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Playing through to the hall of fame

Juli Inkster:
The making
of a
all-around
champion

By Kirsten Fairchilds

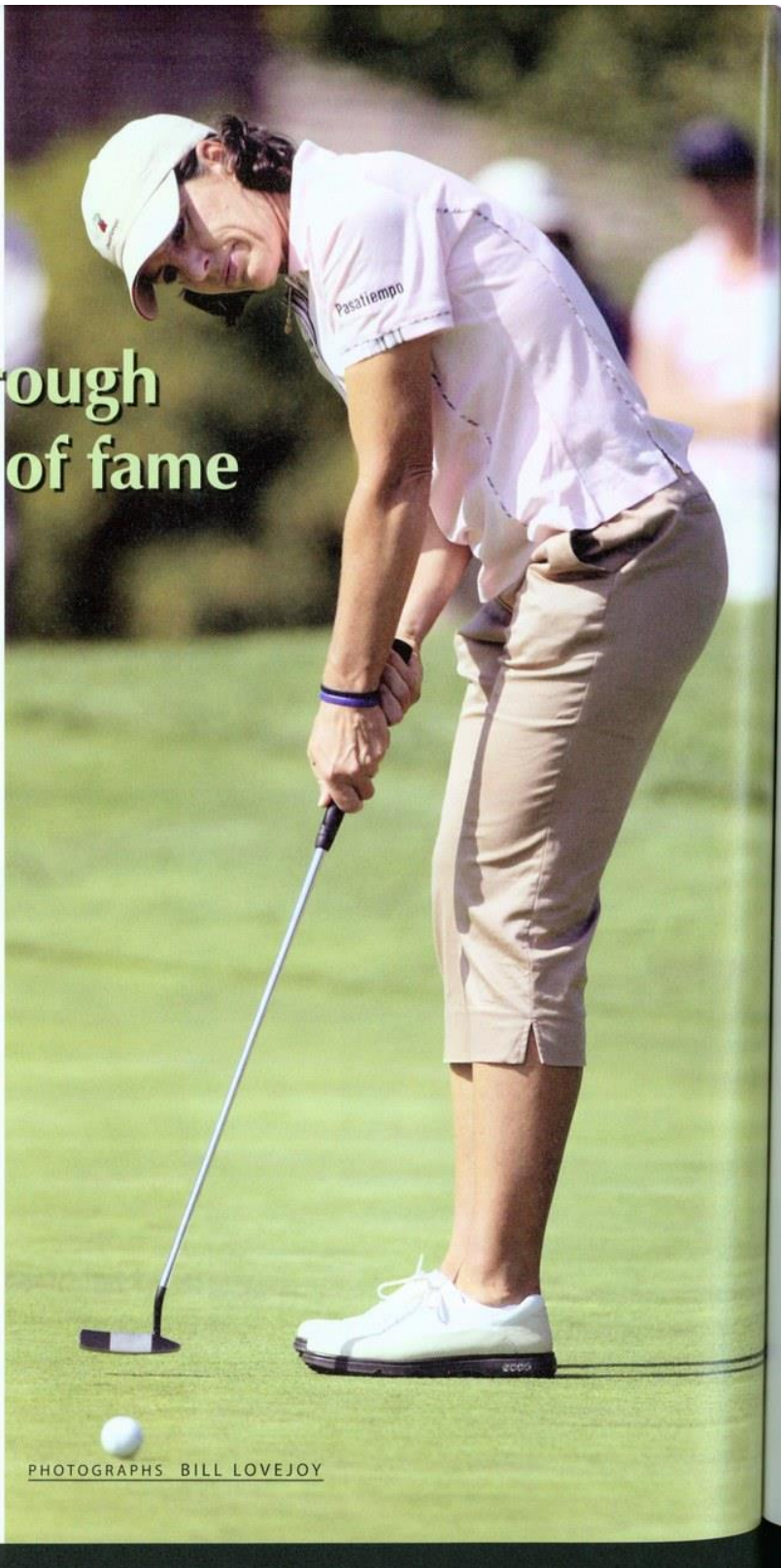
Given that many first loves do not last forever, it may come as no surprise that professional golfer Juli Inkster reluctantly parted ways with hers while still a teenager. The surprise comes when Inkster reveals what her first love actually was.

"Basketball," Inkster said firmly. "Basketball was my first love."

Her four years of playing basketball at Harbor High School faded in the shadow of the 31 titles and more than \$13 million in career prize money earned on the LPGA Tour, which landed Inkster in the World Golf Hall of Fame back in 2000. Now 51 and amidst her longest break from the game — she's recuperating from elbow surgery — she is not yet finished with the sport that was the third she played

Juli Inkster's list of victories consists of seven major championships including the 1999 and 2002 U.S. Opens.

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in high school (she ran track as a freshman).

"I got a job parking carts up at the golf course and picking up the range when I was 15," said Inkster, whose childhood home was located on Pasatiempo Golf Club's 14th fairway. "There were a bunch of boys who went to my school that played there, and I just started playing. I got pretty good at it pretty quickly. I was a competitive, goal-oriented kid, and golf was a perfect fit for me. It just intrigued me."

Harbor didn't have a girls' golf team at the time, so Inkster played on the boys team, but it wasn't her idea.

"Floyd Sluiter was the boys' coach, and he called my parents and asked if I was thinking about trying out for the team," said Inkster, whose last name was Simpson back then. "It had never occurred to me. He pushed me to play. I made the junior varsity team in my sophomore year. The guys on my team were cool with it, but the guys I played against weren't. They didn't want to get beaten by a girl. But by the time I got to varsity, everyone was used to me."

Inkster was still in high school when she met her eventual husband, Brian Inkster, who had started working at Pasatiempo Golf Club as an assistant pro. The couple married before her junior year at San Jose State University, where she played four years on scholarship. They have two daughters: Hayley, 22, and Cori, 18.

While her accomplishments as both an amateur and as a professional are numerous

— highlights include capturing three consecutive U.S. Women's Amateur titles as well as winning seven majors as a pro, including the 1999 and 2002 U.S. Open — Inkster is also noteworthy for both her longevity and being one of the first full-time mothers to compete on the LPGA Tour.

Danville resident Pat Hurst, currently in her 18th year on the LPGA Tour and also a mother, is a close friend.

"A lot of the young girls on the tour view Juli as a mentor, but she's also a mentor to the older women because those that are mothers really respect what she's done," Hurst said. "She showed that it was possible to excel as both a player and a mother." Nine years younger than Inkster, Hurst, 43, also played at San Jose State.

"It just happened that I went to San Jose State on the Juli Inkster scholarship," Hurst said. "I like to say that I'm forever on scholarship with her."

While she describes Inkster as "competitive, athletic and very motivated" in terms of her career, Hurst used another adjective to describe her friend away from the game.

"Juli never leaves her wingman," Hurst said. "She's very loyal. She also likes to have fun."

Although Inkster lives with her family in Los Altos — her husband is the head pro at Los Altos Golf and Country Club — she visits her family in Santa Cruz as often as she can. Her plans are to rejoin the tour this summer after fully recovering from her January

Juli's childhood home was located on Pasatiempo's 14th fairway and she is currently Pasatiempo's LPGA touring professional.

surgery to reattach a tendon in her elbow. When she does, she will continue to be seen with Pasatiempo Golf Club's name on her hats and shirt. She is the club's LPGA touring professional.

"Juli has a lot of roots here," said Ken Woods, Pasatiempo Golf Club's head pro. "It has really benefited Pasatiempo to have her as an ambassador. She's so great with the fans and the media — we're lucky to have her."

Woods credited club member Jerry Maurer with helping to establish a formal relationship with Inkster to represent Pasatiempo Golf Club in the golf world.

"Juli wears our emblem on her shirt," Maurer said. "She wears our hats and carries our bag. She always takes an ample supply of hats on tour and hands them out to avid fans. We've had a number of write-ins or calls at Pasatiempo to ask for some sort of memorabilia from her. It's been a great vehicle for us having her out there championing the golf course."

With no immediate plans to retire from the tour, Inkster hopes she can regain her winning form.

"I'm feeling good," said Inkster, who still counts basketball among the sports she loves. "I'm not sure if I'll get back to where I was before, but I'll give 110 percent and see what happens. I love to play." ♦