Luellen triumphed as player, coach

BY KEN MACLEOD

If not for a colossal recruiting mistake by Stanford, Melissa (McNamara) Luellen's induction into the Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame this November would be a far different affair.

There would be no individual and team NCAA championship at the University of Tulsa to celebrate. And who knows about her stint replacing her mother Dale McNamara as head coach that has led to another NCAA title and a hugely successful second career in coaching.

Circle back to 1984 when Melissa was one of the nation's top-ranked juniors in what was then a fledgling and now booming American Junior Golf Association Tour. Stanford knew all about the daughter of the nation's most successful women's golf coach and 1983 AJGA Player of the Year and flew her to Palo Alto for an official visit.

Part of the visit was to go watch the Cardinal in action. Melissa and her host found a perch behind a par-3 with a good view. As fate would have it, Tulsa was not only in the tournament, but paired in the final round with Stanford. As the Tulsa players came through, four of five made birdie and looked right at Luellen as if to say, "don't even think about it."

"I remember Jody Rosenthal saying, 'we're not letting Melissa get away," her mother said. "All five players just stoned it in there. On the way back she said, 'why am I looking anywhere else. I've got the best golf program in the country in my backyard.' "

"I'm sitting there watching this on my Stanford visit and I'm cheering for the Tulsa players because I knew them all," Luellen said. "That was when I realized I knew where my heart was."

And if the recruiting visit had kept her on campus or seeing the California sights?

"I would have been out there in a heartbeat."

As Luellen firmly believes, everything happens for a reason, and there was a lot of future TU history settled on that par-3.

Melissa accepted the challenge of playing for her mother, already a coaching legend with three national titles. It was an adjustment for both. Dale said she was too hard on her initially, trying not to show an ounce of favoritism. The other players felt treated them equally in practice, but may have spent more time watchng her daughter in tournaments. But none of it fazed Melissa, who earned All-America honors all four years.

By her junior year, the team had an uncharacteristically poor season but Melissa qualified for the NCAA Championship as an individual. Things changed the next year when long-hitting freshmen Kelly Robbins and Caryn Louw joined sophomores Maggie Kelt (now Roller) and Blue Kinander in playing key roles. Led by Melissa's freewheeling leadership style, the team jelled and developed a bit of an attitude.

Melissa Luellen spent 11 years on the LPGA Tour, winning the Stratton Mountain Classic.

At the first tournament of the year as teams were being introduced, all five TU players stood on their chairs.

"It was like, 'here we are,' " Melissa said. "We didn't really mean for it to be like that, but it showed a little bit of moxie."

Dale McNamara locked in the team spirit by of all things leaving her daughter home from a fall tournament.

"Melissa didn't qualify for the Stanford event, and that really showed the team that Dale was treating everyone equally," Roller said. "That was a big mental boost for us. We all had so much respect for Dale after she did that, because there was a feeling she had spent the previous year only watching Melissa. Not in practice, but during the tournaments."

Melissa, Roller and the team went on a tear for the remainder of

Tulsa's 1988 championship team, from left, Caryn Louw, Kelly Robbins, Melissa McNamara (Luellen), Blue Kinander, Dale McNamara and Maggie Kelt (Roller).

Coaching is in the genes when you're the daughter of Dale McNamara, one of the all-time greats of the sport.

the fall and the spring season. Roller won individually and the team won at Stanford, starting a streak of three wins and a second in the next four events. TU was seventh at the Betsy Rawls Invitational, then finished the regular season strong, capped off by a second in the Lady Sun Devil Invitational as Melissa placed fifth.

Luellen then led her teammates to Las Cruces for the 1988 NCAA Championship, where she shot rounds of 72-74-71-70 to take medalist honors, leading TU to the last of four national titles. It was a magical day for the McNamara family.

"The last hole was a par-5 and I remember (late husband Jim) and I walking hand-in-hand up the hill," Dale said. "We're winning, Melissa is winning. It was just very emotional. It's a memory I'll always cherish."

Roller said, "She was the ultimate team player. We all looked up to her. She was easy going and really funny and had a great sense of humor. Even the year we were terrible, she led us so well. And when we won it, that had a lot to do with Melissa's leadership."

It was a special day to share with both parents for Melissa. Mom was the coach and a fantastic player herself, winner of seven state amateur championships and an Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame inductee in 2006.

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CEREMONY INFO

OKLAHOMA GOLF HALL OF FAME EST. 2014

The 2019 Oklahoma Hall of Fame induction ceremony is Nov. 24 at Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa and the public is welcome.

Along with Melissa (McNamara) Luellen and Orville Moody profiled in this issue of Golf Oklahoma, the class includes Bill Glasson, Jim Awtrey and William Nichols.

Various layers of sponsorship are available which come with tables of 10 or individual tickets are available for $175. To purchase tickets go to the Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame website at www.oklahomagolfhof.org or call 918–280–0787.

The dinner will include a reception with drinks and appetizers followed by a three–course dinner. Inductee videos narrated by Jim Nantz of CBS Sports are a highlight followed by remarks from the living inductees or family members.

Both Dale and Jim were instrumental in teaching Melissa to love golf.

Luellen led her Auburn team into match play at the 2019 NCAA Championship at The Blessings.

Yet Melissa had an equally strong relationship through golf with Jim, a low-handicap golfer who also loved the game.

"I loved practicing with my dad," Melissa said. "It reminds me a lot of what I do with my team now. He would throw balls in different spots around the greens and say try to get up-and-down from here. We had a lot of special times together."

Following college and before she was firmly established on the LPGA Tour, Melissa left for a year on the European Tour with sister Cathy serving as caddie and traveling companion.

"It was an amazing experience for the two of us," Melissa said. "We got really close at that time. It was different back then, there was no Euro so you were stopping and exchanging currencies. But we had some great times."

Melissa earned her LPGA card on her second try and in 1991 won the Stratton Mountain Classic. She played for 11 seasons before, tired of the grind, the travel and with feet that hurt constantly, she met with her parents in Phoenix while at a TU tournament. Turns out she wasn't the only one looking to make a change.

"I was heading to the plane to go play in a Monday qualifier and wondering what in the world am I doing," Melissa said. "That night I met my parents in a hotel room and said I don't think I want to do this anymore. I'm 34, been out playing for 13 years. Where do you go and what do you do? That night, Mom said she was planning on retiring and that I should think about it and interview for the job."

Suffice it to say it worked out pretty well. Hired by then-TU athletic director Judy MacLeod, Melissa coached two seasons at TU, winning two Western Athletic Conference championships and two regional titles while finishing 10th and 12th in the NCAA Championship. She was pursued the entire time by Arizona State and left for the desert in 2002, where she spent 13 successful seasons, winning the NCAA Championship in 2009.

In 2015, she accepted a new challenge as head coach of Auburn, where in four seasons she has built that program into a national power. The Tigers hung on to finish eighth in stroke play in May in the NCAA Championship at The Blessings, then from way behind to upend No. 1 seed Texas in the first round of match play.