

Could the LPGA be coming back to the North Shore?

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The whispers have been getting louder by the day in recent weeks. The LPGA, after a 15-year absence, is conducting reconnaissance missions on the North Shore seeking a venue for a possible future tournament.

The courses most mentioned are Ferncroft, Turner Hill, Ipswich and Renaissance.

Ferncroft Country Club in Danvers/Middleton/Topsfield was the site of the LPGA's highly successful Boston Five Classic, under the chairmanship of bank head Bob Spiller, and had a glorious 11-year run from 1980 to 1990. But when the club's owner, the same corporate entity that owned the nearby hotel, upped the course usage fee to an exorbitant sum, Spiller said sayonara. The event moved to Blue Hill CC in Canton under the sponsorship of Welch's and Ping through 1997, after which Welch's and the LPGA pulled up stakes.

Ferncroft, under the new, dynamic ownership of Charlottesville, Va.-based Affinity Golf Management, is clearly a focus of the LPGA. Affinity managing director Damon DeVito confirmed for North Shore Golf that the LPGA has conducted a site visit to his 18-hole, Robert Trent Jones Sr. design.

"Their visit appeared to be favorable in every respect," DeVito said. "They liked the course, the ongoing improvements, our future plans and the logistics we offer for an LPGA tournament. But we're only the little leg on the three leg stool that has to be created to make the LPGA's return to Ferncroft work."

The other two legs are the tough part in the current economy: the tournament owner and corporate sponsors. Under current commissioner Carolyn Bivens, the LPGA has become more of an international tour because of the influx of talented Asian players – and one superstar Mexican native, Lorena Ochoa. As a result, the LPGA is playing more events in other parts of the world.

But, as a high-ranking LPGA official told North Shore Golf, the women's tour would always find room for a stop in the Boston area, especially the North Shore, if all the pieces to the puzzle can be found.

"The LPGA remains interested in returning to the Boston area," Mike Nichols, Vice President of Tournament Business Affairs at the LPGA, said. "It's a matter of finding the right combination of tournament owner, corporate sponsor and golf course (the three legs, as DeVito noted) that work together within the constraints of the existing LPGA schedule."

Affinity Golf has spent more than \$2 million on capital improvements since acquiring the club prior to the 2007 season, including a major expansion and upgrading of the practice facility, which ranks high on the LPGA priority list of required amenities for its players. A new irrigation system had already been installed, but Affinity has done a superb job revamping the property from that point forward. Next up: a new clubhouse, which currently is in the engineering and pricing stage.

“We’d certainly welcome the return of the LPGA to Ferncroft,” DeVito said. “The LPGA knows what a great location and course we have, what a fine history of partnering with the LPGA we have. We’ll simply have to wait and see how the LPGA takes it from here.”

This article has been condensed from the original.