

Strengthened by team bonding, surging Florida State ready for another shot at NCAA's

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Golfweek

May 3, 2017

To trace the surge of Florida State's women's team in 2016-17, go back to the day after the previous season ended.

The Seminoles made it to the NCAA Championship for the first time since 2010, but the team failed to make the match-play portion, placing 15th in stroke play as the top eight advanced. Amy Bond, Florida State's coach, told her players the team could fly home the next morning or spend an extra day enjoying the area.

The group jumped at the latter. The Florida State crew went some 90 minutes out of Eugene, Ore., to get a look at the Pacific Ocean – none of Seminoles' five starters had ever seen it before. The team stopped on the side of a road to take photos of the Pacific, also embarked on a trip to some caves to look at sea lions and took an exhilarating ride in a large dune buggy.

"They still talk about the fun that they had that day," Bond said. "They were really able to enjoy that opportunity."

That sunny mindset has crept into the following campaign. If last season was a breakout for FSU, this school year has seen an explosion. The No. 5 Seminoles stormed out of the gate with three wins in their first four starts. Despite a second-place finish at the ACC Championship, Florida State finished the regular season with six wins in 10 full-field starts.

Sometimes when the victories pile up, a group may forget to savor them. But Florida State is enjoying the good times.

"We're trying to appreciate everything because six wins don't come around too often," Bond said. "Life is too short and things fly by."

The team's top-ranked player is the embodiment of that message. Senior Matilda Castren won three times in 2015-16 and boasted an end-of-season rank of 58.

Yet when Castren, of Espoo, Finland, worked with her coach Petteri Nykky over the summer, she wasn't seeing much progress in her game. That's when Nykky offered the idea that something else in her life might be the issue. Castren came to understand she had too many negative influences, people in her life who didn't encourage the budding golfer.

Over the summer, fall and into winter break, Castren underwent the difficult process of breaking free of those negative voices. Now with two more wins and an improvement in ranking to No. 14, the senior has seen a transformation.

"I don't have a constant feeling on my shoulder, that feeling you get when something's not right," Castren said. "I just enjoy life so much more now."

She's not the only one who's up. Junior Morgane Metraux, buoyed by confidence, has won three times in 2016-17 and jumped from No. 113 to No. 22. Lydia Gumm, a senior, has moved from No. 127 to No. 61.

The Seminoles will compete as the No. 2 seed at the NCAA Columbus Regional from May 8-10 (the top six teams from that event advance to the NCAA Championship).

Gumm noted that chemistry alone could insulate the Seminoles from a letdown: "We're just so close, and I think that is the key."

The whole team embarked on a weekend retreat to Panama City, Fla., a few weeks before the 2016-17 season. It was a time to bond, especially via the game "saucepot" (a charades-like contest played over three rounds that escalate in difficulty).

The one-day excursion after NCAAs still stands out the most, though. At that point, the players determined they could do far better than 15th at nationals. If Florida State can qualify for the 2017 NCAA Championship, to be played from May 19-24 at Rich Harvest Farms in Sugar Grove, Ill., the team won't be intimidated this time.

"I think the sky's the limit," Bond said. "I truly think we can play with anybody."