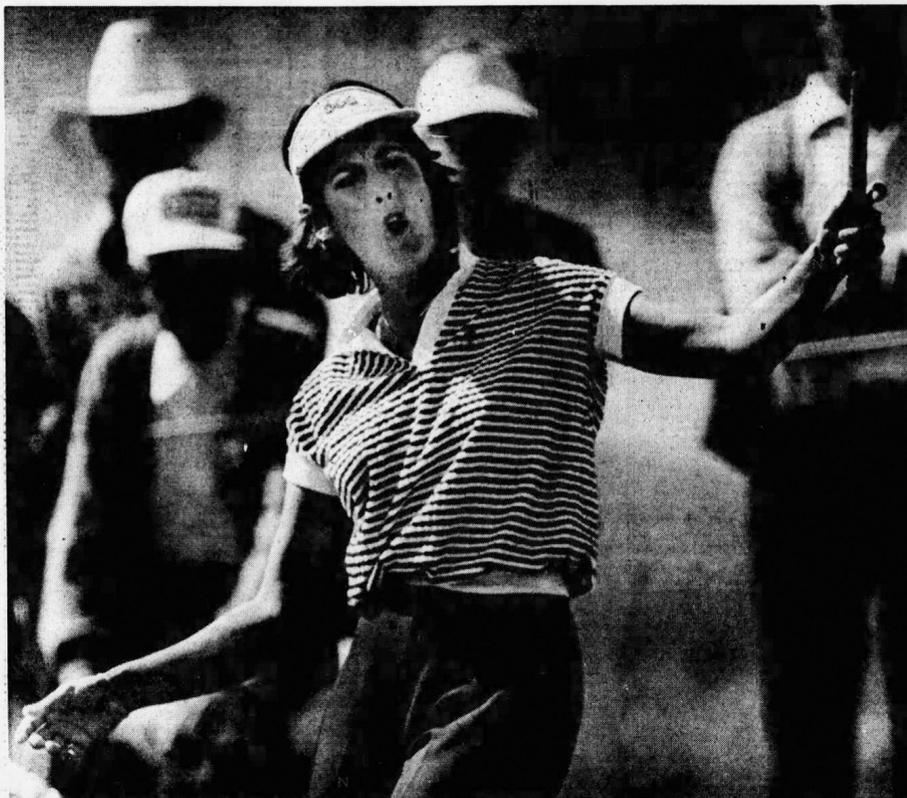


Sports

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Janet Coles grimaces after a failed birdie putt at the 10th hole of the Sun City Classic on Thursday. Coles is tied for third place with 5 other golfers. Jeff Jacobsen/Republic

Sun Devil leads pros at Sun City

By Walt Jayroe

Republic Staff

SUN CITY WEST — And the first-round leader at the Sun City Classic is . . . Lauri Merten-Peterson.

"I looked up on that leader board and I didn't even know who it was," said Janet Coles, a six-year veteran of the Ladies Professional Golf Association Tour.

And neither did a lot of others. But what did you expect after three previous tour rounds at Tucson had been led by a rookie, Patti Rizzo, and a Japanese golfer, Ayako Okamoto?

Merten, you see, is the tour's low life. Twenty-one years old and an amateur, for Petunia's sakes. Her previous accomplishments of note include the Arizona girls high school championship four years ago at nearby Alhambra High and the state women's match-play title in 1980.

And last week, she was runner-up in that big collegiate tournament we've been wondering about up at Fort Ord in California, playing for Arizona State University.

"This is fun, I haven't had this for a long time," she said of the quasi-experience of facing the interview crowd in the press tent.

Her 5-under-par 67 was one stroke ahead of Carole Jo Callison, who made her mark eight years ago as Carole Jo Skala.

Merten, who became hyphenated to Paul Peterson, an employee of a Valley golf-equipment manufacturer, birdied the last three holes to take the lead.

On her last hole, No. 9, she confidently knocked in a 35-foot putt.

"It was my day," she said, "so it went in."

She did not have to look far for encouragement. Her caddy was her

father, George Merten, who brought the family out to Arizona from Wisconsin 17 years ago.

Although Merten lives in the Valley, she said she'd played the Hillcrest course only eight or nine times, including the first Sun City Classic in 1980. She made the cut that year, but said she wasn't invited last year.

"The first two holes I was nervous," she said, "but Dad said, 'You've got to just get into the swing of things.'"

And she did, finishing her morning round with five birdies and no bogeys.

Callison, who won three tournaments in 1974, dropped off the tour for most of two years. But with encouragement from her husband, Verne, she rejoined the tour after changing her game under the tutelage of Bill Ogden, a pro who is based in both Illinois and Florida.

"Basically, I revamped everything," Callison said. "Of course I'm 43, and if I'd been 18 it wouldn't have taken as long."

"There was no way I was going to play well the way I was playing."

Her best finish this year has been 25th. She did that twice, the last time in the Arizona Copper Classic last week in Tucson.

Okamoto, the Copper Classic winner, was tied for third at 69 with Coles, rookie Terri Moody and veterans Pat Bradley, Penny Pulz and Julie Stanger Pyne.

Defending champ Patty Hayes was four strokes back at 71.

But Merten was still the talk of the course. But such old pros as Bradley and Kathy Whitworth hardly raised a brow.

"I just think it's the nature of the game," Bradley said. "Seeing new faces up there is not all that odd these

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