

UNIQUE EVENT

INSIDE *the* ATHEENA

Getting a new, women's tournament up-and-running in less than two months, while in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, sounds like mission impossible. But it happened. Here's how the WPGA and its partners pulled it off.

WORDS PAUL PRENDERGAST

As a showcase of Australia's emerging talent, "The Athena" ticked all boxes.

With a format previously unseen in the world of golf with an unapologetic aim of showcasing the emerging talent of Australian women's golf, the inaugural staging of the WPGA Tour's The Athena tournament in February was certainly eye-catching to say the least.

Even the very nature of the announcement, a mere 10 days before the tournament would commence at the Coolangatta-Tweed Heads Golf Club, appeared to be more aligned with the sudden viral online successes that are a hallmark of this generation.

Chief Executive Officer of the WPGA Tour Australasia, Karen Lunn, laughed at the suggestion this launch 'strategy' was part of a grand design. She assured me it was not, more a result of the feverish amount of work that had preceded it from the WPGA Tour's staff and partners to rapidly pull many moving pieces together.

"We'd been working with Matt Burgess from Evolve Sport on a few things, he's worked on a lot of other sports and doesn't come

from a traditional golf background." Lunn explained. "Matt has a lot of close connections at Fox Sports and he put a proposal to them to do something different and off the wall."

"Funding for the event came from the Federal Government's commitment to funding for Women and Underrepresented Sports and we only got word it had been approved on December 21. We spent the better part of January planning and trying to arrange for some other sponsors to come on board."

"Adidas and Callaway joined with us and have been fantastic partners. Together, we want to be able to build on this for the future."

Being able to call on and receive Karrie Webb's direct support in the running of the event was a tremendous fillip for the Tour and the event's stature in its inaugural year. Lunn said that Webb's long-time support for the endeavours of young Australians has only shifted up a gear or two since she has stepped back from her full-time playing commitments.

Webb had only been back in the country less than two months but as soon as Lunn picked up the phone to tell her about The Athena, she was immediately on board. ▶





THE FIELD ASSEMBLES AT COOLANGATTA FOR THE INAUGURAL PLAYING OF THE ATHENA.



SOUTH AUSTRALIAN KRISTALLE BLUM EN ROUTE TO CLAIMING HER FIRST PROFESSIONAL VICTORY.



AUSSIE ICON KARRIE WEBB INTERVIEWS MONTANA STRAUSS DURING THE FIRST DAY CHALLENGES.



NSW'S TAHNIA RAVNJAK FINISHED THIRD IN THE STANDARD BUNKER SHOT CHALLENGE.



VICTORIAN AMATEUR KONO MATSUMOTO GIVES A RECOVERY SHOT THE THUMBS UP.

"She said: 'I want to be involved, let me know what I can do.'" Lunn recounted. "When you come up with a concept like this and someone like her says she's loves it, that's a great endorsement for us and the WPGA Tour in general."

"The Athena concept itself (two days split into a skills and knockout stroke play format) evolved as we went along. There were some things we really wanted to do that the budget wouldn't allow but we eventually got to a point where we thought we had a good concept to run with over the two days."

While Webb has often been a support to many from afar, the impact Australia's greatest golfer has on these players is never more evident than when she is around them in person. Queensland's Sarah Wilson fell into the category of those in the field of 12, who had yet to meet Webb, and her reaction upon realising it was indeed the Hall of Famer walking towards her prior to Friday's rehearsal was magical.

In front of a table of beaming girls all trying to play it as cool as possible, Wilson stood and nervously put out her hand to introduce herself before throwing caution to the wind and going all in for what ended up being an awkward hug.

Little did Wilson and the rest of the players know but Webb was dealing with her own set of nerves as she prepared to make her TV commentary debut ahead of Saturday's skills format. Indeed, just being back at Coolangatta-Tweed Heads meant in some ways that Webb had come full circle, as it was watching Greg Norman win the 1986 Queensland Open at this course that inspired her to want to follow in his footsteps in professional golf.

The short turnaround between the announcement of the event and its staging clearly caught many of the host club's members on the hop too. The Athena was unique in more ways than one, but rarely has there been a Tour event staged in the midst of membership play across both days of a

weekend. The 36-hole facility allowed both to co-exist in harmony, so much so that 20 minutes before the players were due to start from the 10th hole on the River Course, there were still members playing through the hole.

Many in these last few groups hadn't read the memo as there were some quite confused and bemused as to why carts loaded with equipment and TV cameras were starting to appear just to watch them. Most were oblivious to the contestants warming up on the nearby short game area and putting green and hardly any had realised that really was Karrie Webb in her cap and sunglasses chatting with technical crews alongside them.

Webb said she only just met five of the girls for the first time during the Friday rehearsal. She commented they all had 'pretty tidy swings' but she made particular mention of 16-year-old Justice Bosio's performance during the rehearsal, noting the Caboolture junior might have beaten the rest of the girls home had they been keeping score.

As the tournament unfolded, evidence of the wave of talent coming through the ranks was not only on display from the 12 competitors. The school-aged girls chosen from the local area to caddy for the final eight contestants on Sunday could have been storylines of their own and well may be in the years ahead.

WPGA Tour President Julia Boland, herself a former WPGA and LPGA professional, said that some of the group were on scratch or better and the 'highest' handicap among the red-shirted brigade was a three.

If The Athena proved anything to us, it's that women's golf just below the lofty standards being set by LPGA stars Minjee Lee, Hannah Green, Katherine Kirk and Su Oh is already at a level that should have us all thrilled at what's in store moving forward.

Despite limited opportunities since turning professional, 20-year-old Stephanie Kyriacou has burst onto the world stage and came to The Athena as the reigning Ladies European

Tour Rookie of the Year after earning status on Tour with her tearaway win at the 2020 Australian Ladies Classic in Coffs Harbour when an amateur. In the weeks following The Athena, Kyriacou underlined her explosive talent with a magnificent 63 to lead all comers after the opening round of the TPS Sydney event at Bonnie Doon.

In January, Steph Bunque shot 70-66 to feature on the leaderboard in the opening rounds of the TPS Victoria, a similar ground-breaking event where the prospect of a male, female, amateur or professional winner was still on the cards with less than nine holes to play.

Gold Coaster Karis Davidson, at just 22, was among the more experienced players at The Athena with a resume that includes early success on the tough Japan Tour, while Coolangatta-Tweed's Becky Kay threatened for the title around her home course with family and friends willing her on at every step.

Two of the three amateurs on show – Bosio and Kono Matsumoto – showed composure

beyond their years to march into the final four with Matsumoto eventually succumbing to Adelaide's Kristalle Blum in a tense final shootout over three holes.

Any untried concept justifies a thorough review and the WPGA, sponsors and broadcasters have been doing just that following the event. However, as a vehicle to showcase talented youth and their vibrant personalities that are swiftly emerging in this country, all of the key stakeholders agreed The Athena certainly exceeded its brief.

As the dust settled, many had to test their memory to think back to a similar 'feel good' event such as this on any Tour. Many sports in this country had ground if not to a complete halt, but to a glacial pace at best since the pandemic began and women's professional golf has suffered as much as any. A handful of players have been able to join their male counterparts in pro-ams and tournaments such as the TPS events over the past 12 months but standalone women's tournaments ▶

QUEENSLAND AMATEUR SARAH WILSON TAKES ON THE 100M PITCH. BECKY KAY MADE IT TO THE SEMI FINALS (BELOW).



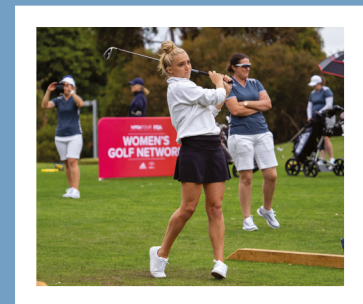
PGA LAUNCHES WOMEN'S NETWORK

The Women's Golf Network is a new series of events introduced by the WPGA Tour of Australasia and PGA of Australia that aims to provide an inviting entry point for women to the game of golf.

The Women's Golf Network was launched at Melbourne's Yarra Yarra GC in March and has since started its tour around Australia with female PGA Professionals guiding participants across full days of clinics and networking.

With support from both adidas and Callaway REVA, each day consists of an adidas Performance Clinic for experienced golfers and the Callaway REVA Beginner Clinic for new players.

"The goal of the Women's Golf Network is to provide an encouraging environment for women eager to try golf for the first time and to provide a pathway for existing golfers to further their games," PGA of Australia Tournament & Event Operations General Manager, Natalie McIlroy, said.



"The series of events complements the many coaching clinics and programs run by PGA Professionals and golf clubs around the country, and we hope the participants continue their golfing journey following an inspirational day with our female PGA Professionals."

"Golf has seen a surge in popularity over the past 12 months but we understand that some women can find that initial introduction to the game somewhat intimidating," WPGA CEO Karen Lunn added.

"With the Women's Golf Network we wanted to create an opportunity for ladies to come and try golf clinics run by our female PGA Professionals and for those girls and ladies already playing to receive expert coaching."

With the aim to inspire women to play golf, the Women's Golf Network provides a warm environment to play golf and the opportunity to network with like-minded women.

To find out more, visit the website www.womensgolfnetwork.com.au.

were some of the quickest to fall.

That factor alone is a large part of the reason why this event had such a warm feel to it. The infectious smiles etched on the players' faces, the obvious camaraderie and sportsmanship that existed among them, the unadulterated talent for the game that each exhibited in their own different ways, the sheer fangirl delight knowing Karrie was right there watching on, not to mention WPGA Tour patron and Olympic legend Dawn Fraser, who couldn't be dragged away from the action on either day.

Playing in front of people with TV cameras buzzing around them, with a rare chunk of money on offer to the winner at the end ... the experience each would have gleaned from competing in such circumstances was as priceless as the looks on their faces. It was well worth the intense and concentrated effort the small WPGA Tour staff invested from funding approval at Christmas to the first shot struck on February 20.

And as if that timeframe to get an event off the ground wasn't challenging enough, consider that in the week leading up to The Athena, Melbourne was caught up in the 'Terminal 4' outbreak which

resulted in a short-term lockdown and concerns about the ability of the Victoria-based players and the bulk of the TV crew to make it to Coolangatta.

Lunn and Co. were forced into rapid fire contingency mode, arranging for some interstate players and staff to fly into Ballina in northern NSW as opposed to the Gold Coast to avoid potentially being stranded if hotspot restrictions had escalated further.

While spectators did attend the event, the often-fragile nature of the pandemic resulted in a reluctance from the host club and WPGA

Tour to overtly encourage galleries in this first year – to reduce an overlay of additional COVID-safe preparations that would need to be stepped up on and around the course.

All in all, pulling off a world's first concept and producing such an inspirational event was a credit to the players but especially so for

Lunn and the WPGA Tour, a sentiment echoed by those on site and in feedback from around the globe via social and mainstream media.

Who knows what future champions were introduced to the game as a result?

We can only hope these important opportunities are able to be replicated by way of The Athena, and many more events for that matter, returning to the WPGA Tour schedule and our screens over the course of this year and beyond. ●

