

Former golf legend in Aurora

By John Cudmore
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For a half-dozen up-and-coming young female golfers, it was a chance to see greatness in their sport up close.

Ever since placing among the top six finishers at the Ontario Summer Games in Sudbury earlier this summer, Tuesday has been a red-circle date with the payoff a chance to play golf with two of the best female players in the world.

It was also a day to which LPGA star Natalie Gulbis could easily relate.

Hey, sitting front row for a 40-minute clinic, leisure chit-chat and invaluable tips from retired superstar Annika Sorenstam and Gulbis, how does it get any better?

Well, a chance to partner with the professionals for three holes ain't bad.

It was part of the fourth Scotiabank Women's Charity Challenge at Magna Golf Club in Aurora, an event that raised \$200,000 for women's charities, driving the four-year total for the event beyond the \$900,000 mark.

The event resonated *deja vu* for Gulbis with good reason.

"I first met Annika when I was 12 in a pro-am event," recalled Gulbis, who, at 27, is not much older than the guest juniors. "She really, really made an impression on me. I'd look at a picture of her before practising to motivate me, so I do understand the impact a day like this can make. It makes a big difference."

After nine holes in the morning with sponsors for Sorenstam and Gulbis, then lunch, the talented teenagers had front row seats as the stars shared secrets, ranging from practice tips — Sorenstam was fond of having her caddy shag range shots with a baseball glove — to technique — Gulbis learned to grip a club as if it were a tube of toothpaste. Then they got to play three holes each with and against Sorenstam and Gulbis.

"We're on the same path to training and today we're seeing people doing this for a living," said Markham resident Meghan McDougall, 16, the runnerup at the summer games. "Just being in the presence of such great players and knowing how they expect to win is great."

Similar sentiments were expressed by Vivian Tsui, 16, also a Markham resident. Both girls attend Bill Crothers Secondary School in Unionville and both played holes 13 through 15 with the pros.

"It's just an honour to come and play and just watch and see how they handle themselves," Tsui said. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be able to talk with them and play with them."

That's probably what Gulbis thought, too, when she met Sorenstam for the first time under similar circumstances.

"We became best friends on tour, even rented homes together," she recalled.

The moment is not lost on Sorenstam.

"I think it adds a great element to the day," said Sorenstam, considered to be among the best female athletes ever, before retiring in 2008. "These girls are young, need to play regularly and will improve their fundamentals. It takes time."

So, does the mother of a one-year-old yearn to make a comeback?

"No, I do not miss it," she said, emphatically. "Not the travel and grinding or other things. It takes a lot of time. I achieved what I wanted to in golf 100 per cent. There's lots of other things I wanted to do."



Pro lessons. LPGA golfer Natalie Gulbis (left) and former great Annika Sorenstam offer tips at the Magna Golf Course in Aurora Sept. 21. They were part of the fourth annual Scotiabank Women's Charity Challenge. *Staff Photo/Steve Somerville*