

Annika “Stabsuzyinthebackenstam”*By: Nathan Crace Date: February 17, 2003*

So by now you've surely heard that Annika Sorenstam—the number one player on the LPGA Tour—has accepted an invitation to play in the Colonial in May and tee it up with the “big boys” on the men's Tour. Can she contend? Probably. In the opinion of many people, she is the number one player in the world—winning more tournaments than anyone over the past two years...even more than Tiger. Last year alone, she won 13 times worldwide and shattered the record that had stood for nearly 40 years. Will she win? It could be close. The course is not terribly long and, if it's dry, the Texas layout will offer her plenty of roll off the tee. But her biggest advantage will be that the course demands a premium on accuracy and not just brute strength. In fact, she could finish quite well come Sunday afternoon.

There's been no lack of media coverage about Sorenstam's acceptance of the invitation to play and she has been gracious in accepting the offer, saying that the attention and speculation is “flattering, and I appreciate that the Bank of America Colonial Golf Tournament is giving me this opportunity to compete in a PGA Tour event.” She is also not shy about telling the media the truth about her wanting to compete, stating “There were many invitations, but the golf course and schedule of the Colonial were ideal. For all the well-wishers who want to know why I would accept such a challenge the answer is simple: I am curious to see if I can compete in a PGA Tour event.” Great for her. Bad for women's golf and common courtesy.

What's my problem? Last year, PGA club professional Suzy Whaley earned—yes earned—a spot in the Greater Hartford Open (GHO) by winning the Connecticut Section Championship. She beat every other PGA pro in her section for the title. A title that also includes an invite to the PGA Tour's GHO in July on the week after the British Open. Suzy would have been the first woman to play in a PGA Tour event in 58 years since Babe Zaharias qualified—yes qualified—to play in the 1945 Los Angeles Open. Babe went on to make the 36-hole cut before stumbling on the weekend with a 79 that knocked her out of contention in the final round. Have you noticed the theme here? Whaley and Zaharias earned their way into Tour events. Sorenstam accepted an invitation—a free ride. Is Sorenstam a better player than Whaley? No doubt. Better than Zaharias? We'll see.

My guess is that the PGA Tour feels backed into a corner over the Augusta National matter and they've elected to fire a salvo over the bow of Martha Burke's battleship in a preemptive strike to diffuse more intense debate leading up to the Masters. How to do it? Convince a handful of tournament sponsors to make an offer (early in the year) to the best female golfer in the world to play in their event in 2003. Then the Tour can step back and say, “See what great thing we've done Martha?” Don't think so? Dan Croak, the Greater Milwaukee Open tournament director, said he would have been open to speaking with Sorenstam about playing in his tournament and, according to press reports, many other tournaments were in line as well. Why the sudden clamor to get Annika in the field this year? Was it a coincidence? Perhaps. Unfortunately for Suzy Whaley, it will cost her a place in the record books. I'll give Sorenstam the benefit of the doubt and assume that she has not even considered this scenario—especially since no one in the “main stream” media has thought to bring it up. They're too excited about Annika's invitation to see the slap in the face to Suzy Whaley and women's golf.

So what's the answer? Should Sorenstam do the classy thing and retract her acceptance to play in the Colonial? I think so. Another post-GHO tournament would be more than happy to have the media blitz and ticket sales that would come with Annika's impending arrival. The Buick Open. The Reno-Tahoe Open. The John Deere Classic. The Texas Open. All would love to have her I'm sure. But that's not going to happen for a number of reasons. Not the least of which is that it would cost the PGA TOUR a lot of money and some egg in its face. But don't count on Tiger being there—he has skipped the Colonial the past few years. It is because his routine is to play the Deutsche Bank-SAP Open in Europe the week before, play the Memorial the following week, take a week off to prepare, and then play the U.S Open? Or is it because the Colonial is actually the MasterCard Colonial and Woods has an endorsement agreement with American Express?

So what's a realistic resolution? How about Annika qualifies to play like Whaley and Zaharias did? Let her tee it up in the Monday qualifier and earn her way into the Colonial. What's wrong with that? It wouldn't be as gracious as waiting to play a men's Tour event after the GHO, but at least she too would have earned her way into the field. If Whaley had not already qualified for the 2003 GHO or if the GHO was prior to the Colonial, I would say great for Sorenstam. This, however, is simply not the case.

It appears as though this move to satisfy Martha and curtail the negative spin machine that has the Masters squarely in it's sights may actually hurt the one woman that has unassumingly done more for women in golf than Martha Burke could ever do with a team of attorneys. In light of the myriad of pieces that have created this puzzle, Annika should enjoy the spotlight she has already created for herself on the LPGA Tour, pull out of the Colonial, qualify for the Texas Open, and give Suzy Whaley her due—the one she has earned.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance “Lipouts” column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2003.