

Battling for respect: Ukiah golfers making their mark

By JEFF CASPERSEN, Jr.

The Daily Journal

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Ukiah High School does have a girls golf team. And with representation times three at today's 18-hole North Bay League tournament at Windsor Golf Course, it's safe to say this year's crop of Wildcats are a talented bunch.

Senior captain Kelly Ridgway and juniors Shaun Reid and Kristin Chiles will be making the trek south with first-year girls coach Chris Philbrick to tee off against the NBL's best at noon today.

Philbrick, also the boys golf coach, took over the reins of the girls program this year and has spearheaded a remarkable turnaround of a team that suffered an 0-12 campaign in 2002.

Ukiah wrapped up the 2003 season with a 5-7 record. With the wins have come respect, and a wealth of community support. Philbrick catalyzed the program's metamorphosis by not only emphasizing fundamentals, but by treating his golfers with the respect they deserve.

Prior to this year, the team had only hand-me-down gear at its disposal.

"We've never had our own equipment or anything," recalled Chiles, who has played on the squad in each of her three years at the high school. "We've been wearing the guys crusty, old uniforms since the 80s, I think. The guys get new uniforms and stuff and we never have. This year, we got new shirts, hats. We're getting new bags. We got shoes, windbreakers. We just got a bunch of really nice stuff."

With the help of a deluge of community support, Philbrick has arranged the funding to back such purchases.

"The community has really responded to someone making the effort to establish a girls golf program," the coach said. "The 18- and 19-hole ladies golf groups gave us \$450 and we raised \$700 from the South Ukiah Rotary Club. The Ukiah High Boosters club has helped out. We've had donations of golf clubs, golf shoes just from ladies that want to support the team."

All the money has gone or is going toward the purchase of equipment. New golf bags are next on the list.

Along with the new equipment has come a heightened sense of awareness of the girls program and its success, not only in the community, but at the school.

“They announce us now at school daily,” said Ridgway, who has spent each of her four years at Ukiah High on the team. “Before, they’d announce everyone but us — tennis, football, even cheerleading. You’d never hear anything about the golf team.”

Chiles echoed Ridgway’s sentiments. Both are heartened by the rapid turnaround in attitude.

“It’s such a change,” Chiles said. “We’ve never really been acknowledged at all through the school or the community. At school, people would always be like, ‘We have a girls golf team?’ It’s nice to be acknowledged. The whole community has been there. I think they were waiting for us to get something together and do something so they could get behind us.”

While Ridgway and Chiles have suffered through the bad, Reid is fortunate enough to be hopping aboard the team as it turns the corner. Though a junior, this marks Reid’s first season on the squad. Don’t let the lack of competitive experience fool you. Reid hails from a family of golf enthusiasts, which is, in part, how she developed her skills. She leads the trio of NBL-bound golfers in stroke average (16.9 strokes over par/nine holes), quickly making a name for herself on the prep golf scene.

“My whole family’s golf-oriented,” Reid noted. “My dad plays golf every weekend. My mom played golf every day in the summer. I just kind of got into it, then they helped me along. When I was 12, they used to take me out like every other weekend, though I mostly just liked to drive the cart.”

Talent-wise, Chiles and Ridgway are not far behind Reid. Chiles posted a stroke average of 18.5, while Ridgway averaged 20.7 strokes over par per nine-hole match in the regular season.

Ridgway did not even receive notice that she had earned a slot in the NBL tournament until Saturday, when a phone call from Philbrick delivered the news.

“I was yelling and jumping up and down,” said Ridgway, recalling her reaction. For Chiles, this marks her second trip to the NBL tourney. She also went as a freshman, but acknowledged that that year, she didn’t quite take the opportunity as seriously as she is this time around.

All three girls credit Philbrick with building the program to its current, revamped state.

“It has just changed so much since last year,” Chiles said. “Last year it seemed like a joke, like we were just out there. Our coach, he’s the heart and soul of the team. He’s been awesome.”

Philbrick, who reluctantly accepted the position at the urging of Dave and Joy Sperry, parents of Wildcat golfer Jondie Sperry, now couldn't be happier he took the post.

"He (Dave) pretty much talked me into it," Philbrick joked. "I'm glad he did."

Regardless of what happens on the course today, Philbrick and the current crop of Wildcat golfers have, at long last, made their presence felt in Ukiah.

"We felt like it was really never acknowledged that there was a girls golf team," Ridgway said. "It seemed like no one knew there was a team, really. Now, people know there's a girls golf team."

Contact Jeff Caspersen at 468-3518 or by e-mail at udjsports@pacific.net.