Family tees off with new 'Golfer Girl' magazine

by Tod Leonard

When it came to a vote, Claude Hooton never had a chance.

The only male in a family of five, he should have known better than to mix the passions of his wife, Michelle, and their three girls.

COVER GIRLS - Libby (from top), Chloe Bell and Courtney Hooton display their magazine's inaugural issue in their circulation department (aka the family's garage). CNS Photo by Scott Linnett. Talk golf with the Hooton children - Libby, 16, Courtney, 13, and Chloe Belle, 10 - and their eyes sparkle with joy. Put their sport together with fashion, writing and photography, and their enthusiasm goes off the charts.

So when their dad laughingly suggested a couple of years ago that the San Diego County family start a golf magazine for girls, it was a gimme that his effort at entrepreneurial whimsy would be met with a thoughtful silence ... followed by squeals of "Let's do it!" A shopping spree at Nordstrom would not have gone over any better.

"My dad was joking, but we all took it very seriously," Courtney said. "This is something we really wanted to do."

After months of late nights, countless hours of work and thousands of dollars spent, the Hootons have self-published the premier issue of GolferGirl Magazine, a quarterly they hope will eventually reach a sizable portion of the reported 2 million girls in the U.S. who have picked up a golf club.

"People said we should do an e-newsletter or a pamphlet, but our thought was that we're going to do this right or not do it at all," said Claude Hooton, an executive in a real estate company that owns medical office buildings on the West Coast.

"We hope that this gives other girls a sense of community. The thought is, 'You're not the only one out there. Maybe you only have five girls in your tournament. But there are thousands of girls like you across the country.'"

The inaugural 72-page magazine features junior golf star MacKinzie Kline on the cover. It is slickly produced and brightly colored, and is packed with player profiles, features, advice columns and instruction.

Even the ads are eye-catching, like those for Ogio's pink "Diva" golf bag and Glove It's matching gloves and visors for junior girls. Possibly most important to the Hooton women: There are lots and lots of clothes to ogle.

"There is no sport that has better clothes!" Michelle Hooton said with a laugh.

The Hootons have been loyal competitors in the San Diego County Junior Golf Association for about seven years. Libby is a two-time Most Valuable Player on The Bishop's School girls team; Courtney is the No. 1-ranked player this summer in the SDJGA's 13-14 Division; Chloe Belle is No. 2 in the 9-10 Division.

Courtney and Chloe Belle qualified for the recent Callaway Junior World Championships, where their magazine will go in all of the tee-prize bags.

When Golf for Women magazine arrives at their home, the girls rifle through it for different reasons. Courtney looks for the latest fashion lines, while Libby is fascinated by the celebrity and player profiles.

And that's how their jobs for Golfer Girl are broken down: Libby is the editor-in-chief who did the interview with Kline and other writing and editing. She once won a Mutual of Omaha children's writing award in Colorado for her story about a baby killer whale. Courtney is the fashion editor who coordinated an eight-page layout that features herself, Chloe Belle and many of their friends. The reaction they'e received from their peers has been gratifying.

"We've had the magazines (distributed) at our tournaments, and to see all these girls looking at it ... It's really exciting to think, 'That's my magazine,'" Courtney said. "It's something to be proud of."

The Hootons contend that despite golf's growing popularity in the Tiger Woods era, a girl playing the sport can still face some teasing. Chloe Belle said she had a P.E. teacher who said golf wasn't a "real" sport.

"Some people says it's for old grandpas," Courtney said. "When they say it's so easy, they don't understand. You're out there walking for five hours, trying to focus so hard, and the pressure and the stress you have out there is crazy. I think it's one of the hardest sports you can have."

They are hoping to use the magazine to not only entertain, but to educate girls on the inner workings of golf. In future issues, they plan to feature college teams, as well as run advice on how to enter junior tournaments and choose a golf camp.

"It definitely makes it more cool and interesting for girls," Courtney said. "I read about a girl in our magazine who can shoot 69, and that makes me want to go and say I can do that. That's our mission - to inspire girls to want to do more."

The magazine has been a significant investment for the Hootons. They estimate they spent at least $15,000 for this first issue and countless hours soliciting subscription and ad sales. "Our mission is not to make money

with this, although we'd hope to break even at some point," Michelle said.

"We need to find that critical mass of girls," Claude added. They printed 10,000 copies and are distributing them through the USGA-LPGA Girls Golf program and other junior golf tournament organizations. They were buoyed by the positive reaction they got from golf's highest levels, and were thrilled to get as a playing editor Suzy Whaley, the Connecticut teaching pro who made national headlines when she qualified for the PGA Tour's 2003 Greater Hartford Open.

The challenge now: Getting that second issue out, since the first one was years in the planning.

Claude Hooton good-naturedly rolls his eyes at the machine he inadvertently created.

"The day we got the magazines back from the printer, we were up to 12 or 1 in the morning thinking about the next one," he said.

For more information on the magazine, go to www.golfergirlmagazine.com.

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