

Cat Scratch Fever

By: Nathan Grace Date: Dec. 21, 2005

"These Girls Rock." That's the new marketing mantra for the LPGA Tour these days. Carefully constructed and meticulously molded, it is an obvious play on words with the PGA Tour's "These Guys are Good" campaign. The LPGA launched their campaign in 2005 complete with 1960's psychedelic-rock-band-poster-style ads featuring its top players. It's one thing to have a catchy slogan. It's quite another to deliver on it. And in an industry full of independent contractors and dominated by one Swedish import, delivering to the masses is easier said than done. However, a slew of young talent had talk of the 2006 season buzzing around the LPGA Tour before Ty Votaw had cleaned out his desk in 2005 and there's one surefire way for the LPGA to make up for lost ground.

Every so often, a professional sport is turned upside down by a child prodigy (or a handful of them) and the sport is never quite the same. Professional tennis, baseball, and even the NBA have seen their fair share of teenage players making waves and headlines by jumping straight from high school into the major leagues. Now, it would appear that the LPGA is next. Notwithstanding the obvious questions about how young is too young to be a full-time professional athlete, the big question for 2006 might be who will dethrone Annika?

We all know about the Michelle Wie show and Wie's desire to not only compete, but also win, on both the ladies' and men's tours. She is strikingly tall in both stature and talent and at only 16 has already forgone the remainder of her amateur status to cash in on the riches of professional sponsorships and endorsements—even if she cannot officially "join" the LPGA Tour until she's 18. Wie is a big shot in the arm to a Tour that needs more corporate cash and the marketable Hawaiian teen should prove to be an important link between the US-based Tour and Asian sponsors.

However, Wie is by no means the only thing the LPGA has going for it in 2006 and, quite frankly, I don't think she's the best of the young guns anyway. She may have potential, but others have already proven they can turn potential into wins and the head of that class is Paula Creamer. In 2005, Creamer had two wins, three other top three finishes, and finished second on the money list to Annika Sorenstam. She also added a win in Japan and became the first rookie to qualify for the Solheim Cup—an event she took control of and put her money where her mouth was by securing the American win as she had promised before the matches. Oh, and she graduated from high school too. Then at the ADT near the end of the season, she showed why Sorenstam should fear her most of all—because Creamer doesn't fear her. During a debate about where Annika's ball crossed a hazard, Creamer made no bones about what she thought and that it was her opinion that the Swede was flat wrong. The two argued and the tension remained well after the round.

This is what the LPGA really needs. Not a Jerry Springer show between the ropes, but passion, desire, and some genuine attitude. Why with the level of talent it has, does the LPGA need help attracting fans and sponsors? As good as Annika is and with all due respect to Sorenstam, she and another product of Sweden—an Ikea futon—have something in common. Years of watching Annika meticulously dissect fairways and greens and run away from the field can at times be about as entertaining as watching the furniture. Unfortunately, dominating players can become boring after long enough.

The LPGA has nothing like the classic Palmer vs. Nicklaus duels. No Vijay vs. Tiger vs. Phil vs. Ernie either. But for my money, Morgan Pressel could change all of that in 2006. She has the game, the resume, and the attitude to make a big impact on the Tour quickly. A few years ago, she became the youngest ever to qualify for the US Women's Open—at age 12! In 2005, she strung together 47 birdies and an eagle in only 142 holes to run away and hide winning the US Women's Amateur and she would be the defending US Women's Open champion in 2006 if not for Birdie Kim's impossible hole out from the bunker on the final hole. Pressel has bypassed a college career at Duke to go pro, but she too must wait until she's 18 to "join" the Tour. She will have six sponsor's exemptions to use before she turns 18 in May and joins the Tour full-time and she makes no secret about bristling at all of the attention Wie receives for far fewer accomplishments. To be honest, if not for her length off the tee, I wonder if Wie would be playing with the men. Pressel is the better player and there's already no love loss between these two. When Wie carded an 82 in the final round of the 2005 US Women's Open, Pressel asked the media why they were protecting her? I say Pressel will win a major in 2006.

So Creamer has proven she can do it and I have all the faith in the world in Pressel becoming a force to be reckoned with. Wie still has to live up the hype of her marketing machine and you can bet Sorenstam, Kerr, and the others will not be stepping aside willingly for the young talent to take control. 2006 could be one of the most exciting years the LPGA has had in quite some time for the general consumer and that translates into more fans, more sponsors, and more money. I hope it proves to be the turning point for the ladies and with all the young talent waiting in the wings, this could be a long-term trend. I just hope the tournament organizers have enough sense to see fit to schedule plenty of Pressel vs. Creamer vs. Sorenstam vs. Wie vs. Kerr pairings in the opening rounds in '06.

Nathan Grace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Association of America whose freelance "Lipouts" column appears in a number of regional and national golf publications. If you would like to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com. Copyright 2005.