THE DAILY CLIPS

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A prime time player

East Carolina women’s golf coach earned a spot in the reality TV golf show, The Big Break.

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector

Kim Lewellen is living with a secret.

It’s no secret that she is a competitive golfer, former All-American at North Carolina, former pro on the European Tour and former men’s and women’s coach at The Citadel. The secret lies somewhere beneath the freshest lines of ink on Lewellen’s resume, the same resume she used when she became head women’s coach at East Carolina a few months ago.

That most recent previous employment for this married mother of two was — gasp — reality TV.

But there were no drunken jousts, no hot tub antics and basically nothing she’ll ever have to learn to live with in this particular chapter in TV’s real-life on-screen mania.

When the fifth edition of the Golf Channel’s The Big Break airs starting tonight, Lewellen will be doing on reality TV what she’s been doing her whole life — trying to hit better shots and have a more consistent golf swing than anyone around her — but her secret life of last October in Hawaii will unravel as it does.

This show pits hopeful LPGA Tour players against one another in traditional elimination format, and as with any reality TV, it does so in a scenario that plants plenty of seeds for drama.

“I think I’m a safe character, but I don’t know,” said Lewellen, 34, originally from Raleigh.

“You have to wait and see, but there is a little bit of drama. I don’t think I’m in that much of it, but you don’t know how the characters are going to be developed.”

With LPGA Tour exemptions on the line for Lewellen and 10 others, the outcome of The Big Break V is still a mystery to all but those 11 women and the staff on the show. Lewellen insists that even her family has no idea what happened to her when she was in Hawaii.

“They’ve been excited, but it’s different because it’s already happened for me,” she said of her family’s interest in the show, which will be quenched somewhat tonight when the family gathers for a premier party that will also include ECU golfers. “But I can’t tell anyone. And it may be even different from how I experienced it. My family doesn’t even know. My mom doesn’t know if her daughter’s going to be on the next show from week to week.”

Lewellen was given the idea for the show by a friend, and she soon found herself swinging all sorts of shots in a frantic audition with some 4,000 other hopefuls for the show in Orlando, Fla.

She admitted thinking she

See BREAK, C3

BREAK
Continued From C1

didn’t have a chance, but her shots were among the finest in the eyes of the judges, and on Oct. 14 she began what she now calls the greatest golf experience of her career.

Before she could land in Oahu’s pristine Turtle Bay Resort, however, Lewellen said she had to hack her way back into playing shape after motherhood had likely taken her to more sand boxes than tee boxes in recent years.

That training included trying to draw on the show’s previous challenges. Lewellen said she spent long hours trying to dream up ways to copy the kinds of things she thought she would need to do. But just like everyone except her in front of that TV tonight, Lewellen didn’t know what to expect.

What she found was nothing she could have planned for anyway.

“It was nothing like I expected. For one thing, we were milked up from the moment we got up in the morning until you went to bed that night. And having the TV cameras there constantly. You hit a shot, then wait two hours and hit another shot,” she said.

“This was the most mentally challenging thing I’ve ever done with my golf game. You basically take one shot to know whether or not you get to come back the next day.”

It’s tough to tell just how good her secret might be, but she does admit she was able to separate The Big Break concept from any other competitive golf she’s played.

“This was something like I’ve never experienced before,” Lewellen said. “You have the drama between the girls, and the very intense shots that you have to hit. It was stressful, not knowing if you were going to make it.”

Contestants were normally dressed and ready to go at 4:35 a.m. during shooting, she said, being told either to dress like a golfer or “in something Hawaiian.” But in general, Lewellen likened the golfing to a 10-day sudden death round.

Ironically, the job offer from ECU athletic director Terry Holland came after the filming for Big Break was done. She wouldn’t budge on whether her taking the job reflected the outcome of the show or not.

“The timing of the position wasn’t ideal for me based on that,” Lewellen said in reference to the ECU job. “But it wasn’t a position that I wanted to let go. I was fortunate enough that I was encouraged to follow up on it. I loved what Kevin Williams had done and what Terry Holland has in store. They encouraged me.”

ECU also encouraged Lewellen to keep playing, and she will, on some of the same women’s tour’s she’s already frequented as a pro. Which means, in essence, she has successfully sold the show to virtually everyone who knows her because she’s managed to keep everyone in suspense.

She won’t be surprised, she said, to see some money changing hands behind her back tonight at the premier party.

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Public Forum

Effective mental health treatment a must

I appreciated The Daily Reflector's story that chronicled the life of Kerry Turner and his loving family. Your story reminds us not to forget the person behind the illness, underscores the tragic loss for his family, the urgency of Greenville to institute a Memphis-model police response team and to adequately fund mental health care.

In 1987, as a result of a similar fatal shooting of a mentally ill man by police, the Memphis Police Department created a response team trained to use weapons that can incapacitate, rather than fatally wound a suspect; thus defusing dangerous situations. Fortunately, Greenville is planning a similar model.

Yet, we desperately need North Carolina's governor and legislators to have the political will to give mental health care a higher priority, be willing to invest the human and fiscal resources to support and implement legal and clinical tools to address the special circumstances of the mentally ill and mentally ill offenders, such as jail diversion programs for those who commit minor offenses; mental health courts devoted exclusively to offenders with psychiatric disorders; a crisis facility alternative to the hospital emergency department; assertive case management; involuntary outpatient commitment for persons who are unable or unwilling to comply voluntarily with treatment and who may become dangerous without it.

While there is currently an outpatient commitment process on paper, it is no longer enforced because of lack of funds and recent downsizing of mental health services in Greenville.

Effective mental health treatment in Greenville, that is adequately funded, and law enforcement training such as the Memphis model, can mean the difference between life and death.

D. ELIZABETH JESSE
Ph.D., RN, CNM
Greenville
Time for the dreaded ‘talk’

Local health professionals offer an assist on the birds and the bees

By Kim Grizzard
The Daily Reflector

As a physician, Hale Stephenson has seen how the topic of adolescent sexuality can make people tend to blush and start to shift in their chairs. And that’s just the parents.

As a father of three, Stephenson understands how parents can’t help feeling a bit uncomfortable.

“I think that parents are uncomfortable because they feel like, ‘I never received any formal kind of sex education.’ I think that makes it uncomfortable talking to your children because you feel like you might not have the information right,” said Stephenson of Greenville Obstetrics & Gynecology. “They’re also unsure when to start how to start, when to start.”

It’s no better for children and teens.

“We think adolescents are afraid that if they come and ask questions, the parents may jump to conclusions (and say), ‘OK, what are you doing?’” Stephenson said.

That is one reason his practice, a division of Physicians East, began hosting adolescent health seminars about a decade ago.

Since that time, hundreds of parents have brought their sons and daughters to the free sessions, which are designed to help families discuss and deal with issues that come with puberty.

“The basic concept is that we feel issues of puberty, hygiene and sexuality are very difficult for parents to discuss with their children and likewise very difficult for children to discuss with their parents,” said Stephenson, who has been involved in teaching a faith-based sex-education course for youth at Jarvis Memorial United Methodist Church. “My feeling is if we have parents and adolescents in a room together and talk about these topics, then it provides an open platform for dialogue.”

The seminars, held in separate sessions for boys and girls accompanied by a parent, deal with issues such as personal hygiene, changes of puberty and consequences of adolescent sexuality. Both sessions focus on abstinence.

Participants are taught about adolescent health through lectures, skits and a video called “Kids to Kids.”

“We try to have a lot of fun with it,” Stephenson said. “We try to make it as unlike school as we can make it.”

Participants are invited to submit questions in writing for health professionals to answer in a group setting.

“Nobody likes to raise their hand and ask questions,” said Becky Bagley, a clinical instructor at East Carolina University school of nursing’s midwifery program and one of the presenters at the adolescent health seminars. “A lot of questions will get are like, ‘Does it hurt to put a tampon in?’ Little questions like that that they’re not getting answered in schools.”

North Carolina law requires schools to provide instruction for students in kindergarten through grade nine on abstinence as well as preventing sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, and other communicable diseases. According to Statute 115C-81, “students may receive information about where to obtain contraceptives, and abortion referral services only in accordance with a local board’s policy regarding parental consent.” State law prohibits contraceptives from being made available on school property.

Bagley has often been called on to address the topic of adolescent sexuality with elementary school students. Giving such talks led her to help begin the adolescent-health seminars at Greenville Obstetrics & Gynecology, where she worked.
as a certified nurse midwife for several years.

"It started back when some fifth-grade teacher called Greenville OB and asked someone to come talk with her class because she didn’t want to do it," Bagley recalled.

"There are some girls who in the fifth grade are already sexually active," she said. "When I went and taught that first class, I was appalled."

Bagley believes that while there’s no set age when parents should sit their kids down for "the talk" about sexuality. As a general rule, she advises parents to address the issue when their children start asking questions or begin to take on the physical characteristics of an adolescent, whichever comes first.

"Some kids at 9 don’t want to hear anything about it," Bagley said. "I think it’s different for different kids. ... A lot of times, young children just want a very simple answer."

That is why Bagley believes talking about "the birds and the bees" should begin with a basic discussion at an early age and continue in greater detail as children grow older. "It’s not the talk," she said. "It’s many talks you need to be able to have with your kids."

Contact features writer Kim Grizzard at 329-9578 or kgrizzard@coxn.com.

Adolescent health

Health professionals from Greenville Obstetrics & Gynecology will offer free adolescent health seminars Feb. 11 and March 4 at Jarvis Memorial United Methodist Church, 510 S. Washington St.

A parent-daughter educational seminar, emphasizing health concerns of girls ages 9-14, will be held from 8:30 a.m.-noon Feb. 11. Registration deadline is Feb. 7. A parent-son educational seminar, emphasizing health concerns of boys ages 11-14, will be held from 9-11 a.m. March 4. Registration deadline is Feb. 27.

Participants will learn about changes of puberty as well as personal hygiene, adolescent-health problems, abstinence and the consequences of adolescent sexuality.

Discussion will be conducted by Drs. Hale Stephenson and Frank Gay and nurse midwife Becky Bagley of Greenville Obstetrics & Gynecology. Call 758-4181.
State behind on pension checks

A change in a retirement law has led to a rush of retirement applications and helped create a backlog.

BY LYNN BONNER
STAFF WRITER

Hundreds of former state government workers and teachers are waiting for their first pension checks months after they retired.

The state treasurer’s office, which administers the pension and retirement system, has told 462 workers who retired between Oct. 1 and Jan. 1 that their first checks will be up to two months late.

Others say the wait is longer.

Alison Merritt retired Nov. 1 as a New Hanover County teacher. Her first retirement check is nearly three months late.

“Lack of timely checks will be a problem with the waiting period,” she said.

The Merritts aren’t pinched for money. Their biggest problem is that medical bills aren’t being paid. Merritt, 50, went to a doctor recently and was told she owes $1,700 because her state insurance wasn’t paying. She found out last week that her medical bills, including her pending charges, would be paid once her pension money starts flowing.

“It’s a big hassle to deal with all of this,” she said.

The state is letting down its retirees and creating a potential disaster for pensioners who live from paycheck to paycheck, said her husband, Gene Merritt, who wrote a letter of complaint to state Treasurer Richard Moore.

“It’s a mighty shoddy way to say goodbye,” he said in an interview.

The pension office asks retirees to submit applications to the state office two months before they leave their jobs. Some retirees who applied late, or had some holdup as their paperwork passed from hand to hand, have had to wait longer than two months to get their first check.

Merritt says she filed on time.

The backlog started building last fall, when a wave of applications hit the pension office. In October, 1,630 employees sent retirement applications. In the same month in 2004, the number was 597.

A change in state retirement law helped create the rush. Under a provision that kicked in Nov. 1, teachers and state employees must wait six months after they retire before returning to work at a public school or for state government.

Doing government work, under contract or as a temporary employee, while also drawing a retirement pension — called “double dipping” — is common. Some workers take little or no break between retiring and returning to work. Legislators were worried that such quick turnarounds jeopardized the pension fund’s federal tax-exempt status.

“You would have a teacher retire on the first of June and come back in August in the same position,” said Rep. Larry Bell, a Sampson County Democrat and a chairman of the House Pensions and Retirement Committee. “Is that really a break in service? Was that good enough for the IRS?”

Between November 2004 and October 2005, 265 employees returned to part-time state work within six months of retiring, the state Personnel Office says.

Last year, 1,435 retired teachers were working in the public schools, and probably all had returned to work within six months of retirement, said Paul LeSueur, director of school business services at the state Department of Public Instruction.

One of the problems was that the legislature passed the budget, with the restriction on double dipping, in mid-August, a few weeks beyond the two-month window the pension office wants for applications to be in for Oct. 1 retirements. Once word circulated about the new restriction, teachers and state employees rushed to file retirement papers.

Of the 1,630 people seeking to retire Oct. 1, about 900 applied in the last two weeks of September.

“That’s what killed us in October,” said Michael Williamson, director of the state retirement systems division. “If we had known about it, we could have prepared better.”

Dana Cope, executive director of the State Employees Association of North Carolina, said retirements are rising because of low pay for government employees.

In recent years, the legislature has approved low raises for state employees or used one-time bonuses and extra vacation as a substitute for raises. This year, state employees received 2 percent raises or $850, whichever was more, and an extra vacation week.

With many working at low wages and for small raises, Cope said, it doesn’t make sense for experienced workers to stay on the job.

When the treasurer’s office realized in October it had a problem, the pension office added eight workers to its 11-member crew that processes retirement applications. The office even called back to work one of its own retirees.

In mid-October, the pension office sent letters to retirees explaining the delay, and in December, started calling about 400 recent retirees. They were offered emergency checks or help getting credit union loans.

J.D. Mills Sr., 60, a former correctional officer from Union County who retired Dec. 31 after more than 25 years with the state, said he filed his pension paperwork in September. The last he heard, he won’t get his first check until March.
The pension office offered Mills help with a credit union loan, but he didn't want one. He makes $300 a week as a church pastor, and "that helped me cope."

The first checks for Mills and other waiting retirees will include payments for missed months.

The pension office said that the worst of the paper flood is cleared and that it expects workers who applied by Nov. 1 for a Jan. 1 retirement will be paid by Feb. 24.

But the office plans to tell legislators this month it needs to add 15 people to the pension office.

That's to handle the extra work that will come with the wave of baby boomer retirements. The pension office anticipates a 141 percent increase in retirees between 2003 and 2022.

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