



Sheehan, Patty (b. 1956)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2009 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Patty Sheehan has had a long and illustrious career in golf. Her prowess as a professional player earned her a place in the Hall of Fame, and she continues to excel on the Ladies' Professional Golf Association's Legends tour.

Patricia Leslie Sheehan comes from a family of athletes. Her father, Bobo Sheehan, coached skiing and assisted in golf, baseball, and football at Middlebury College in Vermont. Patty Sheehan, born in Middlebury on October 27, 1956, was determined to be as good at sports as her three brothers, and she achieved considerable success, especially in skiing. At the age of thirteen she held the top national ranking in her age group.

Sheehan had also been honing her golf skills, and when the family moved to Reno, Nevada, she competed on her high school team. Her performance earned her an athletic scholarship to the University of Nevada-Reno, which she attended for three years before transferring to San Jose State University in California. During her collegiate career she won the Nevada State Amateur Championship from 1975 through 1978 and the California Women's Amateur title in 1977 and 1978. She was named national champion of the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women in 1979.

For the excellence of her amateur career, Sheehan was inducted into the National High School Hall of Fame (2005) and the Collegiate Golf Hall of Fame (1990).

Sheehan qualified for the Ladies' Professional Golf Association's (LPGA) tour in 1980. She performed well in her first year as a pro, claiming her first victory in the final event of the season and earning Rookie of the Year honors in 1981.

Sheehan continued to excel on the course, making the cut to play in the final rounds in the vast majority of cases, achieving many top-ten finishes, and steadily adding to her tally of victories.

In 1989, however, Sheehan suffered a reverse when she lost her house and almost all of her possessions in the October 1989 San Francisco earthquake.

Despite the trauma of the earthquake, she soldiered on in the LPGA tour, making all the cuts in 1990, when she also had 16 top tens and 5 wins; nevertheless, her year was marred when she blew an 11-stroke lead in the final round of the U.S. Open in Atlanta in July, losing by one stroke to Betsy King.

"After these mini-catastrophes," said Sheehan of the loss of her home and her meltdown in Atlanta, "I had to overcome a lot of psychological hurdles—bad memories and bad thoughts."

In 1992 she "eliminate[ed] the demons" from Atlanta with a come-from-behind charge and a play-off victory in the U.S. Open. "It was such a great comeback from 1990, and emotionally it healed so many wounds. It was the most significant win of my career because I overcame so much doubt," she said of her first triumph



Patty Sheehan.
Photograph by Ted Van Pelt.

Image appears under the
Creative Commons
Attribution 2.0 license.

in the prestigious tournament.

She repeated as U.S. Open champion in 1994. In the meanwhile, having notched her thirtieth victory on the LPGA tour, she earned induction into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 1993.

On the eve of the 1995 LPGA Championships, CBS golf analyst Ben Wright provoked a storm of outrage and indignation when he was quoted as saying, "Lesbians in the sport hurt women's golf. When it gets to the corporate level, that's not going to fly. They're going to a butch game and that furthers the bad image of the game."

He also complained that lesbianism "is not reticent. It's paraded. There's a defiance in them in the last decade." He compounded the offense by opining that "women are handicapped by having boobs" because, he claimed, they interfere with the women's ability to execute golf swings properly.

Wright flatly denied having made the statements, yet paradoxically he eventually apologized for "insensitive remarks." CBS initially supported him but later dropped him from the broadcast team.

Asked for her reaction to the brouhaha, Sheehan was circumspect, stating, "Lesbianism is an issue, but not the main issue. The main issue is growth." Focusing on the matter of sponsorship, she noted, "We've made great strides. Corporations are now coming to us."

Only three years later, Sheehan came out publicly as a lesbian. In a column in the March 27, 1998 edition of *Golf World* magazine, Sheehan revealed that she and her manager, Rebecca Gaston, had been partners for twelve years and had recently adopted a daughter. "After years of believing we would make ideal parents—and having many of our friends and family tell us the same thing—it's been wonderful to finally take on this new challenge," she declared.

She went on to state that if others looked askance at the composition of her family, "it's their problem, not mine. There are too many children in this world who don't have an equal chance in life and who aren't loved to worry about what other people think. We have the means to provide Bryce with a comfortable upbringing and, more importantly, we have the desire to be loving and devoted mothers."

Joan M. Garry, the Executive Director of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), praised Sheehan for her courage in coming out during her playing days and commended her for her comments about her family: "Love is at the heart of parenting, and gay and lesbian people are as committed to that ideal as anyone. [Sheehan's] voice resonates to many thousands of fans, and she is sending an accurate, positive message about our community."

The couple has also adopted another child, a son, Blake.

During the new millennium, Sheehan continued to play well, although she participated in fewer events than she had earlier in her career. Nevertheless, her performance was such that in 2001 she was named for the fifth time to the team representing the United States against European players in the tournament for the Solheim Cup. In 2001 Sheehan was named team captain, a position that she held through 2003.

Sheehan then left the regular LPGA tour, on which she had won 35 tournaments. Among her most prestigious victories, along with her two at the U.S. Open, were three at the LPGA Championships and one at the Dinah Shore.

Sheehan has continued her winning ways in the LPGA's senior division, called the Legends tour.

She has also been instrumental in bringing the United States team three wins in a row (2006-2008) over the World team in the Handa Cup tournament, an event for women 45 years of age and older.

Sheehan, Gaston, and their children live in Reno. The couple is active in the life of the community. Sheehan has put on a golf clinic to raise money for the Girl Scouts, and both she and Gaston have participated in events benefiting the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation and the Children's Cabinet, a local charity that offers health, counseling, tutoring, and other service to at-risk families.

Bibliography

"Patty Sheehan." LPGA Players: <http://www.lpga.com/content/2008PlayerBiosPDF/Sheehan-09.pdf>.

Potter, Jerry. "Sheehan: Growth LPGA's Main Issue." *USA Today* (May 17, 1995): 2C.

Romesburg, Don. "Patty Sheehan Comes Out in *Golf World*." *Gay Today* (April 13, 1998): <http://gaytoday.com/garchive/people/041398pe.htm>.

Shapiro, Leonard. "Golf Analyst Denies Making Sexist Remarks." *Washington Post* (May 13, 1995): A1.

Steptoe, Sonja. "Patty Sheehan." *Sports Illustrated* (June 21, 1993): <http://vault.sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1138533/index.htm>.

"World Golf Hall of Fame Profile: Patty Sheehan." *World Golf Hall of Fame Members*: <http://www.wgv.com/hof/member.php?member=1103>.

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.