

The Remarkable Life and Legacy of Kathy Linney: 1946-1982

by Roberta Bowman

“This is the story of an American athlete you’ve probably never heard of. It’s a story of missed putts and missing the cut. But most of all, this is a story about courage.”

That’s how Rhonda Glenn began her feature on Kathy Linney in 1980. Kathy joined the LPGA tour in 1975. In her best year on tour, 1977, she finished 80th on the money list.

But Kathy Linney’s story isn’t about money; it’s about courage. She died of breast cancer in 1982 at the age of 36. Her story is about facing adversity with a deep sense of purpose, grit, resilience and uncommon grace. It’s also about the LPGA, the motivating power of golf, and a special community of competitors who are also caring friends.

I learned of Kathy from a chance meeting with her brother, Jim. When I later googled “Kathy Linney LPGA,” there wasn’t much to be found. The many articles and interviews that Jim later shared aren’t on the web.

In the 40 years since Kathy’s passing, her memory fades with the passing of those who knew her. But her story is too important to be forgotten. And October is the right month for this remembrance.

A Talented Athlete and Student

The first of the baby boomers, born in Mississippi in 1946, Kathy was the oldest of Bill and Dolly Linney’s three children. The family moved to New Jersey shortly after Kathy came along. The Garden State was home for much of her life.

Outdoorsy and athletic, Kathy played in the neighborhood flag football games with her brothers, Bill and Jim. At 14, she won the Union County Baseball Distance Throw and later was captain of her high school and college basketball teams. Dolly had introduced golf to her family, first at Ash Brook public golf course in Scotch Plains and later at Plainfield Country Club. All three of the Linney kids took to the game.

Kathy was also a gifted student with an aptitude for science and math. She earned second place in the 1963 National Science Fair and went on to Marymount College for her BA and the University of Wisconsin – Madison for a Master’s in computer technology. After college, she worked in IT, first at AT&T in New York and later in Denver with Rocky Mountain Bell.

The Clarity That Comes With Cancer

Kathy's first experience with cancer came as a two-fisted punch. When she was 23, doctors found a cancerous melanoma on her left leg. After a 9-hour surgery, her prognosis was good. No follow-on chemo; just rehab to regain strength and mobility.

But just two days after her surgery, Kathy's father, Bill, died from pancreatic cancer.

Nothing focuses your life priorities like serious illness or the death of a loved one.

Kathy understood her own mortality at a young age. "It occurred to me that I might not have as long on this earth as I'd planned and I better get on with living," she said. "I thought it would be important to go after all the things I wanted to do and not waste time on things that didn't make me happy. I wanted to be as happy as I could be for however long I had left."

Golf was what made Kathy happy. She decided to leave her corporate job in Denver, move back to Plainfield and focus on golf. She became one of the Metro area's top amateurs and qualified for the LPGA tour in 1975.

Life on tour suited Kathy. She enjoyed traveling the country and staying with host families. She made good friends, including Cathy Duggan. Duggan met Kathy when she was shanking golf balls on the range. Duggan offered to help and became a cherished friend to Kathy and her family. "We had a deep, deep friendship; even more than a sister," said Duggan.

"You Have Breast Cancer"

While on tour in 1978, Kathy felt a lump in her breast and saw a couple of different Doctors; each put her mind at ease.

Back home in New Jersey, she went for a biopsy at Sloan Kettering.

Jim Linney will never forget that day: "The surgeon told us 'If it's a short surgery; that will be good news.' Kathy's surgery lasted all day. Her doctor said, 'This is serious. It's cancer and it has spread. In addition to a mastectomy, she'll need radiation and chemotherapy.

"When we saw Kathy that night, she was angry and upset. She'd been asking for a biopsy and the other doctors had dismissed her concerns.

“Sometime the next morning, she spoke with Gene Littler, who’d had cancer and successfully returned to the PGA Tour. By the time we returned to the hospital, Kathy had transitioned to full fight mode: ‘I’m going to beat this thing’, she said.”

It was a long, hard road. Surgeons took a lot of muscle from her right side to remove the cancer. Her rehab and treatment took a year and half. Kathy also had to adjust her golf game, learning to hit fairway woods where she used to hit irons.

“The LPGA Was My Big Family”

As much as Kathy missed playing on tour, the tour missed her.

“As a group, the players stepped forward to do what they could to rally around Kathy. She brought that out in them,” said Duggan.

Tour players donated their pro-am money to help with her expenses. Peggy Conley, a former art teacher, started a newsletter called the “*Linney Line*.” Each week, she’d post a large cardboard in the locker room and players would send messages to Kathy.

“The *Linney Lines* made me realize how much I missed being out there and helped me put up with the tedious part of rehabilitation,” she said.

Back On Tour

Eighteen months after surgery, Kathy returned to the LPGA tour for the 1980 season. At the Birmingham Classic in April, she placed fourth - her best finish as a professional. She’d recently had chemo and the course played long in damp weather, making her performance all the more remarkable.

As Kathy finished the final round, players came out to cheer her on. When she arrived in the locker room, she was greeted by a standing ovation and the warm embrace of her friends on tour.

Then LPGA Commissioner Ray Volpe said, “The whole tour was behind her in Birmingham. If there was ever a time when players would root for someone other than themselves, this was it. They loved that girl.”

The celebration was short-lived. A month after Birmingham, Kathy returned to the hospital. The cancer had spread. She needed a second mastectomy.

Changing the Conversation About Breast Conversation

Breast cancer is a disease often talked about in hushed tones. While the first case of breast cancer can be traced back to ancient Egypt in 1600 BC, it is still prone to misinformation, mythology and sometimes stigma. LPGA members have long been part of changing social norms as role-models or advocates. Kathy Linney became both. She shared what it was like coming back from a mastectomy, the importance of early detection and her approach to living with cancer.

“In a way, fighting cancer is much like competing in golf. Golf taught me to be a competitor. You focus on one shot at a time and give it the best you have. As a cancer patient, I live one day at a time, giving that day the best I have. The quality of my life has been improved because of that,” she said.

While in the hospital for her second mastectomy, there was a chance encounter with sports journalist Pete Axthelm. After the brief meeting, Axthelm dug into Kathy’s history and wrote a column in *Newsweek*, “A Song for Kathy Linney.”

Just days after her surgery, Kathy was interviewed on *Good Morning America*. Later she was featured on the *Today Show, Tomorrow*, which was a late-night program, and the new, all-sports network, ESPN. Kathy’s message was touching people around the country, and many wrote with their thanks and prayers.

After her second mastectomy, Kathy again set her sights on returning to the LPGA. She achieved her goal, but found she was no longer competitive. She played her final tournament, the 1981 Ping Team Championships, alongside Cathy Duggan. “I felt like a spectator”, said Duggan. “I was just watching her play; she was a mountain of determination.”

That summer, Kathy received the Ben Hogan Award from the Golf Writers Association of America for “one of the most inspiring and courageous performances in the history of golf.”

Kathy moved to Houston in the fall of 1981 to work with the contractor planning the LPGA’s new headquarters in Sweetwater, TX. She passed away at MD Anderson Cancer Center on March 15, 1982, with her brother, Jim, and friend, Cathy, at her side.

Honoring Kathy Linney

The LPGA Tour honored Kathy a few weeks later at the Chevron Championship. Play was suspended during the third round to pay tribute.

When the 1987 U.S. Women’s Open was held at Plainfield Country Club - Kathy’s “home course”- she was featured in the program. A special trophy, The Kathy Linney Award, was given to the winner that year, a young pro from England just beginning her career: Laura Davies.

How do you measure the scope of a life? How do you assess the real and lasting impact one person has on the world around her?

Kathy Linney made \$14,825 on the LPGA Tour. Her story was never about money; rather, something more precious and rare. These beautiful words from her eulogy:

“Kathy wasn’t very high on the LPGA money list; she wasn’t really a household name. But what a legacy she leaves. She provided everyone she touched with a deep feeling of what life is really all about. How to accept joy, disappointment, fear and frustration and never let it tarnish your inner self. Let’s not be sad. Kathy fought a tough fight and won a truly great victory with God in heaven. And that’s not a bad audience, even for a little-known professional golfer, not very high on the money list.”

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Roberta Bowman served on the LPGA Board of Directors from 2011-2017 and as the LPGA’s Chief Brand and Communications Officer from November, 2018 – February, 2022.