

# PEGGY KIRK BELL:

## *The First Lady of Golf* By Kendra T. Brown, Ph.D.

*To some, Peggy Kirk Bell's story reads like an old-fashioned fairy tale. An attractive young woman falls head over heels in love, rides off into the sunset to a life filled with adventure, travel, fame and fortune, and ultimately arrives at a beautiful "castle" where she lives happily ever after, surrounded by family and receiving visitors daily who come to enjoy the lovely grounds of her kingdom.*

But this isn't your average fairy tale. The love of which we speak is none other than golf! And she rode off into the sunset on her golf cart, not astride a white horse. Those lovely grounds where she receives visitors daily? They are the greens and fairways of her cherished golf resort, Pine Needles, in Southern Pines, N.C.

Peggy Kirk Bell's love affair with golf began about 73 years ago - when she was 17 and known around her hometown of Findlay, Ohio, as just Peggy Kirk. She had already demonstrated considerable talent in multiple sports.

"I was voted Best Athlete at Findlay High School," Bell recalled. "We played intramurals - not for girls - so I always played with the boys."

Her father's supply of sporting goods (through his wholesale grocery business) came in handy.

"I was the catcher on the boys' baseball team because I had the biggest mitt!" she laughed.

The summer of her 17th year, she found herself with a dilemma: The camp she had



*Peggy loved flying and playing with celebrities like Bing Crosby (left).*

attended each year was no longer available to her because of her age. What to do with her time? She wanted to do something physical and her dad, Robert Kirk, happily provided an option. He had recently

purchased a membership at the local Findlay Country Club. Her father's membership was associated with business; he didn't play "that silly game" of golf, as he put it. He did, however, encourage his kids to take advantage

of it; Peggy took him up on his offer. She was desperate for activity that summer, so she went to Dad's supply of sporting goods, where she selected some of "those sticks" and three balls.

She expected to learn how to play golf on her first day at the course; she wasn't going to need more than three balls!

"I hit the first ball and it went into the woods," Bell said. "I spent 25 minutes looking for that ball and couldn't find it. I wondered, 'What do we do now?'"

After a couple of hours, all three balls were lost and she never got to the green. But, she lost more than those balls to golf that day. She lost her heart to golf, as well.

"I was hooked," she said. "Because I couldn't do it."

Other sports had come relatively easy to her and she was surprised at how difficult it was to play golf well. But, with her characteristic confidence and determination, she found a teacher and began to learn and hone the skills that would later take her to championships, honors and accomplishments spanning seven decades.

Those initial lessons quickly paid off. During the first year of her love affair with golf, Bell won the

Photos courtesy Pine Needles Resort

club tournament. The local newspaper carried the story – in the society column – black and white evidence that, in those days, women golfers were viewed very differently than male golfers.

After graduating high school, Bell carried her love affair with golf on to college, where she first attended Boston University's Sargent College of Physical Education, and then Rollins College, graduating with a degree in education.

"I went to school every morning and teed off with the men every afternoon," Bell said. "I played with the men because the women were no good then!"

Peggy Kirk became recognized as one of the nation's top players. Since it was before the development of a professional tour for women, she played on the ladies' amateur tour. In the 1940s, she won the Ohio Women's Amateur championship three times, the North-South Women's Amateur in Pinehurst, the Eastern Amateur and the Augusta Titleholders. In 1947, she teamed with Babe Zaharias to win the International Four-Ball Championship.

Travel to tournaments – which were scattered around the country – was time-consuming in those days. So, with her characteristic "can do" attitude, Bell took flying lessons and began piloting her own plane.

"I took up flying because I was tired of driving coast-to-coast, and it was fun to fly," she said.

During those years, she also observed many of the great male golfers. She

sat for hours watching Ben Hogan practice his swing. She played with some of them, too. On one occasion, Bell and Zaharias were playing with Sam Snead and a club professional.

"Babe hit a long drive and said to Sam, 'See if you can

in Hollywood, Fla.," Bell said. "I was nervous and, in a practice round, Babe asked what was wrong. I said, 'You have won the last seven tournaments you played in and I don't want you to lose this one with me.' Babe said, 'I can beat any two of them



*Peggy stands in front of her beloved Pines Needles Resort in Southern Pines, North Carolina*

catch that one,'" Bell recalled. "Sam hit, but not as far..." and questioned the ball Babe had hit. She informed him it was the same kind of ball as his - Wilson." (Both Zaharias and Snead had contracts with Wilson Sporting Goods at the time.)

Another memory of Zaharias brought a smile to Bell's face.

"Babe asked me to play in an International Four-Ball

without you. I'll let you know if I need you!"

In 1950, Bell reached a personal goal – playing on the U.S. Curtis Cup Team.

"That was my greatest goal – to play for my country," beamed Bell.

Shortly after that, she began her professional golfing career, signing with Spalding Sporting Goods in 1951.

Two of her fondest

memories while playing professionally were breaking the tournament scoring record at the Titleholder's Championship and being on the first professional U.S. international team. It was the Weathervane Team. Patty Berg was the captain on that team and other members included Zaharias and Betty Jameson.

Although these women were competitors, there was a bond between them. There were so few women at this level of competition that they were showcased. Together, they dreamed of a professional tour for women, and so, the Ladies Professional Golf Association was formed. Bell says she is considered a charter member, rather than a founding member, because she wasn't at the first meeting and some of the early records have been lost.

In 1953 – when she was in her thirties – Peggy Kirk became Peggy Kirk Bell, marrying her high school sweetheart, Warren ("Bullet") Bell, who had been patiently waiting in the wings while she followed her golf dreams.

"I went with him for seven years and he kept wanting to get married," she said. "I couldn't get married because I wanted to play golf."

Truth be told, Warren had been busy, too – in college, in military service and playing professional basketball with the Fort Wayne Pistons (today's Detroit Pistons).

In the same year as their marriage, the couple purchased the Pine Needles resort. Along with fellow investor, PGA pro Julius Boros, they had a vision for the Donald Ross-designed course and surrounding property.

## A Lifetime of Golf Achievements

Peggy Kirk Bell, who will be 91 this year, is named in golf Halls of Fame, is a master professional, and remains active in civic, charitable and sports organizations. Among her many lifetime accomplishments are:

- 2007 First Lady of Golf – PGA of America - May 2007
- Winner of the 1947 International Four Ball teamed with Babe D. Zaharias
- Ohio Amateur Champion – 1947, 1948, 1949
- Titleholders Champion - 1949
- North – South Champion - 1949
- Eastern Amateur Champion – 1950
- Member of the 1950 USGA Curtis Cup Team
- USGA Bob Jones Award, 1990
- LPGA/Ellen Griffin Rolex Award, 1989
- Golf Writers Assn. Of America's William Richardson Award, 1993
- National Golf Foundation's Joe Graffis Award, 1981
- Halls of Fame: NC Business Hall of Fame, 2002; Ohio Golf Hall of Fame, 1992; Carolinas Golf Hall of Fame, 1981; NC Sports Hall of Fame, 1976; Inducted into the LPGA (Teaching Division) Hall of Fame, 2000; Golf Magazine's World Golf Teachers Hall of Fame, first woman inductee, Jan. 2004
- Numerous awards for excellence in teaching from Golf Magazine, Golf Digest, and LPGA and others
- Honorary Chairman, US Women's Open Golf Championship, 1996, 2001 and 2007.

Over the next few years, they built a chalet-style clubhouse and lodges in the same style, a pool and other features expected in top resorts. Bell credits her husband for his part in the success of Pine Needles.

"He worked so hard to build Pine Needles," she said. "He built it and I ran the golf and the schools. I never dreamed that it would all be this big!"

Through the years, the resort, with its pristine, championship course, went on to host many of the nation's most prestigious golf tournaments, including: the 1972 Titleholders Championship, the 1989 U.S. Girls Junior Championship, 1991 U.S. Senior Women's

Amateur Championship, three U.S. Women's Open Championships (1996, 2001, 2007), and the 2002 USGA Senior Women's Amateur Championship.

Pine Needles also became the home of the "Golfari" golf schools for women. Bell and her friend, Ellen Griffin (recognized as one of golf's most outstanding teachers and a golf coach at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro), were pioneers in the creation of golf schools, and their Golfari golf schools for women are still enormously popular today. The motto of Golfari, according to Bell's daughter, Peggy Ann Miller, is, "Having fun while learning golf." Today, there are Golfaris for

men, women and juniors.

Bell admits that she wasn't all that keen on teaching golf at first.

"I was more interested in hitting the ball myself," she said. "I didn't want to tell someone else how to hit it!"

That changed, and she became a sought-after and valued teacher, and the first woman voted into the World Golf Teachers Hall of Fame in 2002. Her ability to build solid relationships with her students was evidenced when Robert Linville – a former student who has been named a Carolina's Teacher of the Year and a two-time Division III National Coach of the Year – named his successful program for girls after Bell: the Peggy Kirk Bell Girls' Golf Tour. It's the nation's largest "girls only" tour, with a primary focus to provide girls with a venue to develop, compete and be recognized. The tour is supported financially and logistically by the Triad Youth Golf Foundation, with a focus on working in collaboration with the LPGA-USGA Girls' Golf programs of Greensboro and Winston-Salem, N.C.

And the resort, like Mrs. Bell, isn't resting on its laurels. In 1994, Mid Pines Inn & Golf Club was added. The ambiance at both resorts reflects the Bell family's commitments to golf, family, hospitality and fun. That commitment is evident from the front desk to the 18th hole.

Although Bell's participation in the game, today, is more peripheral than she would prefer, it is still substantial. Almost every day, she can be found driving

her golf cart (with her clubs in the back) from her home – nestled in the heart of the resort – to the clubhouse, where she meets and greets visitors. Their admiration for her is apparent; she glows in their respect, while, at the same time, seeming to be amazed herself at the wealth of awards chronicling her accomplishments and the photos of celebrities she's met all over the world.

Indeed, her love affairs with golf and with "Bullet" Bell have rewarded her many times over. Daughters, Bonnie and Peggy Ann, and son, Kirk, live nearby, along with her sons-in-law, Pat McGowan and Kelly Miller. And there are eight grandchildren.

At Pine Needles, she has a community of support. Along with her family, there are old friends who visit regularly, and new friends to meet every day.

"Connecting with people and their excitement about the game keeps me excited," Bell said. "It's amazing where golf takes you."

But, if you think about it, it's equally amazing where Bell has taken golf – especially for women.

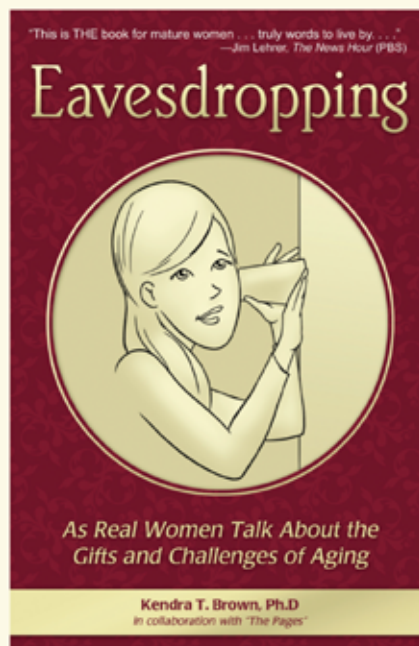
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*Kendra Brown, Ph.D., is proud to say she was one of the founders of Ladies Links Fore Golf. As a team member, she presented workshops and provided sports enhancement articles and tips. She remains an enthusiastic member today. She is passionate about golf and about women aging powerfully and fully. Her first book, Eavesdropping: As Real Women Talk About the Gifts and Challenges of Aging, (Rainbow Books, Inc. 2012) is available at Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, and other bookstores, as well as in Kindle and epub versions. Written as fiction and full of humor, it tells the stories of women as they live and love into the age of wisdom, continuing to enrich and enjoy their lives.*



"This is THE book for mature women and those in anyone's life—including my own. The understanding and advice about everything from traveling alone (demand a good table at a restaurant, stay in bed and breakfasts) to dealing with profound loss (sometimes means liberation, don't be a victim) are truly words to live by. Onward!"

—Jim Lehrer,  
*The News Hour (PBS)*



## A Self-Help, Pro-Aging Book for Women of All Ages

Millions of women who shaped our nation are now leading a wave of aging adults. These women started the sexual revolution, marched for civil rights, broke the glass ceiling, ran for President and went to war. They could—and did—do it all. So, why have many of these capable women stopped thriving mid-stream, as if everything worthwhile is behind them?



**Dr. Kendra Brown**, a Florida psychologist and co-founder of Ladies Links Fore Golf, LLC, asked a group of interesting women (known as "The Pages") to meet with her regularly and examine this perplexing question. Their meetings over three years became sources of support and empowerment for the members as they pondered topics of love and loss, obstacles and opportunities, surprises and sticky situations.

Listen in with the Eavesdropper to their lively discussions filled with honesty, wisdom and lots of laughter. They make this book a page-turner for the reader and encourage all of us to continue reaching for our fullest potential—regardless of age.

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