There Was a Time When Pride was Private on the LPGA Tour

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There was a time — not all that long ago — when the idea of coming out was unthinkable for players on the LPGA Tour. The concern was to protect sponsors, endorsement partners, personal partners, parents and the Tour itself. As Pride Month comes to a close, it's a good time to put a close to that chapter of history.

There was a time — not all that long ago — when, within the LPGA family, everyone knew the secret and everyone protected it. This was a time before Ellen DeGeneres, Will & Grace and The L Word brought Gay people into American living rooms via TV and helped normalized the LBGTQ+ community. It was a time when brave people were just beginning to take to the streets in large numbers to demonstrate for equality – a time when Stonewall became a rallying cry, not an obstacle.

There was a time — not all that long ago — when to be Gay on the LPGA Tour meant to live under the cover of an informal don't ask/don't tell policy that was a matter of survival, both for the individuals and for the Tour. It was a very different time, a time before Mel Reid paved the way for other women professional golfers to come out as Gay.

"That's the way it was back then," Patty Sheehan, the LPGA Tour and World Golf Hall of Fame member who turned pro in 1980 and won 35 times, including six major championships, said by phone during the KPMG Women's PGA Championship, a title she claimed three times.

"It was OK to be Gay," Sheehan said about that time not all that long ago. "But it wasn't OK to talk about it."

Sheehan, whose life with her longtime partner Rebecca Gaston and their two children has been a beacon for change for the LPGA Tour, the community of golf and society as a whole, looks back on those days more with fondness than regret or anger. She sees it as being caught up in the time in which they lived.

“There was definitely a feeling that the Tour didn’t want us to do anything to put title sponsors in difficult situations,” Sheehan said. “My sponsors were always great to me. There was never a discussion about sexuality. But we kept things under wraps.”

There was a time – not all that long ago – as laws began to change, when more people in more areas of society were emboldened to come out and attitudes began to shift as virtually everyone came to realize they had a friend or family member who is Gay, it’s just that they never knew about the secret hidden behind a curtain of fear.

There was a time – not all that long ago – when “Pride and Prejudice” was not just the title of a novel by Jane Austin, but also the umbrella under which the LPGA Tour lived: The Pride of being Gay hidden in the shadow cast by the of the fear of Prejudice.

“It really is nice that players today are more comfortable talking about their sexual orientation, and it is really nice that more people are more accepting,” Sheehan said. “There are still some who don’t want to embrace inclusion, but it is what it is. Overall, we have become a society that is more accepting of people who are different in any way. I like to think of myself as a pretty boring different person.”

Sheehan has carved out a life that is very ordinary in almost every way. She and Rebecca have been partners for 34 years. They married on New Year’s Eve of 2013 when the laws changed and such a union was possible and long after they adopted daughter Bryce, who is now 24, and son Blake, who is now 22.

“I’ve been off tour for 20 years now and I can tell you I deal with the same issues as anyone else does with my kids, with my spouse, with my life,” says Sheehan, 64, who has homes in Santa Barbara, Calif., and Tahoe, Nevada.

“I’m retired,” she says. “I get up, I do the same things everyone else does. I play some golf; I keep score sometimes. My life is pretty basic. We are like everyone else.”

And that is the point: “We are like everyone else” could well be a rallying cry for the LBGTQ+ community.

There was a time – not all that long again – when being a pioneer was a personal thing, a private quest for happiness not made to be impactful but merely to be happy. The LPGA Tour family protected its own but the idea of publicly embracing its Gay players and openly acknowledging them was an unthinkable act feared because it might jeopardize the financial underpinnings of the organization.

Those days are gone. The LPGA Tour can embrace its Gay players because corporate America embraces them, as do more and more fans.

There was a time – not all that long ago – when this discussion was unthinkable.

If “We are like everyone else” is a rallying cry then, “There was a time” is a tribute to the progress made. There was a time when Pride Month was not on the LPGA Tour calendar. Now, it is embraced; it is celebrated – every month of the year.

This is a time to acknowledge the past, embrace the present and set goals for the future. This is a time to remember LPGA Tour pioneers like Patty Sheehan, acknowledge their struggles and thank them for their role in making pride possible.