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Meehan: Guthrie stands out in history of SAWGA

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Shortly after becoming president of the Spokane Area Women's Golf Association (SAWGA), Karen Romberg was sorting through a stack of clippings from The Spokesman-Review when one article caught her eye.

It mentioned that SAWGA was officially organized in 1962. She quickly did the math and realized SAWGA was turning 50.

"When you become president they give you all these scrapbooks and clippings, pins, markers, scorecards, sponsor signs – they're down in the furnace room – and I was looking through everything and it was like, 'This is just awesome history,'" Romberg said. "I've got to do something and have people start reliving these moments."

Romberg and eight members of the championship tournament committee, with the help of area pros, Internet searches, clippings and visits with former champions, updated numerous holes on the lists of city champions stretching back to 1923 and past presidents dating back to 1955. The end result will be a booklet recognizing and detailing SAWGA's storied history.

That's not all. At SAWGA's annual awards banquet Oct. 12, at Northern Quest, past winners will be honored at the Circle of Champions table. Romberg has heard back from 15 former champions and 10 are planning to attend.

"Every one of them has written a nice personal note that has blown me away," Romberg said.

One of those notes came from Connie Guthrie, SAWGA's most decorated champion. She won her first title at age 16 in 1952 (it was known as SWGA at that time) and her last – No. 16 – in 1978.

"Heavens yes, SAWGA has meant a great deal to me," said Guthrie, a Hayden Lake resident. "It's where I started and it grew and I grew as a golfer. I cherish it. Golf has been

a huge part of my life. I'm sure it will be mostly new people (at the champions table) because so many years have gone by."

Guthrie's SAWGA titles came in match-play format. The tournament is now a 54-hole medal (stroke) event. Among numerous rules changes, players now must be 18 to be eligible. Guthrie won titles at 16 and 17. B.J. Hulteng, a four-time champ in the late 1930s and early 1940s, won her first title at 15.

(Those sponsor signs, by the way, are coming out of Romberg's basement soon. SAWGA's championship tournament will be held Tuesday-Thursday with 18 holes at Spokane Country Club, Downriver and Indian Canyon. Beth Wrigley is shooting for her eighth consecutive title.)

Guthrie, who just turned 78, has an incredible amateur resume. In 1952, she won the SAWGA championship, the Idaho and Washington state ams, and advanced to the semifinals of the Pacific Northwest amateur.

She later won two Pacific Northwest titles and two USGA senior amateurs. Her two Washington titles were separated, remarkably, by 29 years.

"During those years I was raising six kids and everything else that goes on," said Guthrie, a member of three halls of fame.

"I suppose I'm most proud of coming back and winning after so many years of sabbaticals."

Golf equipment has improved "by 3,000 percent" compared to when she took up the game, Guthrie said.

"I gave some old Tommy Armour woods to my son. I must have a great collection of old putters," laughed Guthrie, who recalls galleries in the hundreds for championship matches. "You look at the pros with all the training they do and they hit the ball so far, wedges nearly 180 yards. I marvel at it. They have so many opportunities with videos (for swing analysis) and psychologists. None of that took place in the 1960s.

"I hit it about 225 yards. I usually hit it pretty far and fairly straight. When I first started playing I was always in the rough, but it was great because it taught me how to hit all different shots. If I had to do it over again, I'd practice a lot from 100 yards and in."

Guthrie said SAWGA provided quality competition and helped grow the game for female players in the region. She played golf as recently as three years ago with her grandson in

a tournament at Indian Canyon. She's thought about practicing her chipping and putting, but says she's been too busy.

One of the items on her agenda is next month's SAWGA awards banquet.

"It's so wonderful of Karen to do this. It's a great idea," Guthrie said. "I'm looking forward to it. I really want to meet Beth Wrigley. I think what she's done is just super. Somebody will beat my record. They say records are made to be broken."

And celebrated.

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