

Early Golfing Heroines

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In March 1941 Ohio State University mailed out invitations to a national women's collegiate golf tournament to be held June 30-July 3, 1941. This plan by Ohio State was in complete defiance of the practices at the time that women participate in low level activities for fun and recreation. It is not surprising, then, that the women's physical education world was in an uproar over this bold move by Ohio State, and the ensuing events brought controversy, confusion, and hard feelings among women involved in physical education at the college level.

This paper, "Early Golfing Heroines," is not about people you might expect, such as, Mickey Wright, Kathy Whitworth and Patty Berg, but is about Gladys Palmer, the head of the Women's Physical Education Department at Ohio State in 1941 who instigated the tournament and the 38 women golfers who dared to come to Columbus for the tournament. They truly were golf heroines then as national competition for women was definitely not deemed appropriate for females in college.

Gladys Palmer, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, except for her first four years of teaching, spent her entire professional career at Ohio State University from 1922-1957. She became Chair of the Women's Department in 1933 and was professionally active in many organizations, especially the National Section on Women's Athletics which is today the National Association for Girls and Women in Sport (NAGWS). This organization along with other groups had always been opposed to high level competition for women from the Olympic Games to colleges having varsity teams. Miss Palmer felt strongly that college women had the right to have more intensive competition. Therefore, she proposed in 1941 not only that there be a National Women's Athletic Association but issued the invitations to the National Women's Golf Tournament. All the national groups compiled resolutions against both the idea of a National Women's Athletic Association and the National Golf Tournament. But Ohio State withstood the verbal attacks and the written resolutions and continued its plans for the championships.

It is history now, but the tournament was a big success. The competition was high and the competitors suffered no negative effects from play in a tournament of this nature. As it continued to be an annual event, the skeptics were eventually convinced that the idea was a good one. Therefore, it is important to remember that the present NCAA National Women's Golf Tournament is the oldest continuing competitive event for female collegians.

Gladys Palmer, suffering too much abuse with either the silent treatment or harsh words about her tournament and ideas, withdrew from most of the professional organizations after the first championships. However, she and the Ohio State staff continued to conduct the tournament each year until it moved to other institutions after 1952. Miss Palmer died in 1962 at the age of 66.

The first winner of the tournament, Eleanor Dudley of the University of Alabama, was a tournament golfer before the Ohio State event. She married, moved to California and continued as a top competitive golfer in local and regional championships. In 1978, in her honor for her 1941 golf victory, the University of Alabama established the Eleanor Dudley Copping Award. It is given each year to the outstanding female athlete at Alabama.

This year, 1992, the women's golf tournament is celebrating its 51st anniversary in Tempe, Arizona. The 50th last year was held appropriately at Ohio State University. It must always be remembered that it was the early golfing heroines, and especially Gladys Palmer, who paved the way for the situation as it is today in intercollegiate athletics for women.