

In her 19-year professional career, Suzann “Tutta” Pettersen won 15 times on the LPGA Tour and 7 times on the Ladies European Tour, including two majors: the 2007 LPGA Championship and the 2013 Evian Championship. She also had runner-up finishes in the U.S. Women’s Open, Women’s Open and the ANA Inspiration.

Suzann’s consistency was evidenced by the 419 weeks she appeared in the top 10 in the World Rankings and the 146 top-10 finishes she earned playing on the LPGA Tour. She is perhaps most known for her nine Solheim Cup appearances where she was one of Europe’s leading point earners. Her career was capped at the 2019 Solheim Cup where she clinched the winning putt for Europe and immediately retired from the professional game.

In Norway, a nation known for sports success way beyond the size of the population, Suzann has been named Female Athlete of the Year three times and she has also received the Athlete’s Award, the most coveted honor among Norwegian athletes.

Even after retiring as a player, her career in golf continues. Building on her experience as a player and with her character and leadership skills, Suzann has been selected as the 2023 and 2024 European Solheim Cup team captain.



What is it like to be a professional golfer today?

It has obviously changed a lot over the past few decades. When I started it was when looking at the player as a 24/7 athlete started. Tiger Woods was the first who brought in the concept. Now golf has changed due to the power component. Golf is very complex and time consuming, so it takes all the hours of the day and even more to be a top golfer.

If you were to describe a normal day or week at the top level?

It depends on whether you are home or on the road, but on average my day had one session in the gym in the morning, usually 1.5 hours. Woke up at 6 and had breakfast at 8. Technical work from 9-12

SUZANN PETTERSEN

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

419 Weeks in the top 10 World Rankings

146 Top-10 finishes on the LPGA Tour
Finals won over 285 played

2019 Winning putt for Europe in 2019 Solheim Cup

2023/24 Solheim Cup captain

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and then lunch, with more drills or playing on the course after. So that is about 6-7 hours on the course, and if enough energy a short session in the gym at the end of the day. This would be the typical off-season schedule. The key is to be very structured and disciplined. I always knew where to be and what to do at every hour.

What sort of routine do you have during tournaments?

The first two days are either with early or late tee times. The early tee times are between 8:15 to 9:00, so you wake up at least 3 hours before. Light stretch and mobility exercises, breakfast, and the golf warm up took an hour and 10 mins for me. Exactly. This was the same every day before a tournament. Playing takes between 4.5-

5.5 hours. Depending on how I played, after lunch I would practice technique on the range or on other areas of my game. Morning tee times gave more time to practice. If I played late, we usually finish around dark, so you have time for the gym but no practice. Playing well sets you up with more momentum between the rounds, as there is more balance between the times. This has different impact on the mental game too.

What are the main physical demands of the game?

Mobility is quite important, especially functionally, as it relates to the game and technique. Functional stretching is a basic and vital component, like brushing your teeth. In golf you create power from



the ground up and so strong legs are vital, as well as a solid core and back. Upper body is a more general feel. Golf is both technical and fitness-oriented. Prevention is just as important as strength. I started working out around the age of 12-13.

Going back to mobility, were you doing it to increase ROM or to just maintain mobility?

I would say both, the increase in motion and freedom is amazing if the hours are put in. The functional part became part of the strength training, as well, and now it is much more golf-specific than it was before. There is a lot more speed training incorporated in training for young players now, too.

Any particular joints that are restrictive in the golf swing?

The hips, as you are bent over a lot. The back, as the spine needs to rotate freely. Shoulders, and neck, but it varies between individuals.

Players today have worked extensively on the power aspect of their game, so is this the biggest change that has occurred on the tour?

I think players now are less technical than before, they play with what they have and do not copy a "perfect swing". For example, Scott Scheffler and Jon Rahm have very different techniques. In 2000, people chased the perfect swing and now it is much more of a power game and there is more variety in golf swings. It is more about mastering the game today. You can't put one technique on 100 people as their physique limits everyone, but in different ways. I have tried to come close to perfection, but cannot get into certain positions. So I need to work around it. It is good to do physical screening, so you don't chase something that you can never achieve. Some people have hypermobility and other do not.



Image top left: Suzann Pettersen holds a trophy after winning the final round of the Honda LPGA golf tournament in Pattaya, October 2007.

Image left: Se Ri Pak and Suzann Pettersen pose with the trophy at the HSBC Women's Champions, Singapore 2008.

Image right: Team Europe's Suzann Pettersen at the 2019 Solheim Cup at Gleneagles Golf Club, Auchterarder.



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When you were 12-13 years old you were already focused on golf, when did you start playing?

I started at 5, but did all sorts of sports until I was 10. But at 12 I chose only golf as the time schedule did not allow me for more time. At that age, you have a feel that you can master something and understand where you are more likely to succeed.

When you made the decision for golf, what were the main factors for you to choose the game?

I had the passion and fell in love with the game, but I also never really cared what my school friends were doing. Not many of my friends played golf, usually only boys. They were stronger and I always had to compete with boys, which made me mentally stronger. I find it hard today to explain how to make young girls want to play golf, as for me it was pure passion. I have a journal of dreaming about my vision and philosophy for golf. It was a 6-page document asked by the federation and I poured my heart into it. I achieved all the goals I wrote down, except for being number one in the world. I was always number 2.

This was when you were 15-16?

Yes. I wrote down 5-year goals and 10-year goals, like winning majors, described the support systems and other factors I needed. People don't believe it when they see it!

What do you think about early sport specialization today?

I experienced it myself, and I think that you must measure yourself against the same age group to succeed. At age 11, I found it boring to compete against the girls in my age group. It felt protective, but you

can't stop someone from dreaming higher. I think that in today's climate you really need to be specialized early to have a chance to succeed. Especially in women's golf you compete against a lot of Asians, and there is an age limitation of 18 before you can play professionally a full season. It is trying to protect the girls, but there is always someone like Michelle Wie who asks for an exemption to turn pro at the age of 16. There are a lot of South Koreans who are taken out of school at age 10 to specialize if they have talent, and play professionally at age 14. So, to be able to compete with them, you need to start early. On the other side, golf is a longevity game and I played for 20 years and could have done more. It is sad to see young kids that specialize early to stop competing by the age of 25 or 30, which happens very often. However, they would not be as good as they are if they did not start very early.

Is there a benefit to playing other sports at the same time into adolescence?

I would encourage it until there is no more time. It is a great platform to be exposed to everything. I skied, played football, biked, did horse riding, gymnastics and many other sports and greatly enjoyed all of them. Apart from gymnastics, all the other sports were a lot of fun! My young kids are already doing basic gymnastics to control their bodies and I think it is important to do so at a young age. At the same time, to be the best there is, you must start early.

Is golf different in early specialization or is it the same in all sports?

It's for all sports, but it must start with the passion from the kids. It is important for parents to pace their children, as the body is growing.

Maturation and growth is an interesting point. The sudden changes can be significant for a young woman, was this an easy transition for you?

I don't have any specific memories from the bigger changes, so I don't think I had specific issues with it.

How about your injuries as a professional?

I've had a fair share; golf is one-dimensional in swinging and so at 12 or 13 you are out of balance in one direction strength-wise. It would be good to swing both ways, but nobody does it as it is not as effective in performing. I had a ruptured lumbar disk the first time at age 23 and it took me out for a solid year. I was based in Norway and so had a good team around me, as well as second opinions, and no one wanted to do surgery as I was too young. We opted for rehab and I never had any procedures done, for which I am thankful for today. My lowest point was questioning whether I could swing a golf club again and it motivated me greatly to get better. The recovery was gradual and with many adjustments to be softer on the back. But golf is brutal, requiring the same movement time and time again. So I had a second big injury in 2013, which came out of nowhere, the same back injury. The third case was in 2017, the same part of my back. I did everything to prevent a relapse, but it came back unexpectedly again. I was reaching for sunscreen and doing squats when my back popped again. Many golfers have wrist injuries, but I've never had that. I have had inflamed shoulders, but a less serious case.

How has your back injury changed your training program?

I changed it a lot after the first injury. I found other ways of training legs. I did not run too much in season, usually using the bike as it is softer on the back. My back is always stiff, even now, so I stay on top of prevention, but need to take ibuprofen almost every day.

Before the age of 23, your first major injury, did you have injury prevention in your mind?

The early days were more general and less golf-specific than the latter part of my career. Fitness was always my getaway from the golf course. I always believe that if you feel strong you are strong. You don't lose focus at the end of the round from fatigue and are one step ahead of your competitors. That was always my strength, that I was physically and mentally prepared to play.

So, body language matters in golf just as much as in team sports?

I think so, you could see it when Djokovic won the Australian Open. You don't want to let the opponent know you're injured. I always felt that players who vocalized their suffering had already lost. I kept pain to myself.

As a young golfer, did you reflect on injuries as part of the game?

I learnt prevention the hard way – when I got injured. You learn from being able to flip the picture and get healthy again. During rehab you find the light in the tunnel and motivation, as well as the revenge to get back. As painful as it is, it has made me mentally stronger and I don't regret the injuries. You learn how to maneuver yourself as close to the straight line as possible if you go astray.

What kind of medical support system did you have as a professional?

The fundamentals were always based in Oslo, at Olympiatoppen. I have my two main doctors who always checked up on me. On the LPGA we have doctors, but I always came back home to get properly treated as I felt safer about the 2nd opinions. The last 10 years, I've always had my personal physiotherapist travel with me. We were 3-4 players who usually had the same physio on tour.



Image: Team Europe celebrate winning the Solheim Cup, at Gleneagles, Scotland 2019.



Image: Pettersen competes in the Women's individual stroke play at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games.

Why did you choose the one physio if there were so many at every tournament?

If you have no issues, you don't need the best physios, but with serious injuries need the best care. My physio was very knowledgeable and helped me every day with sessions.

You have a lot of experience traveling the world and have met many medical professionals. If I were a young sports medicine doctor, what would be your advice to me?

Throw yourself out there and try to have very good understanding in one sport and its every aspect. It creates respect amongst the athletes if someone you see understands where you're coming from. Experience is everything.

What personal qualities would you look for?

It's all chemistry, but if you're in a bad spot it's also expertise. So, I would say expertise trumps personality. My best experiences are with those doctors that clearly know what they are talking about. You don't want to have questions as an athlete walking out of a doctor's office. You need a good plan of how to get back.

What advice would you give to young girls who want to pursue golf?

Dream big! There is no limit to how good you can be. You can do a lot, but pace yourself and enjoy every phase of development. It's important in golf and life to take every step of the way as part of the total journey. Don't try to jump stages.

Traditionally, the major investment has been in men's golf, and now it's turning to the women's game. What are your thoughts about elite women's golf and where it's headed?

I think women's golf is stronger than it's ever been. If you look at the top 30 in the world, there's people from across the world. It is important to expose the game in every part of the world to young kids so that they have a chance to fall in love with it. You can learn a lot of life lessons from the game, in addition to the competitive side.

There is also more investment in health support and performance services for the players. What are the unmet needs?

Every player is a lot more professional in every aspect. The physical support system will get more and more important. Here in Norway at my young age, people were not as knowledgeable and had to travel to the United States to learn. Now, people know more and the big players like Viktor Hovland will tell you that fitness is a main component of success.

As a Solheim Captain, what kind of medical support would you want for your team?

As a captain you want to facilitate the best surroundings. So, I brought in an extra physio for the team, so each player has more one-on-one time. I choose people that the current players are working with, so they are familiar with their ways, as it's more effective. This brings comfort, as there isn't much time to explain.

A final question: Golf is a mental sport – how are we doing with caring for players' mental health and what is missing?

You must look at the overall well-being of the athlete. There is no specific support system for the mental side of golf, as it is up to the individual player to take responsibility for their own well-being and life. It is part of the discipline you learn along the way and you need to have a team to support you. The dynamics make it hard to make a steadfast rule about how mental support should be incorporated in such an individual sport. I've been looked upon as a product, someone who needs to perform, and so started looking more at the human elements of the game. I tried to make sure I always had people around me that cared about me as a person. I worked with one guy who supported me for 12 years and decided to try other things. But I regretted losing him as I became only a product in the eyes of many others. It showed me that one person within the team can have a significant effect on you as a person and for performance. He cared more about me as a person than my ranking, and it is important to realize that many people don't understand that athletes are not machines.

So, you suggest that young athletes who need mental health support look for someone within their immediate surroundings, closer to home?

Yes. It is easier and more likely that people genuinely care for you and do not only see you as a product.

Anything else you'd like to say?

Hard work, patience, and sticking to your plans will give you the best results. Don't give up!

Prof Roald Bahr MD, PhD