



Tom Ryan/Staff photo

Women's Metropolitan Golf Association Match Play champion Debbie Doniger shows off her trophy yesterday at the Country Club of Darien.

Doniger gets an A in history and title

By Tom Renner
Staff Writer

DARIEN — Debbie Doniger knows that in golf, no lead is safe.

History has taught her that painful lesson.

So when the 22-year-old Greenwich golfer ended the first 18 holes of yesterday's Women's Metropolitan Golf Association Match Play Championship with a three-hole cushion, she didn't consider the match to be over.

"The thing with golf is, anything can happen," Doniger said.

And what happened is that Doniger got even better. She won three more holes early in the final round at the Country Club of Darien and went on to a convincing 8-and-6 win over Wee Burn's Jan Phillips.

If Doniger had thought about going on cruise control once she got her lead, the memories of last year's Match Play final were enough to make her kick into a higher gear.

Doniger advanced to the 1991 final against Stamford's Karen Durkin, and at one point led 4-up. But Durkin came back to win the championship, and that defeat lingered in Doniger's mind — until she picked up the championship trophy yesterday.

"I wouldn't say what happened last year gave me extra motivation," Doniger said, smiling. "But I wanted to win this tournament very badly."

And she played all week like a young woman intent on capturing the top prize.

She survived two matches that required extra holes, including one in the semifinals. She jumped out to a lead yesterday by shooting a three-over 75 for the first 18 holes, winning the 15th and 16th holes to go 3-up.

"Absolutely, I thought I could still win it going into the final 18," Phillips said. "I thought I'd just hang in there and see what happens. Unfortunately, my putts weren't dropping. I needed birdies to win holes, and I wasn't getting them."

"Anybody can come back from a 3-down deficit," Doniger said. "I've done it, and you just never know what's going to happen. I just had to take it one hole at a time."

Doniger soon built on her lead. On the fourth hole, a 342-yard par-4, Doniger hit a 5-wood from 165 yards to within 12 feet and two-putted for par, while Phillips bogeyed. Doniger also parred the next hole, a 117-yard par-3, while Phillips bogeyed.

And on the sixth-hole, a 476-yard par-5, Doniger placed a 9-iron 15 feet behind the pin and made the birdie putt to go 6-up.

"Even then I wasn't thinking that I had it," Doniger said. "I was thinking I should keep building on the lead."

Phillips made a neat 20-foot putt to save par and halve the seventh hole, and the contestants also halved

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the next two. Doniger went 7-up with a birdie on the the 10th hole, a 319-yard par-4, and after they halved the 11th hole, Doniger won on the 12th. She put her approach shot four feet from the pin, and Phillips conceded after missing her putt for par.

"I played well today, I was pleased," said Phillips, who was playing in the event for the first time. "But Debbie deserved to win. She played wonderfully. I haven't had too much experience in events like these, but I really enjoyed it."

Doniger won the Atlantic Coast Conference championship while

playing for the University of North Carolina earlier this spring, her most significant career accomplishment.

But that doesn't diminish her elation at winning the match play title.

"This is important because this is my neighborhood and I've been playing in this tournament for a while," said Doniger, who plays out of Fairview. "Any win is gratifying, but particularly this one."

A lot of times those words are hollow. Doniger's wide grin indicated hers weren't.

NOTES: Lyn Cook of Round View defeated Diane Ruble, 1-up on the 20th hole, to win the Sanford

Cup. Sixteen players qualified Monday for the championship flight, and the next 16 played for the Sanford Cup.

Doniger has pro aspirations, but has another semester at North Carolina (though no golf eligibility) and plans to remain an amateur for another 1½ or two years. "I have to strengthen my game in all areas," Doniger said. "Distance, consistency with my irons, everything I think could be improved if I'm going to the next level." She plans to work on her game in Florida after graduation and continue to play amateur tournaments next summer.