

Jennifer Wyatt more than a caddie for Diana D'Alessio
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Brad Ziemer, Vancouver Sun, August 2012

VANCOUVER - There are times when Jennifer Wyatt reflects on her LPGA Tour career and wishes she had done more with it.

But then there is a week like this one when the Richmond native realizes the 10 years she spent on Tour was about a whole lot more than the money.

Wyatt did collect one LPGA Tour win -- the 1992 Crestar-Farm Fresh Classic -- and earned nearly \$400,000 in prize money. But she also helped shape the life of one young teenage girl nearly 25 years ago.

Proof of that can be found this week at Vancouver Golf Club during the CN Canadian Women's Open.

When Diana D'Alessio walks down Vancouver Golf Club's magnificent tree-lined fairways this week, she'll do it with Wyatt by her side as her caddie.

D'Alessio might not have made it here without her.

Their story began in D'Alessio's home state of New Jersey, when she attended the 1989 Atlantic City Classic with her dad.

D'Alessio, then 13, wanted to see her favourite player, Betsy King, who happened to be paired that day with Wyatt. But it was Wyatt, not the future Hall of Famer King, who made the real impact that day on D'Alessio.

"I was watching Betsy and Jen talked to me all the way around the golf course," D'Alessio recalls. "And I just thought she was amazing and was so cool. You are 13 years old and you are going to watch a golf tournament and you don't really expect any of the pros to talk to you and she was talking to me from green to tee and I was just in awe of her. I just thought she was awesome."

It was right after that round when D'Alessio told her father that she had decided what she was going to do with her life. She emphatically declared that day that she was going to be a professional golfer.

"I wasn't sure at the time if I wanted to be a professional golfer but after I had that experience with Jennifer, I thought that's really great, she gets to play a sport outside and make money at it and enjoy herself doing it. So I was like, that's what I am going to do. I am going to be a professional golfer."

And that is exactly what she did. D'Alessio has been on the LPGA Tour for the past 12 years. She hasn't won, but she has had a nice career, earning more than \$1.3 million along the way.

Wyatt, who now teaches golf in Richmond, didn't learn about the profound effect she had on D'Alessio all those years ago until 2003, the last time the LPGA Tour visited the Metro Vancouver area at Point Grey Golf & Country Club. The two have a mutual friend in Canadian pro Angela Buzminski and the three of them had dinner one night that week.

It was over dinner when Buzminski turned to D'Alessio and said something to the effect of, 'well, are you going to tell her?'

So D'Alessio, somewhat shyly, told the story of that day in 1989 and how much Wyatt's friendliness had affected her.

Wyatt was blown away.

"It was a mind-slapper to be told by that 'little girl' that what I did, how I behaved, affected her," she said Tuesday before their practice round at Vancouver Golf Club. "I was really surprised and touched. Being a Tour player is sometimes a selfish endeavor, so it was great to realize it had a positive effect. . .Dee was kind of shy telling me and I was sort of like, wow. It kind of made it have meaning that whatever you do does have an effect on people."

Wyatt and D'Alessio reconnected at a pro-am earlier this year in Memphis run by former Tour player Mary Murphy. It was there that Wyatt asked D'Alessio if she could use her name as she told their story to some of the junior golfers she works with.

D'Alessio, of course, agreed and seeing Wyatt again planted a seed for her visit here this week. She decided to ask Wyatt to caddie for her at Monday's qualifier at Morgan Creek in Surrey. But it turned out D'Alessio, who only has conditional status on Tour this year, drew into the event and did not have to qualify. So that one-day caddying gig has turned into what hopefully will be a week-long bag-toting job for Wyatt.

"I'm super excited about it and am so happy to help Dee out," Wyatt said Tuesday. "And that's 'out' with a Canadian accent, which she is comically mocking me about."

Like Wyatt did so many years ago, D'Alessio is contemplating retirement. She's 37 now and has just finished a medical exemption following hip surgery last year.

Unless she goes on a late-season run, D'Alessio may walk away from a game and lifestyle she loves.

"I'm not sure I want to go back to qualifying school," she said.

But that is a decision that can wait. This week, she has a place to play and she'll do it walking alongside one of the people who helped make it all happen. And this time, they'll both be inside the ropes.