

Golf for Cause unites game, business success

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Debbie Waitkus was in her 30s when a friend dragged her along to a golf course.

A former collegiate soccer player and natural athlete, Waitkus didn't have reservations about picking up a putter. But she had no idea what golf could do for her.

"I had no expectations," Waitkus recalled of that first outing, on the Encanto Park Golf Course. "It was all about a social good time."

And a good time she had, even though she remembers the game as more croquet than golf.

She quickly learned how golf could open doors far beyond the back nine.

Now, 15 years later, she's amazed at the doors that golf keeps opening, rather like a hall of mirrors that extends seemingly forever.

The latest opening is into the rarefied air of the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce's awards program for women business leaders. Waitkus, founder and president of Golf for Cause, is one of 10 finalists for the Athena Businesswoman of the Year Award, which recognizes outstanding business leadership, community service and mentorship for women.

The winner will be announced Wednesday during a luncheon ceremony at the Arizona Biltmore Resort and Spa.

Waitkus, 45, was nominated by various clients and business associates. They lauded her ability to break through the "grass ceiling" of golf and show women how they could do the same.

For Waitkus, golf was nothing more than "a big black box," something with unknown dimensions, to her when she first entered the business world after graduation from the University of Arizona, doing video production in Tucson.

Later, while working at U-Haul, in Phoenix, a co-worker cajoled her out onto the Encanto course, even though it was summer and Waitkus was several months' pregnant with her first child.

The mysteries of golf started to lift as she learned the game, but Waitkus still didn't see how golf, which she viewed solely as a sport, had any place in the business world.

That perception started to change when she signed on as a loan officer with Mortgages

Inc. in the 1990s.

Her boss treated her as an equal in all regards, including golf outings. Waitkus began to see how the ability to find her way around an 18-hole course could do more than improve her handicap. It was a way to create a common ground that would pay off later.

"This one office I went into, all the guys were wearing golf shirts," she recalled of a marketing call to a bunch of brokers.

They told her they only did business with people who called on them, so Waitkus picked up on the visual cues and invited the members out for a golf date.

"I think they were totally floored when I called with a tee time," she said. "But they sent me deals."

The deals multiplied as she spent more time on the course, making connections, getting a read on how they operate, all while chasing a little white ball around manicured greens.

"I started to get deals from people who saw me out on the golf course," she said.

She parlayed that into big-dollar successes that ultimately propelled her to the job of president of Mortgages, Inc.

At age 39, she became the first female, and the first person from outside the founding family, to run the business.

By 2001, she was ready for a change and ready to show women how understanding the "big black box" of golf could help them meet their business goals.

She founded Golf for Cause, marketing it as a way to use golf to achieve business success. It's a form of networking that works across gender lines, she said.

She talks a lot about the "environment" of golf and how it builds teamwork, shows respect for long-established traditions and opens windows into how people operate.

She hires contractors to teach her clients the technical aspects of the sport.

Her first seminars took place upstairs of Eddie Matney's restaurant at 24th Street and Camelback Road, at the center of the corporate corridor.

She grew that into the clinics that have become the hallmark of her business: People meet to play golf, then retire to the clubhouse for refreshments, some networking, a pitch or two about a business and a presentation on a local charity.

Through 50-50 raffles, Golf for Cause has raised more than \$9,000 for charities.

Waitkus has started speaking at golf-industry shows and think tanks.

"I feel like I'm effecting change, which is kind of fun," she said.

The job keeps her outdoors and active and gives her enough flexibility to have time with her husband, Jack, and children Amy, 14 and Ben, 10.

And it allows her to work on her 10.1 handicap, although she says she is content with the play itself and its relaxing environment.

It fits with her Golf for Cause mantra, which is that the game is more about attitude than it is about aptitude.

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