

A career (so far!) spent breaking barriers earns **Suzy Whaley** the MGA's highest honor, its Distinguished Service Award.

BY SUSAN K. REED

# Suzy

# Trailblazer

**T**here are a few things you need to know about Suzy Whaley. First, she's President of the PGA of America, the organization of 29,000 golf professionals, the people you see and talk to every time you turn up to play. Their mission is to "work daily to grow interest and participation in the game of golf." The 53-year-old Whaley is the first woman president in the PGA's 103-year history.

She's a quick study. An economics major at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, she can talk as fluently about the business of golf as about the fine points of instruction. She's a proven consensus-builder, a glass-half-full leader who prefers to cite data and stories that demonstrate forward progress in the game.

But make no mistake: Behind Suzy Whaley's bright blue eyes and pixieish personality, she's a fierce competitor. If there's anything standing in her way, it's a good bet it won't be there for long.

Flash back 18 years to 2001. Whaley was 34 years old and the head professional at Blue Fox Run in Avon, Conn. She was also raising two young daughters with her husband, fellow golf professional Bill Whaley. "I was an LPGA Teaching & Club Professional at the time, pretty happily going about my way," she recalls. "But the T&CP division only had two tournaments each year, the National and Sectional Championships. One day I said to Bill, 'I'm mad at you because you get to compete so much more than I do.'

"He said to me, 'Well, Suzy, why don't you do something about it?'"

Whaley took the advice of the man she calls her "truth-teller and best friend." She joined the PGA of America, which at the time was still predominantly male. That decision proved both career- and life-changing: In 2002 she signed up to play in the Connecticut Section's PGA Championship. She shot 68-72-71 to beat her male competitors and become the first woman in history to win a PGA individual pro tournament. The victory guaranteed her a spot in the next year's Greater Hartford Open, making her the first woman to qualify for a PGA Tour event since Babe Zaharias at the Tucson Open in 1945. Though Whaley missed the cut by 13 strokes, she bettered the scores of 13 of the 155 men in the field, including David Duval, the 2001 British Open champion.

"I'll never forget those days, the response from the fans was overwhelming," she says. "They cheered for me on every single shot, whether I hit the green or missed it. They helped keep me going,

RUSSELL KIRK/GOLF LINKS





Whaley and friends at the 2017 PGA Jr. League Championship presented by National Car Rental in Scottsdale, Arizona.

and they kept a smile on my face all day.” She adds, “Hopefully I showed young women that you can be successful.”

Suzy Whaley has done that, in spades. On December 4, The Metropolitan Golf Association will present her its Distinguished Service Award. Given annually since 1973, the award recognizes “distinguished service to golf and its related activities, consistent with the valued standards and honorable traditions of the game.”

“It’s our highest honor,” says Tod Pike, MGA President. “We’re looking for people who truly give back to the game and have a history of long and exemplary service. Suzy is such a role model. Not only has she paved the way for women in the game, she’s a great advocate for all golfers of every level and skill.”

Her golf life started in a bathing suit. She was nine years old and was swimming with friends at the Cavalry Club in Manlius, N.Y., where her parents were members. The boys suggested she come hit golf balls with them. “But of course I was in my swimsuit, which wasn’t allowed,” Whaley recalls. “The staff called my mom and she came over to the club. She didn’t scold me, she just asked if I liked hitting the ball. From that moment on, no one could get me off the golf course unless it was snowing.”

Whaley’s mother, Mary Ann McGuire, was an avid player; she taught Suzy everything she knew, and after that she brought her to a PGA professional named Joe Tesori for further lessons. Whaley became the first girl to compete on the boys’ golf team at Jamesville-DeWitt High School. She received a full golf scholarship to UNC, then played for two years on the LPGA Tour. Drawn to teaching, she worked with the Jim Flick Golf Schools for five years before moving to Connecticut with Bill.

“When I joined the Connecticut PGA Section, I met so many amazing people who were as passionate about the game as I am,” she said. “Bill had been the Secretary, Vice President, and President of our section. I joined committees and ended up loving it, and then I joined more committees.” She eventually became a board member, then Vice President at large. In 2014, Whaley was elected Secretary of the PGA of America, the first woman to hold a national office in the organization.

Two years later, Whaley moved up from Secretary to Vice President, and in 2018 she ran for President and won. “I really felt I had something to contribute,” she says. “I wanted to have a seat at the table, a voice in the room. I’m humbled and honored that our 29,000 members have confidence in me to

lead them. It’s a huge responsibility, and obviously, not without challenges. It’s also an enormous opportunity for equality, and to showcase what women can do.”

When Whaley started, Seth Waugh, the PGA of America’s CEO, asked her to list a few of the things she wanted to see happen during her two-year tenure. “I sent him a list of 46 things,” she says cheerily. “Many of them were already in progress. For instance, we’re always striving to give our members the resources they need to succeed in a competitive marketplace; we want to deliver jobs, good compensation, improved skills, and in the future things like health care and retirement and savings plans. We want our Championships to be at the highest level. And we want to see more people on golf courses.”

Some of the PGA’s accomplishments and priorities during Whaley’s time on the governing board:

- **Establishing women’s championships.** “[In 2015] we debuted the KPMG Women’s PGA Championship, taking over the LPGA Championship and becoming one of the women’s majors. I’m super-biased because I’m a female, but for this to happen during my tenure, to see how it’s been received by the players, to

work incredibly hard to raise purses, get women on network television, play on the best golf courses—it's something that I'll continue to work on year after year. Other things we've implemented that I couldn't be more proud of include our PGA Junior Leagues and the Women's PGA Cup, an international team competition that debuted in 2019."

- **Improving the teaching models.**

Among Whaley's many passions, teaching ranks at the top. She runs her own business, Suzy Whaley Golf, and she is Director of Instruction at the Country Club of Mirasol in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. She is also a PGA Master Professional, the organization's highest certification, held by only 370 of its members. "We have an enormous teaching and coaching commitment," she says. "We're looking to incorporate something called the Athletic Development Model, which 11 other sports in this country already utilize. It gives professionals, if they choose, the skills to understand each student's needs as they learn the game, based not only on age, but on physical development as [the students] grow into adulthood."

- **Making it easier to find places to play and learn.**

"We will unveil a consumer resource in June 2020 [that] is like OpenTable for golf. If you're a golfer and you've just gotten out of college and are moving to Boston, say, the PGA of America will be able to connect you with a league or a teacher. You'll have ratings and reviews, and be able to look through it and determine what's right for you."

- **Making the game more inviting to young golfers.**

"We have to lower the barriers to the game. I love 18 holes of golf, and I tuck my shirt in because I grew up in golf that way. Do I wear my hat forward? I do. But I also play music in my cart now. And I play it loud. Would I have told you ten years ago that I would do that? Not a chance. So I'm a traditional golf professional, but I think we have to be open to new things. George Gankes is a PGA professional near Los Angeles who has 179,000 followers on Instagram and coaches at a driving range with mats and wears flip flops when he teaches. The game is now spanning every generation and culture and we need



Whaley at the 2018 PGA of America Annual Meeting.

to be there."

- **Diversity, and growing the game.**

"I will continue to advocate for more people of color and more women playing the game. Everyone deserves a chance to play golf. We just added a program as part of our foundation called Place to Play. We're raising money to partner with municipal golf courses to make sure that they can survive, and continue to provide programming in communities that are underserved by golf."

- **Play golf. A lot.**

"If you're going to wear our PGA of America badge as a professional, you should be playing a lot of golf. I'm a huge advocate of working on your game and keeping it at a high level. I realize everybody's time is limited, but I think it has to be a priority [for PGA pros]."

When Whaley's term as President ends in late 2020, she'll transition into the position of President Emeritus for two years. Despite the title, she won't be slowing down. Increasingly, though, she wants to share—especially with younger women—what she understands to be the critical elements of her success. "First, I never forget the women who came before me," she says. "Whether it's Alice Dye or Mary Bea Porter or Missy Crisp, none of us today would have careers without them. They fought for our rights and helped break down walls and barriers."

More personally, she says, "I've been able to walk through so many doors because,

number one, I've been courageous enough to do it, plus I've had an incredible support system around me. Nobody who tries to do anything of import can do it alone. I can tell you with every bone in my body that my husband is the most encouraging, positive partner anyone could find. He understands the commitment, the time demands, my goals and objectives. He has never wavered, even in moments when I have."

Whaley is proud that her daughters took up the mantle of the game. (Jenn, 25, was an assistant golf coach at Quinnipiac College and is now VP of Girls on the Run, a non-profit, while working for CVS in Boston. Kelly, 22, will play on the Symetra Tour next year.) "They've seen times when I wanted to get something done and didn't succeed. They know that to succeed you need to prepare and overprepare, and to find joy and passion in what they're doing, because every day isn't going to be joyful."

"My mom and dad taught me that you don't get trophies for participation. I learned that you get recognition when you excel at something, when you accomplish your goal. Then you get to celebrate it. That goes for the PGA of America brand, for our members, and for every single one of us."

The MGA's Distinguished Service Award is recognition, accomplishment, and celebration all in one. "I'm so honored," says Whaley. "The MGA embodies the best values of the game. I couldn't be more proud to share that passion, and to receive this award." ■