

Steve Weller
sports columnist



Big Mama unhealthy but wealthy

NORTH MIAMI BEACH — Janet Coles looked like she'd just won a trophy at her makeup table. Jane Bialock was busy reinforcing her Chapstick. JoAnne Carner was working on a cigarette and an appreciative gallery.

All three were on the first tee at Turnberry Isle Sunday. The first two were on a thankless errand. Their assignment: pick up five strokes on Carner and keep her from turning the Elizabeth Arden Classic into her 41st LPGA victory.

Was there any reason to bother? Looking back, no. But at noon it seemed like a good idea.

Saturday, when Carner was about to lap a slew of rivals who could have hit the ball better with pool cues, she stepped back to admire her work and almost fell off the back nine, losing five shots in five holes.

She blamed it on a lapse in concentration. But part of the problem was a lapse in the condition of one more of her 45-year-old parts.

Last week at Deer Creek it was shin splints. Sunday it was the deltoid muscle in her left shoulder that she injured halfway through the third round.

Two healthy challengers. One leader smuggling a pint of DMSO, the magic horse liniment, in her golf bag. The perfect comeback scenario? Not exactly.

From a family doctor's point of view, Big Mama is a mess. From a competitive standpoint, Carner's peers have seen too many birdies work their way out around her back spasms, pulled muscles and other ailments.

"When I heard JoAnne was hurting I knew that was the kiss of death," Bialock said when day was done. "You have to look out for the sick ones. When you don't feel good, you tend to play within yourself."

Coles echoed that sentiment but her first swing served notice she didn't mind attacking a wounded rival.

On the LPGA Tour, the average tee shot produces a "thunk, bzz."

When Coles hit her first ball Sunday, the sound was "Crack, bbbzzzz."

If Arnold Palmer had been there he'd have hitched his pants and proclaimed, "The game is on."

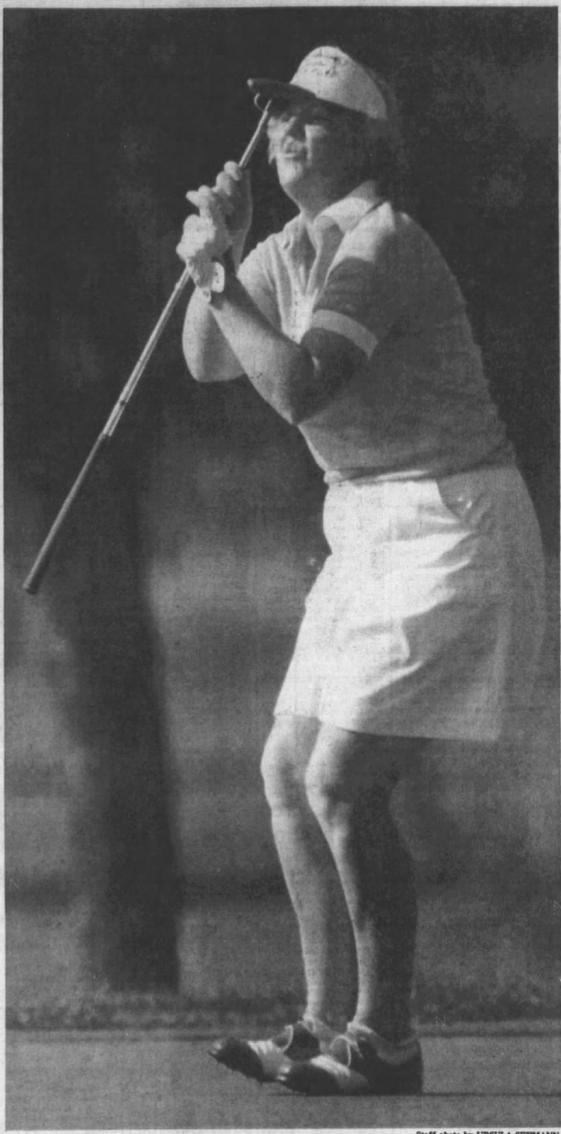
What Coles did was walk down the fairway and find her ball 15 yards short of the crippled Carner's.

Bialock wasn't surprised.

"JoAnne was hitting the ball 50 yards farther than I was. She told me she was using her driver on every hole so she wouldn't have to hit long irons, which had been giving her trouble. It certainly worked."

Trailing by six shots after three holes, Coles got serious, hitting her approach on

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Staff photo by URSULA SEEMANN

JoAnne Carner reacts after missing putt on No. 15. Carner coasted to six-shot victory.

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No. 4 just 5 feet from the cup. Take that, JoAnne.

Carner took it, winced on her backswing and knocked a shot 2 feet from the pin.

"She did that to me all day," Coles conceded. "I thought I was charging but I wasn't getting anywhere."

On a cloudless day when one patch of shade was worth two clear views of the action, some semblance of a contest was needed to keep the crowd's attention.

For nine holes Coles actually did charge, pulling within three shots on No. 7 and staying there through the turn.

Then, on the 10th green, Carner backed away from a birdie putt. A glimmer of hope? Was the woman who was LPGA Rookie of the Year in 1970, at the advanced age of 30, wearing out?

She went ahead and made the

birdie, Coles bogeyed and, for all practical purposes the tournament was over.

"If nothing happens pretty soon," a man grumbled, "I'm going home and watch the Crosby [men's tournament] on television."

Coles kept him hanging around with a birdie on No. 11. She was just teasing him. Her last hurrah was the sound of little ripples lapping against a grassy bank as her second shot went into the water near the 15th green.

From that point she went from an uncatchable second place to a three-way tie for third.

Blalock, plagued by periodic duels with Turnberry's sand, and defending champion Patty Sheehan were second, six shots back of a beat-up Big Mama. •

"It's tough, getting old," Carner said after she'd tied the Turnberry tournament record at 8-under 280.

At 45, those \$30,000 checks feel like they weigh a ton.

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