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Interview with LPGA pro Kelli Kuehne

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LPGA star and Dallas native Kelli Kuehne calls 'em like she sees 'em, whether she's hitting golf balls or dispelling myths about her struggle with diabetes.

By Rebecca MacDonald



WHEN KELLI KUEHNE FIRST STEPPED OUT ON THE LPGA TOUR at 19 years of age, the Dallas native was already used to winning. As an amateur, Kuehne had racked up an impressive record, winning back-to-back U.S. Women's Amateur Championship titles in 1995 and 1996, on the heels of winning the 1994 U.S. Girls Junior Amateur. She then extended her streak internationally, winning the 1996 Women's British Amateur Championship.

Looking back, Kuehne admits she didn't recognize her accomplishments as particularly special at the time. "I was too young and dumb to know that golf was supposed to be hard. It wasn't that I didn't respect the game-I just thought that every week I was supposed to kick butt."

Growing up in a family with two older brothers-Trip, a successful amateur, and Hank, a PGA tour professional-Kuehne did not automatically gravitate to golf. Instead, she competed as a national tennis player. "I started dabbling in golf when I was around eight years old," she explains. "But I wasn't crazy about it at first."

In fact, it was her desire to be with her family that led Kuehne to golf. "In the summers, Mom would travel with me to my tennis tournaments, and Dad traveled with my brothers to their golf tournaments. I finally quit tennis to play golf so the whole family could travel together, as crazy as that sounds. Who knew it would turn into this?"

Asked if she and her brothers were competitive with each other on the course, Kuehne laughs. "Everyone always asks that. We're all competitive, and I hate to lose. We'd have competitions where we bet each other which one could spit farther! Even though I was a girl, I'd try my hardest to spit a watermelon seed farther than they could. But when it came to golf, we weren't competitive like that. We just tried to push each other to get better, and we helped each other out with our swings, stuff like that."

Riding on the success of her junior amateur career, Kuehne headed off to the University of Texas at Austin, where, under the guidance of Coach Susan Watkins, she was named a first-team All-American in her freshman year. At that point Kuehne decided that she needed to take her game to the next level. She sailed through LPGA Qualifying School, tying for fifth place on her first try and earning exempt status for the 1998 season.

But she soon learned that winning on the LPGA tour would not come as easily as her amateur success had. In her rookie season, she faltered for the first time, missing 11 cuts in 21 starts. Her best finish that year was a tie for twentieth place.

"I got off to a really bad start," Kuehne says. "I just put such a tremendous amount of pressure on myself, and I didn't even have fun with it. I expected to keep doing what I'd always done-win tourna-

ments. I thought I should win five or six tournaments a year right off the bat, and when I didn't win, I just kept trying harder. And the thing about golf is, the harder you try, the worse you do."

The experience was a rude awakening, but one, she says, that taught her a lot. "Hindsight is twenty/twenty, and looking back now, it's the best thing that ever happened to me. Falling on my butt and having to pick myself back up made me appreciate the successes a whole lot more. Of course, no one likes to struggle, but I like the idea of being a fighter, of picking yourself up and making a comeback."

She did come back, with a new attitude and a renewed determination, not just to win but to rediscover her enjoyment of the game. The approach worked. In 1999 Kuehne garnered four top-ten finishes, including a win at the LPGA Corning Classic and a tie for second at the Jamie Farr Kroger Classic. She also carded a

career-low score of 64 in the first round of the U.S. Women's Open, where she ultimately placed third. Her success continued—only two years later, she surpassed the \$1 million mark in career earnings.

Living with Diabetes

Golf was not the only challenge Kuehne had to overcome. When she was only ten years old, she began experiencing strange symptoms. "I hadn't been feeling very well, and I'd lost about five or six pounds—which at ten years old is a lot. I was very lethargic, and thirsty all the time. I'd drink half a gallon of water in one sitting, five or six times a day. My mom took me to the doctor, and they ran some tests. I remember it like it was yesterday. The doctor told me I was diabetic. I had no idea what that meant. The next day I got put on insulin."

Kuehne says that learning about the disease and how to manage it has made it possible for her to live a normal life. Her mother helped her with research, and she met with a nutritionist when she was only 10 years old. "I'm not on a diet, but I did get on an eating program—I try to avoid sugary foods, fatty foods, and fried foods. I love pasta, but I don't eat it, because if I have more than half a cup it sends my blood sugar through the roof. I'm almost better off almost eating a Snickers bar than I am eating pasta. It's crazy how it works, but education is key. You learn cause and effect, and how to eat to keep your blood sugar within a healthy range."

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Kuehne became a spokesperson for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, and her "Teeing It Up to Cure Diabetes" golf tournament has raised nearly \$2 million since 1998. "My biggest message to parents of kids with juvenile diabetes is, don't alienate your child. A lot of kids think it's their fault that they got sick. They think they did something wrong and that they're being punished. So I tell them, 'You know what? God picked you to have this disease because he knew you could handle it.' And they look at you and you see them start to smile."

Kuehne often shows kids the insulin pump inserted in her abdomen. She says she took two insulin shots a day for ten years, until her trainer at UT, who is also a diabetic, showed her the pump. The device looks like a small digital music player attached to the back of her pants, and works like an IV. A cartridge fits inside, dispensing insulin at timed intervals into her system. "It's made my life a hundred times easier, as far as monitoring and keeping my blood sugar stable, especially when I travel. If I have to fly from New York to California, I'm adding three hours to my day, and I would have to add three hours of insulin. But if I change the time on my insulin pump it does it automatically."

It's All in the Family

Growing up in a family of athletes, Kuehne decided to continue the tradition when she married Jay Humphrey, an offensive lineman at Texas who was drafted by the Minnesota Vikings and later played for the Green Bay Packers and the Jacksonville Jaguars. When they were both playing professionally, Kuehne says, it was easier to coordinate their schedules. "My tournament schedule ran from February through November, and he reported for training camp in July, so I had three or four months when I could be with him during his season, and starting in February he would come to my tournaments."

Humphrey later left the NFL and is now studying to become a chiropractor, which Kuehne says makes it harder for them to find time to spend together. "Now that he's in school, he can't come out on tour with me as often. His nose is buried in the books. It's been difficult because we don't see each other very much." That situation, however, is temporary, she notes.

"I've always wanted a big family. And I've always had the idea that when I start a family, I want to be there for my kids—golf will be a sideline at that point. I'll certainly play forever, I love the game that much. But I want to have a second phase of my life that is dedicated to my family and my kids and my husband. I don't have any interest in raising a family on the road. There a lot of women who do it, and I have tremendous respect for them. But I'm kind of old-fashioned and Southern in that I want to be a full-time mom to my kids."

Life on Tour

Asked what it's like spending so much time with other women players on tour, Kuehne is philosophical. "I think it's like any other workplace. Women are cliquey—that's just the way it is. Don't get me wrong; the women out here are phenomenal people, but when you have 144 professional athletes sharing a locker room, that's a lot of hormones and a lot of estrogen floating around!"

She also thinks that, like herself, many of the players who are used to winning at the amateur level have to adjust their expectations once they make the tour. "Everyone here is a star, and has had some success just to get here. But on the professional tour, cream rises to the top, and you have to take care of the players who carry your tour. If you're number one on the money list, you're going to get some advantages, you damn sure earned them. And if you're number 150 on the money list, guess what, you have to go back to the drawing board, and figure out how to get better. That's the way of the world, that's business."

Kuehne adds that she is excited about how much momentum the women's tour has been gaining lately. "Golf is cool now! It's hot. Tiger's had a huge influence in general on the game. Annika Sorenstam has certainly had the same kind of influence on the women's tour. And now you have up-and-coming stars like Paula Creamer, Morgan Pressel, Michelle Wie. There's such a conglomerate of talented women out there. The talent has always been there, but I honestly think it continues to get better."

Speaking of Wie, we asked Kuehne what she thought of the teenager who's been making headlines by competing in professional events on both the women's and the men's tours. "You know, some people are threatened by Michelle Wie. My take is, she's sixteen years old and she's one of the best I've ever seen. I grew up with Tiger, and he was phenomenal. But a lot of people say Michelle doesn't belong on tour because she's only sixteen. You know what? The girl can play. Get out of the way—she's that good."

To keep the momentum going, Kuehne says, it's important that stars like Wie continue to win on the LPGA tour. What exactly does that mean? Kuehne is blunt: "The bottom line is that Americans love to see Americans succeed. We need to continue to have American powerhouses coming out, like Paula Creamer, Morgan Pressel, Natalie Gulbis, and Christie Kerr. We are a global tour now, and that is a great thing. But we need to continue the trend where Americans have a significant presence. It's not like the Olympics. We're in houses every week, week in, week out, and I think it's important to see Americans winning to generate that excitement with the television audience."

The Future Is Fun

At 28, Kuehne hasn't given up on her dream to be one of those Americans generating the excitement. After eight years on tour, she's still hungry to compete, and she practices several hours a day at the Four Seasons Sports Club in Las Colinas, where she is a member. Tim Cusick, the director of instruction at the Four Seasons, has stepped in as her temporary swing coach. Until recently, Kuehne's swing coach was Hank Haney, the same coach she's had since she was 10 years old. However, this past year, Haney's much-publicized work with Tiger Woods has put a bit of a crimp in their relationship. "I've worked with Hank Haney my whole life," she says, "but this year I've been working more with Tim, because Hank has been traveling more with Tiger—he kind of took my teacher!" she laughs.

Cusick worked with Haney for years at the Hank Haney Golf Ranch in McKinney, so Kuehne says it's not really a difficult transition. "I've known Tim for years, so it's not like I have a brand-new teacher. He's teaching me the same way I've always learned." She adds, "I think Hank Haney is ridiculously talented and knowledgeable about the golf swing. He doesn't work for everyone, but I believe in his system and his ideas. The nice thing about working with Hank is he helped me understand cause and effect in the golf swing."

However, she admits it's not always easy to have patience with her progress. "The difficult thing about golf is, the work you put in today doesn't necessarily help you tomorrow. The work I'm doing today is going to help me several months down the line. And that's a difficult thing to accept, but that's what brings every one of us back. It's a fine line between driving yourself crazy with it and accepting it and finding peace with it. You just have to keep working toward a goal, and know that it might not happen today."

Kuehne says that the patience she's learned in developing her golf swing has helped put her future in perspective as well. "For the first time in my life, I don't really have a plan. I know I want to play and I want to go out when I'm on top. I set a goal when I was fourteen years old to be the number one player by the year 2004. I'm a little bit off on that, so I may need to readjust my plan a little. I just want to be competitive week in and week out. The beauty of it is I've got some time. I don't have to be a mom right away. When the timing is right, I'm sure it will all fall into place."

She adds that, above all, she wants to recapture her sense of fun. "I do my best when I have fun and don't worry about anything but chasing my ball. I want that sense of fun to show in the way I play again, like it did when I was a kid." She gestures out toward the driving range at the Four Seasons' Byron Nelson School, where she practices. "I have an incredible job, and a beautiful office. I just want to continue to enjoy coming to work every day."

