

Kathy Whitworth



Think about it: Four years after picking up a golf club for the very first time, Kathy Whitworth turned pro. She was THAT good. As she describes her rise from small-town girl in Jal to enduring legend in women's golf, Whitworth makes it all sound like she was blessed by good luck, good friends, good timing. That's true, of course, but it doesn't change the fact that she had a talent and a drive that belied anyone's imagination.

"When I look back on my career," she says, "I wouldn't trade it for the world. I didn't initiate any of it. But when you talk about it, you think, Yeah, maybe it was meant to be." In Whitworth's case, it was meant to be first. As in, first place.

Her golf résumé is just short of outrageous. She won six Ladies Professional Golf Association major titles; established the sport's victory record with 88 tournament titles; became the seventh member of the LPGA Hall of Fame; remains one of the best-known and best-liked ambassadors of the game. In other words, she was Nancy Lopez before there was a Nancy Lopez. Or an Annika Sorenstam. Or a Michelle Wie.

Whitworth, 67, gives great credit to Jal for helping her find the game that would make her famous. Jal Country Club, a nine-hole course carved into the desert, was the perfect place to learn for a 15-year-old. She also ran across the pro there, Hardy Lowdermilk, who would recognize and refine her talent and eventually send her to golfing legend Harvey Penick.

"The beautiful part about growing up in a small town was that golf wasn't expensive and I had access to a golf course where I could learn to play," she says. "Now, if you're at a country club or in a big town or city, it's hard for a young player, especially if their family doesn't live on a golf course and isn't affluent. It was a fortunate thing for me." Whitworth took to the game immediately. "I practiced and played, practiced and played," she recalls.

Soon, she was good enough that she knew she had to leave Jal to truly hone her gift. She says people in town got together, formed a corporation to sponsor her career, and, poof, she was gone: M.C. and Dama Whitworth's kid had a legend to create.

Whitworth now lives in Flower Mound, Texas, and says she doesn't get back to Jal as often as she'd like. But the feelings, the memories, are still there. "Jal was where it all started," she says. "There were so many wonderful people who went through Jal. It will always be close and dear to my heart forever."