



Jones, Rosie (b. 1959)

by Linda Rapp

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Rosie Jones. Photograph provided by RosieJones.com.

Golfer Rosie Jones enjoyed great success both as an amateur and a professional. Since her retirement from the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tour, she has become a commentator for the Golf Channel cable network.

Rosie Jones took an interest in sports from a young age. Born November 13, 1959 in Santa Ana, California, she grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she played basketball and softball and also competed in track. She credits her father with introducing her to golf. He fixed up a broken club for her to play with when she was about eleven, and the die was cast.

Tom Nielson, her first professional instructor, to whom she came as a twelve-year-old, was not sanguine about her chances for success in the sport. "She didn't actually have a lot of natural ability," he recalled years later. "It was all done through hard work. Golf is a game of hard work."

Jones was willing to make the effort, and it paid off: she won the state junior championship from 1974 to 1976.

Since the high school that Jones attended had no girls' golf team, she initially played on the boys' squad. However, some of the ramifications of Title IX of the federal Education Amendments of 1972, which required equal participation and funding for both men and women in all educational programs, including athletics, finally kicked in during her senior year. As a consequence of Title IX Cibola High School needed a girls' team in order to make its female athletes eligible to participate in the state tournament. Jones helped organize a girls' golf team and led them to qualify for the New Mexico competition.

When a coach from Ohio State University called Nielson to inquire about potential recruits, he touted Jones. She was awarded a golf scholarship and had a highly successful college career both academically and athletically. She earned a degree in education in 1981, while picking up All-American honors in sports along the way.

By the time that she graduated, Jones recognized that her future lay in professional golf. She qualified to participate in LPGA events in July 1982 and won her first tournament in 1987.

"The win in '87 gave me confidence. It was kind of a barrier that I broke," she stated in 2003. Her career continued to build from there.

Jones notched a total of thirteen victories on the LPGA tour from 1987 to 2003. She never managed to win a major but was runner-up four times, along with achieving 26 top-ten results in the most important events.

Of being "the best player never to win a major," Jones stated in 2005, "It's never felt like a huge void for me. The big one has eluded me, but that's not how I define my career."

That career was one that earned her both the admiration of fans and recognition and respect from fellow golfers. She was chosen to represent the United States on the Solheim Cup team seven times, beginning in 1990. A high point of her participation in the prestigious international tournament came in 2002, when she made the putt that secured the victory for the U.S. team.

Putting is a strong suit for Jones, who, during her LPGA career, was often at or near the top of the rankings in that aspect of the sport. She was also highly rated for the accuracy of her driving.

Jones was a fan favorite not just for the technical expertise of her game but also for her approach to competition. She drew consistent praise for her determination and the energy that she put into her pursuit of athletic excellence.

In 2004 Jones took a step that she realized could cost her some fans: she came out as a lesbian in an article in the *New York Times*. Although well aware that "as any gay person can tell you, coming out involves making yourself incredibly vulnerable," Jones stated, "I'm optimistic that my fans will see me as the same competitive, hard-working Rosie I've always been and respect this new aspect of my life as I respect their diversity."

Jones had been out to her family since the age of nineteen, and she had made no secret of her sexual orientation to friends or to the people of the LPGA. She explained her decision to make a public statement by saying, "I have reached a point in my life, at age 44, when I have the financial stability and emotional and intellectual wherewithal to make this leap."

Adding to Jones's financial security was an endorsement deal with Olivia, a travel and entertainment company for lesbians. She was pleased to receive the offer not only because she could represent a company "with a complementary social mission" but also because she felt that she had had less than her share of opportunities before that.

"I was a top player, and I was not getting endorsement deals that other, lesser players were getting," she stated in a 2007 interview. "I have definitely felt in the past that I was scrutinized or looked over because they assumed I was gay. Or dropped from an endorsement deal because I was gay," as those in the world of women's professional golf already knew.

Signing with Olivia necessarily entailed a public coming out. Jones was prepared for negative reaction to her announcement but in fact met with very little. On the contrary, she signed with a new sponsor, YES! putters, after her revelation, and she did not lose any of her existing endorsements.

Nor did her fans desert her. Jones had always been a favorite with lesbian followers of the sport, from whom a positive reaction was to be expected, but she was pleasantly surprised by the warm and favorable response from a wide spectrum of the public: "I had a lot of people come up to me and say that coming out was really great. It would be old people, young people, straight people, gay people, and that was all very touching."

Some in the glbtq community took issue with Jones's statement in her *New York Times* piece that although she was a proponent of equal rights, she was not an activist. She clarified her position by stating in an interview in *The Advocate*, "Honestly, I'm not as knowledgeable [about gay issues] as I probably should be." She did not rule out a different role for herself in the future: "It doesn't mean that later I can't be a stronger voice."

Jones continued playing on the LPGA tour through the middle of the 2006 season, when she retired after recurring back and neck problems made it difficult for her to perform at the level she demanded of herself. During her two final years, her partner, Carrie Sexton, was by her side as her caddie.

Jones's last appearance on the LPGA tour was in the 2006 U.S. Women's Open. It was the twenty-fifth time that she had competed in that event. After putting out at the eighteenth hole on the final day, she removed her golf shoes and glove and set them near the side of the green to symbolize her departure.

But Jones was far from done with golf. She joined the LPGA Legends Tour, on which she is enjoying success, including a victory at the Wendy's Charity Challenge in Jackson, Michigan in August 2007, when, characteristically, she made a tricky putt on the last hole to bring home the win.

Jones has expanded her role with Olivia from guest celebrity on cruises to the leader of RosieJones [sic] Golf Getaways, special tours on which Jones takes lesbian golfers "to play all those courses in the world [that she] never got to because [she] was on tour so much."

Jones has also continued her association with golf by becoming a commentator and reporter on events telecast on the Golf Channel network.

While she has yet to define herself as an activist, Jones is doing her part to increase the visibility of the glbtq community. Among her activities was an appearance with basketball star Sheryl Swoopes at the Women's Kickoff Party at the Gay Games in Chicago in 2006.

On that occasion she stated, "Men and women, young and old, everyone has come up to me and said, 'Thanks,' and that I've been such a positive force for the LGBT community, and that really means a lot to me because I really haven't been able to give back a lot to the gay community, but this is a way I can do that."

Jones was honored with induction into the Georgia Golf Hall of Fame in January 2006.

Jones and Sexton reside in Atlanta, along with their mixed-breed dog, Rosko, whom Jones adopted from a shelter. Jones has described her hobbies as gardening, home improvement, fishing, and woodworking: "You know, regular lesbian stuff. I have the Home Depot credit card."

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