

# A decade since its rebirth, ShopRite LPGA Classic continues to thrive

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GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — The ShopRite LPGA Classic began its second act nine years ago.

It wasn't the best time to revive a sports event.

The Atlantic City region was still feeling the effects of the 2008 recession.

The LPGA Tour consisted of just 24 events and \$41.4 million in prize money, compared with 33 events and a record \$70.55 million in tour wide prize money in 2019.

“We didn't come back at the best time,” said Tim Erensen, managing partner of Eiger Marketing Group, which owns and operates the Classic. “We got a few funny looks along the way.”

Still, the ShopRite LPGA Classic not only survived but prospered.

The 31st Classic will be held Friday through Sunday on the Bay Course at Seaview Hotel.

The \$1.75 million tournament continues to be one of South Jersey's most successful national events. The Classic is shown nationally on the Golf Channel, which always mixes in shots of the Atlantic City beaches, Boardwalk and casinos.

The Classic began in 1986, with ShopRite becoming the title sponsor in 1992. It disappeared from 2007 through 2009, mostly because of a dispute over dates between former Classic organizers and the LPGA.

The tournament returned in 2010 with 300 sponsors. It now has more than 450, according to tournament organizers. The Classic's two-day pro-am is the largest of any golf tour, with more than 1,500 amateur rounds being played at four Atlantic County courses.

“The foundation was here,” Erensen said. “We knew it was going to be a slow build. We intended to be here for a long time, but you never know how it's going to work out.”

Through the Classic, ShopRite has raised more than \$34 million for New Jersey charities, including the Community FoodBank of New Jersey.

The Classic has agreements with ShopRite, the LPGA and Seaview to continue the event through 2023.

With the Classic about to be held for the 10th time since its return, Erensen last week spoke about the tournament's past, present and future.

**What is the current state of the Classic?**

We knew that Galloway and Atlantic City had missed the LPGA, but what we quickly realized is how much the LPGA missed coming back to Atlantic City. The way we were welcomed back in 2010 to where we are now, the support has only gotten better. Our retention rate of partners and sponsors is 96 or 97%. To me, that tells us the program is working, the people who are investing their money in us, the event and the LPGA continue to come back.

### **How much stability does ShopRite give the Classic?**

It (the revival of the Classic) would not have worked without ShopRite. They're such a proud, family-oriented business. They don't like to toot their own horn. They're looking to be good partners to the community. We're super fortunate to be along for the ride. They give us a chance to invest in our event. The trick is getting the commitment from them. The rest is easy. We're putting on a good show.

### **What does it take to successfully market the LPGA?**

The LPGA in the sports business is always one of the hardest initial sales. Television numbers aren't great. Attendance numbers aren't great. The PGA Tour is out there. We don't have Tiger Woods playing. But when we get people out, 96 or 97% of the time they come back. To me, that shows it's working.

### **It seems like today the tournament sells the total event and not just one LPGA star.**

What's best for the game? Is it better when you had Annika (Sorenstam) winning eight or nine times a year, or is it better when the fields are deep and it's so competitive? We'll have half the field that has a legitimate chance of winning this week. We have 30 or 40 new players in the field every year. Your lifespan on the LPGA Tour is relatively short. It's about the overall experience and not a particular player or two.

### **The LPGA this year has 20 events in the United States and 13 in foreign countries. What challenges does being a global tour present? Some might argue the LPGA doesn't get enough attention in the U.S.**

Every sports organization on the planet, the NBA, is trying to go global. The NHL is playing games all over the place. The NFL is trying to do the same thing. Everybody is trying to figure out how to grow their business globally. The LPGA has been a leader in that from the beginning, and somehow it's almost viewed as a negative because they've been successful at it. It's creating great opportunities for these ladies to showcase their game to a global audience.

### **Where do you see the Classic 10 years from now?**

I think we just want to continue to make things better. Do a better job for our partners, which in turn will make it a better experience for the LPGA, and at the end of the day that means we can help ShopRite raise more money for the community.

### **Plenty of professional sporting events in and around Atlantic City have failed. The Classic has survived and prospered. Any special satisfaction in that?**

We've done it without the support of the CRDA (Casino Reinvestment Development Authority) money and Atlantic City Alliance money. They were much more focused on bringing new events to the market. But looking back, I'm glad we didn't have it. You become dependent on it, and when it goes away, it's game over. I'd love to see over the next five years (Atlantic City) really pick up and see how (the region) can really use the (Classic) to showcase Atlantic City. If we see some support from that broader community, we could do some really neat things.

### **What impact do you see sports gambling having on the Classic?**

It's definitely coming. I think it's a big opportunity for us because of the partnership we have with the (Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa) and our proximity to the casinos. It's an exciting time for golf and sports in general. I know the (LPGA) is still trying to figure out what their policy is. I think that the next five years will be a changing landscape not only (for the Classic) but for golf in general. I think (sports gambling) will bring a whole new audience to the sport. To be able have our pro-am party at the Borgata and be able to have the odds on who's playing at the sportsbook. To me, it can only enhance the experience.