

U.S. OPEN PREVIEW

THE MEN AND WOMEN DESCEND ON PINEHURST NO. 2

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The Teenage Sensation Can't Win—Can She?

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LEFTY'S LAST HURDLE

Is Phil Mickelson Cut Out to Win the Title He Covets Most?

By Michael Bamberger

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POINT
AFTER



Field of Dreams

→ BY MICHAEL BAMBERGER



Kaye Pierson works on the grounds crew at Pinehurst. One winter morning last year she was on her Toro TriFlex riding mower when she looked up and saw “a sky show.” Google *kaye pierson* and *first light*, and it will come right up. The statue of Putter Boy—that goofy Pinehurst emblem, cousin of Big Boy from the burger chain—is in the foreground. A dewy putting green is in midframe. In the back, treetops, sunrise, lifting fog, “Hogan coming out of it, like he’s Shoeless Joe Jackson in *Field of Dreams*,” Kaye said the other day. This woman likes her golf.

She’s 58, a retired nurse. Her father ran Pierson’s Service Station in East Corinth, Vt., and her mother had a vegetable garden that was the envy of the town. As an adult Kaye took up the game and became the club champ at the Bath Golf Club, in coastal Maine. She loves the smell of cut grass in the morning.

For the fortnight—Open I and Open II—Kaye will be working every day, tending to the back-nine tees, fixing divots, blowing away displaced pine needles, excavating buried tees. Somebody’s got to do it. She’s glad it’s her.

Kaye has already been on the grounds crew during the Masters, assigned to the 12th green, positioning herself deep in the woods, carefully following

the order to stay out of camera view. Pretty soon she’ll have a U.S. Open under her belt. She’s reasonably certain she can get a gig on the grounds crew for the 2017 PGA Championship, at Quail Hollow in Charlotte. Her dream is to work the Old Course at next year’s British Open. She loves the Old Course. Just like Phil, she’s mapping out a career grand slam.

Adjacent to the Old Course there’s a hillocky 18-hole putting course called the Himalayas. The Pinehurst version is called Thistle Dhu, and that’s Kaye’s baby. She cuts the greens and chooses the hole locations, leaving behind physical evidence of her mood that day.

She likes the sound of the lead-bottomed flagsticks being returned to the holes they call home. She’s attuned to sounds. She’s a musician—she once opened for Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul and Mary—and she’ll cut greens while listening to Bonnie Raitt and Tony Bennett, among others.

One of her tasks is to mow greens on Pinehurst No. 2. The key to a good cut, she says, “is knowing where the blades are when you drop them.” The stakes are high, as the very shape of the greens conceived by Donald Ross in 1907 are in jeopardy. Drop those blades too early and you’ll leave a thin spot in the fringe like an inattentive barber might on the side of a customer’s head.

Thistle Dhu is Kaye’s baby. She cuts the greens and chooses the hole locations, leaving behind physical evidence of her mood that day.

Kaye starts at 6 a.m. or earlier and is done by noon. Sometimes in the afternoons she and her husband, David Leonard, a cabinetmaker, will play one of the eight courses owned by the resort. She is paid by the hour and gets a significant employee health benefit: crazily reduced green fees for two. Like \$10, or \$5. Pinehurst hires people who like their golf.

Kaye is a Rossophile of the highest order. Ross, as every dues-paying member of the Donald Ross Society knows, is the golf-course architect who went from Dornoch, in the Scottish highlands, to seaside Massachusetts to the Sandhills of North Carolina. There’s no place in American golf that feels more like Dornoch than Pinehurst. For that matter, there’s no place in the South that feels more like New England than Pinehurst. It’s not a coincidence that Kaye found her way there from the Pine Tree State. She likes the fireplace in front of the Pine Crest Inn, in the heart of the village, and the indoor money-game chipping contests that break out in front of the hearth. Actually, she played once, lost 10 bucks, never played again.

The other day Kaye caddied for her friend Veronica Karaman in the 36-hole U.S. Women’s Open qualifier. Scorewise, the day was not a great success (82–88). Still, come June 19, 156 other women will play in a national championship that is guaranteed to make history. The women, for the first time, are following the men. Same course, one week later. They will all be playing No. 2, where Kaye cuts greens, rakes traps, fills divots. Her course. Here comes Patty Berg, out of the lifting fog. Field of dreams. □