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'Vet' Coles guns for Inamori title

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SAN JOSE — To Janet Coles, yesterday was 1977. She might even have to stop and think how old she is. In fact, it wasn't until she saw it in black and white that Coles realized she's been on the LPGA tour for six years.

"It felt funny the other day when the paper called me a 'veteran,'" said Coles. "I've been playing six year now. But, it seems like I was a rookie a year ago. I'm glad I'm no longer a rookie, but, once a veteran; always a veteran."

Coles doesn't feel her age — 28 — and doesn't look it. Her dark tan and athletic, fit shape gives her more of the look of a UCLA coed — which she was, 10 years ago. Coles is enjoying the best season of her career in the LPGA, with more top 10 finishes (eight) and more money (\$68,674.67) than ever before. But, it hasn't all been easy.

"Basically, I taught myself to play golf on the tour," says Coles, this week playing in the third Inamori Golf Classic at Almaden Golf and Country Club. Of course, there have been others who have done the same thing, she says, naming "Sandra Palmer, Janie Blalock — all the older ones. The newer players come out now already seasoned. They have come up through the junior programs and the college tournaments. They have already learned how to play competitively. That's the name of the game. You have to learn how to play in competition."

Coles was born in Carmel, moved with

her family to Aptos and went to high school in Watsonville, graduating in 1972. At that time, there wasn't an extensive junior golf program for girls, meaning Coles didn't have too much competition in winning the NorCal Girls' Junior from 1968 through 1971. The next year, she was ranked the No. 4 women's amateur in the country and went on to play at UCLA, where she also played basketball. But, it wasn't until Coles qualified for the LPGA tour in the winter of 1977 that she discovered how much work golf could be.

Coles has developed into one of the most solid players in the tour. But, having won only once, in the 1978 Lady Tara in Atlanta, she hasn't achieved "star" status. Coles' career earnings is an indication of her consistency. She has made \$246,880 in six seasons. Nancy Lopez, who qualified for the tour in the summer of 1977, has won 23 times, but has earned less than four times what Coles has.

This year has been somewhat of a comeback season for Coles. In 1981, she won \$47,539, which was about an \$11,000 dropoff from the previous year, when Coles was 17th on the final 1980 money list. The difference? "It's been my attitude," Coles says.

"This year, I'm more relaxed when I get into contention," says Coles, who has had the one-round-jinx in the past, where one bad round has meant the difference in possibly winning a tournament instead of just placing in the top 10 or top 20. "I have had some good finishes and have placed in the top 20 consistently (in 16 of the 25 events she's played, missing the cut only once).

"I took a lot of time off at the beginning of the year," she says, of her not playing until the fifth week of the tour season. "I wanted to get some things in order in my life. It's hard to say it, because people take it so wrongly, but it is because I became a Christian a couple years ago. It made my goals more important to me."

Coles has a definite plan for the rest her career. Four more years after this and she expects to retire. "I will play 10 years — that will be enough of a career," she says. Coles won't follow in the footsteps of, say, a JoAnne Carner, who at age 43 is the leading money winner on the tour.

For Coles, who still calls Carmel home and plays out of Carmel Valley Ranch, there is more to life than golf. She has a degree in kinesiology from UCLA, is an avid skier and runner.

"It's easy to make golf number one in your life, but that's a dead-end street. You get to be 40 and where are you? I'm still going to be somebody. Just because I'm not 'Janet Coles the professional golfer' doesn't mean anything. If my significance is only that I am a golfer, then I am going to have to play the rest of my life."

One idea for her future is developing a golf camp for young girls. There, she could teach the things she had to learn on her own. "Playing golf is the easy part," she says. "I know how to do that and am skilled at it. It's the in-between part; being away from home 40 weeks a year. It's not easy."

And it's the same, for a young rookie, or an old rookie.