

Noble hoping WMGA victory is first of many

By JOHN RUYZAM

Karen Noble will be gazing at her future over the next 12 months as she prepares her game for a possible career on the LPGA Tour.

The time table depends on her performances in golf tournaments this summer — she's already tucked away another women's major amateur championship this season — and with her college team in her final campaign at Wake Forest University.

Nine days ago, the 20-year-old resident of Brookside, who works on her game at the Morris County Golf Club in Convent Station, captured the Women's Metropolitan Golf Association Match-Play Championship with a 4-and-3 victory over another young pro aspirant, 23-year-old Maura Waters, at the Somerset Hills Country Club in Bernardsville.

Earlier this season, Waters, a former Rutgers star player, turned her initial foray into local distaff competition into a victory in the Garden State Women's 36-Hole Stroke-Play Championship which she won by 11 shots.

In the WMGA event, it was Noble who prevailed in the predictable final-round clash that was as exciting as any that's been played in recent years.

In the morning round of the 36-hole match on June 17, Noble won the third, eighth and ninth holes, but Waters charged back to win the 11th, 12th and 17th. Noble then rolled in an 12-foot birdie putt on the 18th to go to lunch with a 1-up advantage.

In the afternoon, Noble again surged in the early going, winning the first hole with a 20-foot birdie putt and the third with par, but Waters battled back to slice the lead to 1 up going into what both golfers agreed was the final turning point, the 360-yard 13th hole.

Both golfers missed the green, but Waters chipped to within eight inches and was conceded the par. However, Noble chipped next and holed out from 35 feet for a birdie and a 4-up lead.

"She hit a great shot," recalled Waters, who plays out of Raritan Valley, where she's won the women's club championship twice. "We were both shocked. If I had won the hole, I would have been just 2 down. Instead, I was 4 down."

The 5-4, 125-pound Noble added the WMGA title to a growing list of credentials. She won the 1985 Rutgers Junior Girls, the 1987 New Jersey Women's Amateur and, with her mother Rie, who has made her own big impact in state competition over the years, the WMGA Mother-Daughter Championship last season.

In 1986, she placed second in the state Amateur and advanced into the first round of match-play competition in the U.S. Amateur in Santa Cruz, Calif.

"Karen has the potential to play professionally," offers Morris County head pro David Glenz, a former PGA Tour player, who has won 11 major tournaments in the Metropolitan Area since 1978, including two in New Jersey this season. Glenz, considered one the best golfers ever to compete in the state, has been Noble's teacher for the past four years. "She's solid in all phases of the game and can hit the ball as well as anyone on the LPGA Tour right now. All she needs is the confidence, and she'll develop that with every tournament she wins. She certainly has the talent."

Noble, however, is more humble in assessing her own skills.

"Right now, I'm not really good enough to make it as a tour pro," said last season's MVP and co-captain at golf-rich Wake Forest. "It depends how I play this summer and during the school year and if I continue to improve and win. I'm looking to perform well in the U.S. Amateur and in college tournaments and make a national name for myself."

Waters was impressed with Noble's consistency, her short game and her cool temperament.

"If she happens to make a bad shot," said Waters, "she doesn't let it bother her and recovers quickly."

Noble, who plays to a three handicap, will ride the momentum of her WMGA triumph to the Local Qualifying for the U.S. Women's Open July 8 at

the Montclair Country Club in Clifton. She missed qualifying by three strokes last season.

"I've been working with Glenz on my swing and I'm hitting the ball better now," she said. "At Wake Forest, I got into some bad habits. David noticed them right away. I was bringing the the club away with my hands and not using my upper body."

"I credit the success that I've had to him and his teaching ability. I'm scoring much better now. He explains things to you and makes them easy to understand. He teaches you to feel comfortable when you swing instead of worrying about mechanics."

She says the greatest improvement has been with her putting.

"I've been practicing it a lot. I stand over five-foot putts and try to make 50 of them. Now I don't three-putt too often."

Karen's mother helped identify an era in local women's golf when she won the Garden State Better-Ball of Partners Championship seven times between 1966 and 1974 with Joan Ruvane and again in 1983 with Isabel Mercer.

She's also won the organization's Elizabeth Goss Round-Robin and Stroke-Play titles, the Philadelphia Women's Amateur in 1961 and '63, the 1971 state Amateur and the 1972 New Jersey Women's Golf Association Stroke-Play Championship.

Karen's father, Jim, was a scratch player in his prime. Her brother Jay plays to a seven, while her sister Anne is working on lowering a 20 handicap.

Besides playing on the boys' golf team at Mendham High, Karen also was an All-State field hockey player and competed in basketball. But, she found golf to be the most challenging and enjoyable sport.

Mom introduced her to the game when she was 10 years old.

"She watched me play a few times, but really picked it up on her own," remembers Rie. "She's a natural athlete, so it didn't take her long to become good at golf. But she puts in a lot of time practicing. She's very competitive."

Playing on the professional tour is a goal that Noble wants to achieve, but if that's not to be, she would like to become a lawyer.

"If there is one thing my mother taught me about golf, it's to have fun and enjoy the game," she said. "One day you can play good and the next day bad, but I don't let that bother me. My mother has been playing for a long time and still loves the game. That's what I'd like to do."



Photo by Kevin Murtaugh

Karen Noble practices with an iron at Morris County Golf Club in Convent Station under supervision of David Glenz