made sense that we would have representation on the board of Washington Golf. So, that's how it happened. I was the PNGA rep, then I became the Washington State rep as well. That make sense?

Tom: It does make sense. Yes. And so in that timeline of things, in 1994 was the inaugural playing of the Washington Women's Amateur conducted by the Washington State Golf Association. And you spoke earlier about the Washington State Women's Golf Association serving the private club members and the Washington State Women's Public Links Association serving the public women players. So there were two state women champions for quite a number of years.

Sharon: That is correct.

Tom: So in 1994, when the WSGA held its first women's state amateur, that was open to everybody, both private and public players. And as I understand it, you competed in that, is that right?

Sharon: I did. I did. You know what's interesting? Stepping back a few years before that, I happened to be playing in a championship at Spanaway and it was the Tacoma Women's Amateur, and I was walking off the 18th green, and it would've been 1984 because I was basically attacked by Jack Serrault, who was a writer for the *Tacoma News Tribune* at the time. And he came up to me and, with hands on hips, saying, 'Well, Sharon, I understand that you're president of the Washington State Women's Golf Association.' And I said, well, yes as a matter of fact, I am. And he says, 'Well, tell me this. I know that you guys have a championship every year and the Pub Links have a championship every year. And you know, who's the real champion of Washington state. Who could it be? You've got one, they've got one. Don't you ever schedule something where the two play off or what do you do?'

And I said, well, we've got two solid golf associations. One is the private clubs, one is the public clubs. Each of them have their own bylaws, their own rules, and the people that can compete are in their member clubs. So anyway, I said, until we have a funding organization that can sponsor a championship that's open to everybody in the state, then probably we won't have an answer to your question.

And so what's really interesting, Tom, leading into this. How could we ever know who the champion is going to be? Well, obviously Washington Golf did it. Washington State Golf Association established a championship that was open to everybody. And we all know how difficult it is for people to give up their golf courses for a championship or whatever. And so that's one of the things that Washington Golf does so beautifully, is by working together with the individual clubs and hosting these championships. So, accolades to this organization for that reason.

Tom: That was an historic year, actually historic few years in the early '90s, with the realignment between the PNGA and the WSGA and then the inaugural women's state amateur as well. Lots of stuff going on, lots of changes, and lots of positive steps were being made, I think, for the golf community in general.

Sharon: Oh, I agree.

Tom: So for you, at what point did you serve on the WSGA board of directors? Do you recall that, Sharon?

Sharon: I do. To begin with, I had become the rep from Fircrest, so I was very involved in what I could and Bill Mays was president at the time and he asked me to serve as championship chairwoman. And so that's really what got me started on the board of WSGA. And so I accepted that assignment and then that also put me on the executive committee because they wanted representation. At that time, the feeling was most of what we do, or a lot of what we do is championships. And so it seemed logical that they would have the championship chairperson sit on the executive committee. And then if there were issues one way or another, that would be handled at the executive level. That's kind of how it began.

Tom: So serving on the board, do you remember what your roles were in particular?

Sharon: Well, I was championship chairwoman for 10 years, and then I became president of the Washington State Golf Association. So then at that point, I served as president for two years and then immediate past president for two years. So that's four years that I spent there. But basically I was president, I think from the fall of 2007 until 2009 and was just always involved. And then beyond that, I ended up being a regional vice president. So I represented the second district, I believe, was our region. And so I would go to the board meetings in that capacity.

Tom: So I don't want you to gloss over your years as president, because that also was a significant thing. In the fall of 2007, at the annual meeting for the WSGA, you were elected the very first woman president of the WSGA. And that was obviously a very significant circumstance. How was that for you? Did it feel like a natural thing for you? Did it feel like, wow, this is a big deal? How was it for you on that?

Sharon: For me, it just seemed like a natural progression. I had been involved with the organization for so many years and been on the committee and well, not only served just on the committee, but I worked in all different aspects of it. So I went to championships, I volunteered at championships. I had many little jobs along the way. I just felt so involved that, the more that I learned, I got involved in course rating in the early 1980s, when it first came on board for slope rating, I was at the very first meeting.

It was at Meridian Valley and somebody from the USGA came out and explained this whole new system of course rating. And I was fascinated by it. So I got involved in course rating. So I felt like when they asked me to be president, I knew so much about what we do as an organization. I believe in it. I love golf. So it was my way to give back.

And I never once ever thought, 'Wow, I'm a woman at this job.' It never occurred me. It just was. It just seemed like a real natural progression.

Tom: From the fall of 2007, you served two consecutive one year terms as president, and then also two years as immediate past president. Also, you did serve as the championship committee chairwoman for the WSGA. What years were those, Sharon?

Sharon: Oh, let's see. That had to have been when Bill Mays was president. And so that had to be about 1989, I guess. Oh, I know. I was there for like 10 years and then I became president. So then I gave up my championship chair position. And so it would be 10 years prior to 2007.

Tom: So 1997 or so, for those 10 years.

Sharon: Perhaps, yes.

Tom: Well that was a significant time as well, just because of the number of new championships that came on board for the WSGA. Is that right?

Sharon: Yeah, absolutely. And they were very, very cognizant of trying to have championships that were open to everyone and would include different things. So we would have a women's best-ball, for example. We'd have an individual championship. And so they tried to find things that, like the best-ball, I believe anyone with a 30 handicap or less may enter that. And it's been a very, very popular championship. And rather than just single-digit players, they're trying to have things that are more open to our membership. We want to be as inclusive as we can.

Tom: From 1922 until 1987, the WSGA only conducted one event and that was the annual Washington State Amateur. In 1987, they started the Washington State Senior Amateur for men. And in 1994, the Washington Women's Amateur. So really, very few events until the late 1990s and early 2000s when, like you just outlined, it really became a priority to have and hold championships and events for men and women of all skill levels, just to really branch out and make the game available for all. It was a really big time of growth.

Sharon: Absolutely. And I think that today, those values are very, very important and they want to grow the game. And therefore, I think for interest for all of the member clubs, as well as the individual memberships at those clubs, I think that the more we can be open and inclusive, the more successful Washington Golf will be.

Tom: And it seems like it's working. The membership numbers and interest in game and golf in general is on the upswing these days. So to speak.

Sharon: The last two years have been incredible growth. Absolutely. And most clubs are bursting at the seams and tee times are hard to get. And so it's been, yeah, I would say probably it's the only good thing that's come from COVID in these last two years.

Tom: I jokingly tell people it's the upside of the pandemic.

Sharon: Exactly right.

Tom: So just looking back and very briefly, Sharon, what is a favorite personal memory of yours? Just a personal thing that you think how this was really a cool thing that happened or that I got to experience or people I'd met or whatever it may be. Just a personal memory or two.

Sharon: I think probably one of the things that stands out to me and I've learned so much over the years, having been a competitor in golf, that the year that I was the champion for the Washington State Women's Golf Association was incredible. I played against Ann Swanson, who is a perennial winner and a real champion, and I was able to come out victorious. And it was-

Tom: What year was that, Sharon?

Sharon: It was 1998. And in '96, I played against her in the final and I was runner-up, but she prevailed. But I think as far as most things, I competed in a lot of events, but that was probably the largest that I've ever actually been the champion of. I've been champion at my own club half a dozen times. And of the Puget Sound Women's Golf Association, I think nine or 10 times. So I played in a lot of other championships and done well, but that one has to stand out as one of the most exciting.

Tom: Well, as we talked about earlier in this conversation, champions of that Washington State Women's Golf Association championship reads like a who's who of women's golf in our region, lots of really significant names on that leaderboard.

Sharon: Absolutely. I know names, well, I've already mentioned Liz Culver and Edean Ihlanfeldt is a name that everybody recognizes, who's been very, very active in Washington State and PNGA, and certainly has been a champion of many things as far as even USGA events. The only USGA event that I played in was the senior women's and it was at Broadmoor so it was in our own neighborhood. And that was a USGA championship and that was quite an experience. So I was able to serve on the USGA Women's Mid-Amateur committee, I've been on that for 10 years. And so that's how I got into rules, because that was a requirement of being on the Mid-Am committee. So, prior to that, I'd been so involved with course rating that I hadn't really gotten involved in rules. So then that kind of pushed me to the limits and opened a new avenue for something, too.

Tom: Are you still involved with rules then, Sharon?

Sharon: I did not go this year. A requirement is that you stay active in your rules, as you need to be rules proficient, meaning getting a score of 75 or higher at least once every four years. And so you need to keep up your credentials and I've decided at this stage, since I'm active in so many things around here, I serve on the board at The Home Course, and I just thought, I won't continue with rules any longer. It doesn't mean that I don't enjoy it. I'm just not going to remain proficient.

Tom: For the Centennial year, this year, I know for Washington Golf, we're going to be doing several events during the year. For the Washington State Women's Golf Association, are you going to be involved with anything that they're going to be doing this year?

Sharon: Oh, sure. I'm the Washington State Women's rep from our club from Fircrest. And so specifically, I'm on their board committee, but there's nothing direct that I'm involved in other than I will definitely support the championship and will be involved in that way. So, no job has been assigned, put it that way.

Tom: Not yet anyway. I'm sure you'll jump in. Today, we've had the pleasure of speaking with Sharon Johnston. And again, Sharon is the past president of the Washington State Golf Association, which is now known as Washington Golf, and is also the past president for the Washington State Women's Golf Association. And now, I have learned today that she's also a past champion of the WSWGGA championship, which is pretty awesome. Sharon, thanks so much for sharing some memories. You've had a long history of being involved with the game in our region, and we just want to thank you for your involvement, number one. And thank you, number two, for taking time today to talk about it.

Sharon: Tom, it's been a pleasure for me. As I said earlier, it's been a walk down memory lane, just bringing up a lot of these memories. I will have to say thank you to all of the Washington Golf staff that do such a tremendous job, running their championships, coordinating all of our benefits, doing all of that. I think it's kudos to all of you who put in so much time and effort making it a truly class organization.

Tom: Well, I appreciate the words, Sharon. And the golf community, I think in our state and our region, is a really good community to be involved with, and we count ourselves as being lucky.

Sharon: I would have to agree. This is good.

Tom: There you go. Thanks again, Sharon Johnston for joining us today. And we'll talk again soon.

Sharon: My pleasure. Goodbye, Tom.

Tom: Bye.