GIVING BACK



Seneca native Austin Ernst, who won an individual national championship at LSU, turned pro in 2012 and won the 2014 Portland Classic on the LPGA Tour, follows through Monday during her annual charity tournament at The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards.

PHOTOS BY REX BROWN | THE JOURNAL

LPGA stars put rivalries aside for common cause

BY SCOTT ADAMSON
THE JOURNAL

SUNSET — The competition on the LPGA Tour can be fierce.

However, Austin Ernst and 10 of her fellow pros showed there is still plenty of room for camaraderie when it comes time to work for a common cause.



Four-time LPGA Tour winner Michelle Wie said her participation in Seneca native Austin Ernst's annual charity golf tournament at The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards represented her first visit to the Golden Corner of South Carolina.



Ashlan Ramsey, who played at Clemson in 2013-14 and was All-ACC as a freshman before turning pro after earning a spot on the 2014 United States Curtis Cup Team, hits a drive Monday at The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards during Seneca native Austin Ernst's annual charity tournament.

Ernst hosted her annual pro-am charity golf tournament benefitting Safe Harbor on Monday, and there was quite a bit of star power on display at The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards. Joining Ernst were Tour regulars Michelle Wie, Morgan Pressel, Marina Alex, Amy Anderson, Jessica Korda, Brittany Lang, Alison Lee, Ashlan Ramsey and Jodi Ewart Shadoff.

As it turns out, lining up some of the sport's top players to help raise money was no problem at all.

"Just Austin asking me if I wanted to be a part of this is absolutely how it happened," said Wie, who has four career victories and 48 top-10 showings. "All Austin had to do was ask. I've never been to this part of South Carolina before, and it's amazing ... the course is amazing. It's really cool."

The "tournament" was low-key, with no player allowed to score higher than a par on any hole and the only real winner Safe Harbor.

SEE **STARS,** PAGE **A5**

safe harbor

The organization provides around-the-clock counseling, legal support and safe shelter for domestic violence victims. This is the third year Ernst's event has benefitted Safe Harbor.

"I wanted to have a charity and be able to give back to the community, and being in a position to do that, I started going around looking at what I wanted to do," said Ernst, who grew up in Seneca, won an individual national championship at LSU and turned pro in 2012. "I heard a statistic that South Carolina was No. 1 nationally in women killed by men, and Oconee County was No. 1 in the state in that category, so then my parents told me about Safe Harbor.

"I looked into it, and it's fantastic. Now we're in our third year, and each year it's gotten a little bit better, and we raise a little more money."

Lisa Nalley, volunteer coordinator for Safe Harbor, said the annual tournament is instrumental in making sure the organization has the funds to provide necessary services.

"This tournament is really important to Safe Harbor, especially our shelter in Seneca, which is full a lot," Nalley said. "It has 16 beds, and all three of our shelters are full most of the time. We have shelters in Seneca, Anderson and Greenville, and we could not survive as a nonprofit in this community without local support, so this tournament is very important to the health and well-being of Safe Harbor and the Seneca shelter, in particular."

Ernst added that many Tour players have their own charity pro-ams and are willing to help each other out when it's time to tee it up away from the spotlight.

Yet even though they were playing off the grid, the lineup in Sunset on Monday was an impressive one.

Lang is fifth in earnings this year, and already has a victory and five top-five finishes in 2016.

Ramsey, who played at Clemson in 2013-14 and was the top-ranked amateur in the world during the summers of 2013 and 2014, was All-ACC as a freshman. She turned pro after earning a spot on the 2014 United States Curtis Cup Team.

The 11 Tour players who participated on Monday have combined for 13 LPGA victories.

"I don't think anyone else has ever played here before except for Ashlan," Ernst said. "But all of the players are really impressed. We went out on the lake (Sunday) and people were taking pictures, and you could turn around one way and you've got the lake, and then the Blue Ridge Mountains are in the other direction. It's probably one of the prettiest parts of the country, in my opinion. You can really showcase the area playing here at the Vineyards."

More importantly, this tournament helps showcase the willingness of LPGA pros to make a real difference beyond the golf course.

"It means a lot to me to have all my friends come out and support me in what I think is a really great cause," Ernst said. "That's what's so great about the Tour — so many players have their own events to benefit charities. The thing is, we all want to give back, and tournaments like this are our opportunity."

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