

Source: Webster-Kirkwood Times

Top Amateur Returns To Area As Top Teaching Professional

by Kevin Murphy

April 17, 2009

Maria Palozola is back in St. Louis and doing what she does best -- teaching students to play golf.

One of the top-rated professional golf instructors in the Midwest, Palozola was once the Show-Me State's top amateur player.

The Des Peres resident was a standout at St. Joseph's Academy where, as a junior, she won the 1987 Missouri State High School Championship. In 1993, Palozola defeated top amateur Barbara Berkmeier to win the Missouri State Amateur.

Her amateur career also included back-to-back St. Louis District Championships, in 1992 over Ellen Port and in 1993 with a win over Berkmeier. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch named her amateur athlete of the year for 1993.

After high school, she accepted a four-year golf scholarship to the University of South Alabama where she became a collegiate golf champion. She was an All Sun Belt conference player in 1993.

"I played basketball, soccer and golf in high school, with basketball being my favorite sport. But I new golf was the one sport where I could get a scholarship and be involved in for the rest of my life. That's the direction I decided to go," Palozola said.

After graduating college (earning a degree in marketing), Palozola married, turned professional, and lived for a short period in Myrtle Beach, S.C. She competed in Ladies' Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tour events including the 2000 LPGA Championship.

Palozola said life on the road as a tour player was difficult and very expensive.

"I had a taste of what it was like to be inside the ropes -- that lifestyle -- and it helped me as a teacher," Palozola said. "Many great teachers, not all but most teachers, were also great players."

Palozola opted out of the hectic life of a tour player and headed to Chicago where she combined her teaching skills with her playing expertise to serve as Director of Instruction at the Michael Jordan Golf Center. She was also the teaching professional at St. Andrew's Golf Club located in West Chicago.

Palozola taught at all levels, and her determined approach to teaching soon caught the attention of her professional peers.

Golf Digest named her as a Top 10 Teacher in Illinois, as voted by her peers; and Golf Magazine listed her as a Top Teacher in the Midwest. The LPGA named her one of the top 50 instructors in the world, an honor also voted on by her peers.

While working in Chicago, Palozola won the 2002 Illinois Open Championship.

After 10 years in Chicago, Palozola, now with two preschoolers, returned to her hometown of Des Peres and the support of her family following a difficult divorce.

Palozola is now the Director of Instruction at the Midwest Golf Lab, 13378 Manchester Road in Des Peres; the Barrett Station Golf Practice Center near the Museum of Transportation; and at Pevely Farms Golf Club in Eureka.

Picking Up The Game At A Young Age

Maria Palozola was the youngest of seven children, her arrival into the world coming a full decade after her closest sibling.

With most of the Palozola kids grown and on their own, Maria's parents -- Len (now deceased) and Joan -- had a lot of time to spend with their youngest daughter. Both loved golf and held memberships at Forest Hills Country Club in Chesterfield. Palozola said she picked up her first club at age seven, "and never looked back." She was soon joining her parents on their frequent golf outings.

"By the time I came around my parents were older and playing a lot of golf. I played a lot at Forest Hills, which had a great junior program, and family vacations always seemed to include golf."

Palozola said she was fortunate in that St. Joseph's Academy was one of the few all-girl high schools at the time that offered a golf program. The team's home course was Greenbriar Country Club in Kirkwood.

Palozola claims, without hesitation, that her game is much better now than it was back in her years as a top amateur player.

"My swing and game are better than they have ever been. If I had this game 20 years ago I definitely would have been able to compete on the tour," Palozola said.

Palozola considers putting and driving to be the best parts of her game.

"When I'm on, I putt like nobody's business. But like other players, I find that my putting comes and goes," Palozola said. Though slight in frame, Palozola is long and accurate off the tee.

High-Tech Teacher

It's early in the afternoon on a recent Friday at the Midwest Golf Lab and Palozola is enjoying a break from a succession of morning lessons.

"I was a good amateur in St. Louis and people knew my name, but I was never able to teach here. It's fun now to have that opportunity," Palozola said.

Surrounding her in the indoor facility are three hitting bays and an artificial putting green, all equipped with the latest in swing analysis technology. The lab also offers custom fit and built golf equipment.

Palozola embraced video as part of teaching when she began in 1994. She is not among the old-school instructors who tend to scoff at "biofeedback body mechanics analysis" and "optimal data recommendations."

Palozola said you can talk to a student about "coming over the top" until your face turns blue, but a

swing error captured on video speaks a thousand words.

"Golf is a game you can enjoy for life, but a golfer who becomes frustrated with his game is going to quit," Palozola said. "People can spare themselves that frustration by taking a few lessons."