

Bradley, Hiestand lead SWFL at Florida women's opens

Florida Women's Open/ Senior Open

Where: Quail Creek Country Club

When: Friday-Sunday

Tee times: 7:30 to 9:30 a.m.

Parking: Check in at gatehouse; no charge

Info: fsga.org

Greg Hardwig Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

A good number of Southwest Florida golfers won't have to go anywhere to play in a state championship beginning Friday.

The Florida Women's Open and Florida Women's Senior Open are being played at Quail Creek Country Club.

For Naples golfers like Mary Jane

Hiestand, who's competed in over 40 United States Golf Association events around the country and just returned from an international tournament in Italy, it's a little strange.

"It's going to be fun being here," said Hiestand, 58, a Hideout Golf Club member. "I kind of feel like I'm not in a tournament yet because I'm not going any-

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Emma Bradley of Naples will be playing in the Florida State Women's Open at Quail Creek in Naples beginning Friday.

DAVID W. DOONAN/BRADENTON HERALD

Opens

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where."

Hiestand was expecting to have that feeling last year -- and so was Quail Creek -- but Hurricane Irma wiped out the chance for the U.S. Women's Mid-Amateur, first USGA event in Collier County. The tournament was moved to Texas. Hiestand ended up making history, going all the way to the final.

There's not that much history this week. This is only the second year for the two tournaments, which share a \$50,000 purse. But the fact the tournaments exist -- coming on the heels of the inaugural U.S. Senior Women's Open in which Hiestand competed, is a good sign for women's golf in general, and especially for senior women.

"I think the Open really opened up some eyes to people for women's senior golf," Hiestand said. "There's a lot of chatter about a Women's Senior British Open. I think the Legends Tour (the women's tour for pros 45 and over) will get a little bit of a boost. They're going to add some tournaments."

The Legends Tour lists six tournaments, and that's including the U.S. Senior Women's Open and the Senior LPGA Championship. It did have a joint event at Cypress Lake Country Club from 2015-16 that also featured Symetra Tour players from 2014-16, but title sponsor Chico's left and a replacement was not found.

Hiestand, who finished fifth last year, hopes events like this week will continue to give opportunities for senior women.

"It's not like that they don't play," said Hiestand, who is paired with Naples' Gail Graham, an instructor at Tom Patri Golf Schools at Esplanade and former LPGA Tour winner and Legends Tour player. "They don't have anything to play in and it's a shame. It was so much fun at the Open seeing them and seeing the camaraderie amongst them and how happy they were to be back together. A lot of them are retired and they have a great life, but yeah, they miss that, you can feel it."

Emma Bradley has a long time be-

Notable tee times

7:30 a.m. (Quail Course, No. 10) -- Sydney Shrader, Naples (a); Ashley Yarborough

7:39 a.m. (Quail Course, No. 10) -- Mary Jane Hiestand, Naples (a); Gail Graham, Naples; Charlie Buxton (a)

7:57 a.m. (Quail Course, No. 10) -- Terry-Jo Myers, Fort Myers; Veronica Karaman; Amy Ellertson (a)

8:15 a.m. (Quail Course, No. 10) -- Laurie Rinker; Barb Bunkowsky; Diane Lang (a)

8:24 a.m. (Creek Course, No. 1) -- Emma Bradley, Naples (a); Madison Opfer; Sandra Changkija

8:51 a.m. (Creek Course, No. 1) -- Charlotta Sorenstam; Anna Hack (a); Aneta Abrahamova (a)

9 a.m. (Creek Course, No. 1) -- Vasy Montague, Naples (a); Cathleen Wong (a), Stoneybrook; Alexandra Casi

9 a.m. (Creek Course, No. 10) -- Kim Egozi, Bonita Springs (a); Emily Rymer; Abigail Herrmann (a)

fore that feeling comes about.

The 18-year-old from Seacrest Country Day is mere months from starting her collegiate career at Baylor; she signed with the Bears a couple of weeks ago after decommitting from Ole Miss. Bradley played in the inaugural Florida Women's Open at Reunion Resort in Kissimmee last year and tied for sixth.

"I'm really happy that it's obviously in Naples, my hometown," Bradley said. "That's super, super exciting and I've been able to really get some good prep work in. I've been playing (the two courses) the last two weeks. I'm really, really comfortable out there."

Bradley is planning to ramp up her tournament play before she leaves for Baylor at the end of the year, so this fits right in.

"It's all about going out there and getting more experience for college," she said.

Both Bradley and Hiestand said Quail Creek's two Arthur Hills-designed courses are in great condition.

"The greens aren't super fast, but they're in good condition and they're true," Hiestand said. "The courses are in great shape. They're really, really good."

The field of 156 runs the gamut from young amateurs, collegiate players, Symetra Tour and young LPGA Tour players, and older professionals and amateurs. Barb Bunkowsky, a former LPGA Tour player, won the Senior Open last year, and Sandra Changkija, who is paired with Bradley on Friday, won the Women's Open title.

"I think it's going to be a very exciting couple of days of golf," Bradley said. "We've got a bunch of high-ranking amateurs, a bunch of young pros. You have a lot of diversity and talent."

Former LPGA Tour player and current Legends Tour player Terry-Jo Myers is playing, as is Bonita Springs' Kim Keyer-Scott, who won the Women's State Mid-Amateur title.

Other players with local ties: Ailsa Clark, Florida Gulf Coast University women's golfer; Annie Garcia, The Quarry; Lexie Flerlage, FGCU recruit; Emma Smyser, Naples; Vasy Montague, High Point women's golfer from Naples; Cathleen Wong, Stoneybrook; Kim Egozi, Estero High and Pelican's Nest; Gabriella Wheeler, Cape Coral; Jennifer Udd, Naples; Sydney Shrader, St. John Neumann grad and current North Florida golfer; Jeanne Gibbons, Colonial Country Club; Elizabeth Amendola, Community School of Naples and Grey Oaks; Natalie McNicholas, Calusa Pines; Holly Vaughn, Quail Creek; and Kathie Westlund, San Carlos Golf Club.

Hiestand said having a hometown crowd just adds to the event and her experience.

"It's nice when you have people out there," she said. "It's always nice to get support. I get a lot of support from the people at Hideout."

Regardless of who's watching, Hiestand just wants to give them and herself, something to feel good about.

"I just want to play good," she said. "(My game) has been kind of mediocre."

"I'm just really looking forward to it," Bradley said. "I'm prepared, more than anything."