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Big Hearts: Charity Lives Despite Golf's Tough Days

BY HOWARD WARD: GOLF WRITER

The sagging -- or is that plunging? -- economy has golf courses in the Sandhills searching for ways to increase revenues.

Play is down. Income is down. In a lot of cases, spirits are down.

But the spirit of the game is alive and well, as witnessed by recent events held at National Golf Club and Pine Needles.

Golf has always been one of the most charitable of all sports, and the people who make the game great keep coming through despite their personal concerns.

The Patriot Pro-Am and Sunbelt Tour event held at National a couple of weeks ago delivered in a huge way for the benefit of Army families. The Patriot Foundation donated checks totaling \$100,000 to its two charities.

The Patriot Foundation is a tax-exempt nonprofit headed by retired Naval Reserve Capt. Chuck Deleot. The group works diligently year-round to raise funds for children of 82nd Airborne Division paratroopers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and children of serving, retired and former Army Special Operations soldiers.

The Patriot, which just completed its sixth year, has provided scholarship assistance to 300 children.

The checks were presented at the foundation's annual post-tournament dinner held at National Golf Club.

The emotional ceremonies were attended by Maj. Gen. John Mulholland, commanding general of U.S. Army Special Operations Command; Maj. Gen. Mike Scarparatti, commanding general of the 82nd Airborne Division; Gen. Buck Kernan; Adm. Bob Natter; Maj. Gen. Chuck Swannack; and Maj. Gen. Don Strait.

There were 170 guests packed into the National dining room, including several top executives from around the country. The dinner was highlighted by a moving video of testimonials from wives of military personnel who had lost their lives in the service of the country.

Another event pointing out the love for the game and its charitable contributions was the annual First Tee of the Sandhills "Fun Raiser" held at Pine Needles Lodge and Golf Club's convention center.

This affair drew a huge crowd to the dinner, dance and auction that help fund The First Tee. It seemed that practically everyone in the area involved in the game was either present or represented in some way.

Peggy Kirk Bell, the first lady of golf, was there, of course, as well as other members of the Bell family. Bob Burrell, who owns and operates Roberts Golf, is always an integral part of any First Tee gathering.

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There were Don Sweeting and Bob Farren from Pinehurst Resort, Stuart Taylor from Whispering Woods and his wife Linda, Dale Briggs from Knollwood, and Bob Klug, the Southern Pines Realtor and golfer who not only plays the game on a championship level, but also gives to it the same way.

There were Mike Fields, who is still celebrating his son Jack's North Carolina Amateur Championship, and Donna Andrews, the former LPGA star, horse farm owner, golf instructor and Realtor. Former PGA Tour Rookie of the Year Pat McGowan and wife Bonnie were there, with Bonnie snapping pictures of everyone. Kelly Miller, the man who oversees the affairs of both Pine Needles and Mid Pines, was on hand.

Also present were banking executive Phil Fulgrum, volunteers superstars Lois and Wade Vollmer, and Jason Cox, who heads the Carolinas Golf Association's junior golf program.

Those were just a few of the hundreds showing support for The First Tee program. And the great thing is that they proved that support in more ways than just showing up for some good food and good music by the MacKenzie Brothers Band.

Things may be tough in the world of golf during a national economic shakedown, but golfers and those who simply love the game and what it stands for are making things a little easier for everyone concerned.

Bill Baker, in his initial year as executive director of The First Tee Sandhills Chapter, was smiling a lot and shaking a lot of hands.

It was exciting to see how many people deeply care about the program.