

Women's Golf TEXAS

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Susan Watkins

UT coach leads Longhorns in
quest for national championship

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Susan Watkins

Longhorns coach wants to bring a national championship home to UT Golf Club

Susan Watkins didn't originally intend to make golf her career. The Corsicana native joined the Longhorns' program in 1977 as a member of the tennis team. Her tennis career ended, however, when she suffered a knee injury shortly after her arrival. Looking for new challenges, Watkins asked UT women's golf coach, Pat Weis, to introduce her to Harvey Penick, the legendary former UT men's coach who many believe was one of the greatest instructors in the history of the game. Under Penick's expert eye, Watkins learned the game of golf.

"It was so delightful," she says of the experience, "because Harvey made it so simple. He related golf to tennis for me. He was so well versed in every avenue of life. He'd always allow you to use your natural ability, and relate golf to something that was familiar to you."

Within a year, she showed such improvement that she was able to join coach Weis' Longhorns team as a walk-on. Asked how she progressed so quickly, Watkins says, "I think that you know when you fall in love. When you develop that kind of passion and interest, it's easy to just connect to it. Then you go and commit to some hard work with a great instructor. You take it one day at a time, and you make sure that you break up your time, so you can really absorb what's going on throughout the learning process. Then it's just a matter of getting it polished on a regular basis."



When she's not coaching the Longhorns team, Coach Watkins enjoys cooking and collects wine.

Photos by Julie Farias Photography

cover story

Finding her passion

After graduating from UT, Watkins went on to play professionally on the West Coast Tour. She played for several years, but eventually realized that teaching was her true calling.

"It wasn't as fun as I thought it would be," she says of her professional playing days. "It was a bit of an awakening. The travel was great, and the people were great. But, in the heat of the moment, it was very difficult. I'm the type of person who really enjoys people. On Tour, you have to be willing to cut the cord and distance yourself from those relationships on the course. It's not that I couldn't have that attitude, it's that I didn't want to. It was more important for me to develop the

Watkins' article, "A Story by Susan Watkins," appears in Penick's book, *For All Who Love the Game: Lessons and Teachings for Women*.

Coming full circle

Watkins eventually left Austin Country Club for teaching stints at Bent Tree Country Club in Dallas, then at the John Jacobs Golf School in Scottsdale, Ariz.; Cherry Hills Country Club in Englewood, Colo.; and Palm Valley Country Club in Palm Desert, Calif. But it was during a visit to Texas in 1993 that her career path came full circle.

"It was kind of like, you click your heels and you're back home," says Watkins of her return to UT. "But it didn't happen by accident—every time I came back to Austin, I'd say to Coach Weis that I'd love to come back here. Then that summer, she told me I should get my resume in order, that she was going to retire."

That's when Watkins became only the second head coach in the history of the University of Texas women's golf program. Since then, she has established herself and the Longhorns as among the best in the country. The team consistently competes at the national level, with top-six finishes at each of the last five NCAA Championships. A further testament to her coaching skills, many of Watkins' students have gone on to play on the LPGA Tour, including Nadine Ash (1991-95); Heather Bowie (1995-97); Kristin Dufour (1998-2001); Kori Johns (1994-1996); Kelli Kuehne (1996-97); Randi Meadows (1998-2001); and Jessica Reese (1999-2003).



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relationships, maintain the friendships and give back what I'd learned. That's how the teaching thing came about for me."

Watkins headed back to her roots, securing a position at historic Austin Country Club teaching alongside her mentor, Penick. "I embrace every one of those days. I can remember sitting and listening to stories that he might tell over and over again, but you wanted to keep listening, because every time you'd get something new out of them. He had a fascinating way of drawing people in, because he was the type of person you just had to be around. Once you'd made that connection and had that relationship, you needed it. You needed Harvey, or a Harveyism, daily, to keep you going. And I still live by them every day."

Celebrating that Texas spirit

Under Watkins guidance, the Longhorns continue to rank among the nation's best, and are recognized for both their play on the course and their performance in the classroom. Watkins attributes her teams success to its cohesiveness.

"At UT, we have something a lot of people don't have, we have a lot of incredible traditions. We've got the Hook 'em Horns signal, we've got a color that can't be matched by anything, that burnt orange! And we carry those traditions onto the golf course. When someone makes a birdie, we turn around and give the Hook 'em sign in the middle of the fairway! And you can see the other team thinking, 'we don't have anything to do except pump our fist!'".



"Once you'd made that connection and had that relationship with Harvey, you needed it. You needed a Harveyism, daily, to keep you going. I still live by them every day."

Watkins's sense of humor is one of her hallmarks, and it has become a hallmark of the team as well. "The idea that you can be serious and competitive, but also have a sense of humor, is what makes my team more cohesive. I want to have a good time when I win. I want to know that I can keep a smile on my face, hard as it is, when we lose. I want to know that I'm going to get something out of it., and I try to pass that on to my team."

Of her teaching philosophy, Watkins says she likes to keep things simple, and that many instructors make golf more difficult than it really is. "My students know that I'm not a mechanical teacher at all. If we need to work on swing mechanics, we'll do it. But I guarantee you, if there's a problem with a student's swing, it will always come down to fundamentals: grip, stance, aim or posture. It doesn't have anything to do with pulling the trigger."

Building trust

Watkins admits her role as coach involves a lot more than teaching fundamentals, however. "What I really do now is spend time with the player as sort of a player/coach/sports psychologist, so that they'll start to trust me. I've taken a couple of players to a totally different level. In the heat of



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About UT Golf Club

The University of Texas Golf Club was a vision that became a reality when some of the university's most influential supporters set out on a mission to build a permanent home for UT golf teams. After 18 months of development, the UT Golf Club is now open. Located in the Steiner Ranch residential community in Austin, the club is licensed by The University of Texas and is home to the university's men's and women's golf programs.

Head Football Coach, Mack Brown, serves as Chairman of the Board. Memberships are being offered to those interested in enjoying the unique experience the club offers, and is not conditioned upon prospective members being alumni or having any other relationship with the university.

The UT golf course is a 7,154 yard, par-71 championship course, created by Bechtol Russell Golf Design. Built in the Texas hill country, the course overlooks Lake Austin and borders a natural wildlife preserve, offering challenging shots and spectacular views. In addition to the course, the club features:

- Private club memberships in a gated community.
- Distinctive practice facility with generous teeing grounds and multiple chipping, pitching and putting greens.
- Phase I of the clubhouse design includes a pro shop, snack bar, serving bar and an open-air special events pavilion. Phase I will be retrofitted as a fitness center upon completion of Phase II.
- Phase II will include a 15,000 square foot club house with sophisticated dining areas, pro shop and spacious locker rooms.

A casita site is also being planned, and a pool will be built at the casita site, available to all members. The new clubhouse will include a display area featuring UT legends' memorabilia, such as major championship trophies, a Ryder Cup display and NCAA champions. The "Walk of Fame" will highlight Texas golf legends both within the clubhouse and on each teeing ground.

For more information about membership, visit www.utgolfclub.com, or contact Dana Mesarole, Director of Membership, at 512.266.6464.

competition, we'll talk about creating a different ball flight—in the middle of competition! That's when you can see how they're thinking and give them different ideas. Normally, I let them go with their instincts, but if I see that it's not going to pay off, then my job is to give them a different idea. I'm not taking anything away from them, I'm trying to add to what they already have. When you can do that, and develop that kind of player-coach relationship, you can create a great player."

When she's not coaching, Watkins enjoys cooking, and collects wine. "My mom's side of the family is Lebanese," she says. "So when I first started cooking, I started with some really difficult recipes. But being in the kitchen with my grandmother really inspired me."

She also still gets out on the tennis court, but says that, "Where I really breathe and get a lot of thinking done is up in the mountains. That's where I go when I really need to feel my serenity."

A club of their own

A year and a half ago, some UT alumni decided to get together and build the Longhorns their own golf course. The result is the University of Texas Golf Club, a course set in the Austin Hill Country, between Lake Austin and Lake Travis.

"I love that they were able to use the hill country terrain for what it is," says Watkins. "I'm much the traditionalist when it comes to golf courses, I like smaller greens and tighter situations. The back side is my favorite side, but I love the whole golf course because they used the terrain so beautifully."

Watkins even thinks the course has potential to make its mark on the national stage. "My goal is to set it up and tinker with it, so that in the next three years I can bring a national championship here. It is definitely a national championship venue, and I think giving the greens a few more years to soften up, and give the grass and rough a chance to grow, can really set us up for something special."

Twelve years and counting

Having coached the Longhorns for 12 years, Watkins is often asked if she'll soon be looking for new challenges. She says that she has some goals she still wants to reach at UT.

"I want desperately to accomplish a team championship for many reasons: for these kids, for the university, for coach Weiss, for the former players. I want to see that happen before my time is up here. I get emotional talking about it, because we've had great players who've worked very hard, and the university has been so supportive. We deserve to light that tower as a team." 