

LPGA event's crisis unites rescue effort

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Now that the LPGA's Fieldcrest Cannon Classic is here with its \$550,000 purse secured, its 1,000 volunteers in place and 13 of the top 20 money winners in the field, it can be appreciated as a survivor.

Six weeks ago, the Fieldcrest Cannon Classic was on its deathbed, victimized by the sudden demise of the company that owned it. Now it's on schedule to start Thursday at the Peninsula Club.

"Was it in jeopardy? Absolutely," LPGA Commissioner Jim Ritts said.

Trouble hit the tournament sud-

denly. Del Wilber & Associates, the company that owned and operated the Fieldcrest Cannon Classic, three other LPGA events, the Ice Capades and other sports-related events, suddenly went out of business in mid-August.

A company of more than 100 employees based in McLean, Va., and St. Louis, DWA ceased operation on a Friday afternoon with no warning.

It was, Ritts said, unprecedented. The other DWA tournaments had already been played and there was plenty of time to

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secure their status for 1998 and beyond. But the Fieldcrest Cannon Classic was in crisis.

Ken Haines, vice president of Raycom Sports, was driving near the Arboretum when his car phone rang. A DWA employee broke the news that the company was disbanding.

"I asked if it had any impact on the tournament here," Haines said. "The person said, 'Yes. We won't be involved.'"

"There was an initial period of shock. It's hard to imagine a company going out of business that quick. They were just gone."

Raycom, which brought in Fieldcrest Cannon as the title sponsor in 1995, had played a support role in the tournament operation until DWA disappeared.

"But it didn't take long to dawn on me that there was no one to operate this tournament and to pay the bills," Haines said.

There was one other problem. The \$550,000 purse had already been paid by Fieldcrest Cannon to DWA, in accordance with LPGA rules. When the company folded, the purse vanished.

If the tournament was to survive, another purse had to be found and the massive staging process had to be jump-started.

For 10 days, officials from Raycom, Fieldcrest Cannon and the LPGA burned up phone and fax lines. The prospects looked grim initially.

"Ultimately, it came down to the LPGA's desire to make it work in Charlotte and Raycom being headquartered in Charlotte," Ritts said.

An agreement was reached for Raycom to assume ownership of the Fieldcrest Cannon Classic as well as the other events previously owned by DWA.

By taking over the other events (in Sacramento, Calif.; St. Louis and Florida), Raycom will have the chance to recoup any losses it might suffer from the Fieldcrest Cannon Classic while increasing its presence with the LPGA Tour.

"To us, it's worth the risk," Haines said.

But getting here has been hectic, nerve-racking and inspiring.

When the crisis arose, Haines immediately called Bob Hamilton, division vice president of marketing at Fieldcrest Cannon. The company wanted to save the tournament an effective market-

TODAY'S EVENTS

Several of the top players in the Fieldcrest Cannon Classic will participate in a special six-hole event at 3 p.m. today at the Peninsula Club.

Kris Tscheter, Donna Andrews, Tina Barrett, Cindy Figg-Currier, Jane Geddes, Rosie Jones, Barb Mucha, Terry-Jo Myers, Dottie Pepper and Kelly Robbins are scheduled to play in the Gillette Tour Challenge. The event features two-player teams playing for an \$8,000 first prize.

In a related event, Kerry Jones of High Point will have a 10-foot putt for \$25,000 after the Tour Challenge.

Admission is free today.

cializes in towels and targets a strongly female audience.

It wasn't feasible for Fieldcrest Cannon to spend another \$550,000. The company helped with purse money but Raycom, which made a major financial commitment, appealed to area companies to help save the tournament. It worked.

Harris-Teeter, Bell Atlantic Mobile, Duke Energy, Coca-Cola Consolidated and others came forward.

But staging a golf tournament involves more than finding a course and putting up a purse.

The operating budget for the Fieldcrest Cannon Classic is approximately \$1 million (including the purse). It costs \$25,000 for tents, \$50,000 for hospitality and \$15,000 for security.

Pro-am spots must be sold, courtesy cars must be arranged, the course must be roped off, trailers must be put in place and, perhaps most importantly, an enormous volunteer base is required.

"There wasn't a lot of knowledge about what had and hadn't been done because they (DWA) just evaporated," Haines said.

Raycom committed most of its staff to the tournament. With experience in staging events such as the Carquest Bowl and the Harris-Teeter/Pepsi Challenge basketball tournament, the company had a sense of what was involved.

Officials from two other LPGA events were brought to town to

dividuals and companies that hadn't previously been involved with the tournament called and offered to help.

Daily meetings became routine. Managers checked on everything from lunch plans for volunteers to evacuation routes in case of a storm to the placement of portable toilets.

Time and efficiency were critical. Once the plan of operation was put into place, it developed its own momentum.

"The only thing I can liken it to is living in New York City during the two blackouts," Hamilton said. "You would have imagined there would be looting and robbing but the opposite was true. Statisticians said it was the lowest crime rate in the history of the city."

"People who had no interest in golf came out of the woodwork and helped. Maybe (what happened) wasn't such a bad thing. There's an energy and emotion with this that I've not seen."

Ritts compares it to a political campaign that builds momentum near election day when it senses victory.

Now it's time to perform. The event has received solid support in its first two years and officials are hopeful of drawing 35,000 to 40,000 spectators for the week.

That's what it drew two years ago with ideal weather. Last year, the threat of rain diminished the crowd slightly.

This is an important year for the tournament. The original three-year contracts with Fieldcrest Cannon and the Peninsula Club expire after this event.

All sides have expressed an interest in continuing the tournament but no decision will be made until after the event. Ritts said the LPGA wants to release its 1998 schedule soon and wants to resolve the status of the Charlotte event before doing so.

"We really haven't talked about the future because everything has been focused on '97," Ritts said. "Everything has been very single-minded."

It's possible, Ritts said, that the desperate situation this year might ultimately work in the tournament's favor.

"There's an irony here," he said. "You never choose to go through an extreme financial situation like this, but the reality is this tournament has probably never been so visible in Charlotte."

"There's a chance the community will rise to embrace it because of what happened."