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WGOLF: Abby Newton Finds New Home at Home

Georgia Southern hosts the Stutter Gus Invitational at GS University Course this weekend.

By Marc Gignac

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STATESBORO – Georgia Southern’s Abby Newton will be returning to the site of a life-changing moment when she tees it up on the practice range at Georgia Southern University Golf Course to warm up for her opening round of the Stutter Gus Invitational Sunday.

That very range is where it all began for the freshman from Statesboro. Well, at least it’s where the golf part of the story originated. The Georgia Southern part of the story goes back much further.

Born to Dewey and Laura Newton, two Georgia Southern alums who met at the college and put down their roots in Statesboro, Abby grew up around Georgia Southern. Eagle football, basketball and baseball games were regular events for her as far back as she can remember.

She used to chase foul balls at baseball games in J. I. Clements Stadium for baseball coach Rodney Hennon, her neighbor, and slide down the old grass hills in the end zone at Paulson Stadium long before the Ted Smith Family Football Center and Field of Dreams were even inklings, much less realities.

“I grew up in it,” she says with a smile. “Just about every sport you can think of, me and my dad were there. I grew up tailgating at every game from probably ages 3 to 12. I lived on those hills. I didn’t watch a lick of football, but I had a great time sliding down the hills.”

Playing sports came naturally to Abby and her older sister, Anna, and they excelled in most every one they tried, especially basketball. Anna started playing travel basketball, and Abby followed suit when she was in middle school. They would go on to be all-state selections at Bulloch Academy, and it appeared both were headed towards college basketball careers.



That's when fate intervened. Watching *The Master's* one Sunday with her father, then 14-year-old Abby told Dewey she wanted to give golf a try. Off to the range at Georgia Southern University Course they went. As with most sports, Newton picked it up pretty quickly. She had spent countless hours on the softball diamond, and the golf swing motion was already somewhat embedded into her muscle memory.

A well-struck golf shot has a purity to it, an effortless motion when all the parts of the body move in conjunction towards contact and the ball jumps off the club. These are the shots that hook the novices and ignite an addiction. Newton hit a few shots like that, and she was smitten.

"I just knew - I would hit a good shot and knew this is what I want to do," she remembers.

Her family had been members of Forest Heights Country Club when she was younger, but as the family had spent countless weekends on the basketball travel circuit, Dewey found himself playing less golf so they had discontinued their membership. Now that Abby had a budding hobby and Dewey had a consummate playing partner, it was time to rejoin. Abby spent countless hours at Forest Heights and the Georgia Southern University Course working on her craft and started playing in competitive junior tournaments when she was 15.

Two years before Newton discovered her affinity for golf, Georgia Southern announced it would be starting a women's golf program. The Bennett-Ramsey Golf Center added a new tenant, Emily Kuhfeld

was named head coach in 2014 and the Eagles started competition prior to the 2015-16 season. Newton had been slightly aware of this development not yet knowing how it might affect her.

Now showing some promise on the links, Newton got another peek at destiny during the Schenkel Invitational, Georgia Southern's longstanding men's tournament at Forest Heights, and another Eagle athletics event she had attended regularly. Each team competing in the Schenkel gets a host family for the week, and on this occasion, the Newtons helped their neighbors be host a family. They brought their team to the Bennett-Ramsey Golf Center for a tour, walked upstairs and perused the home of Georgia Southern women's golf.

I'm not sure I've coached a more pure athlete, and she is so competitive and so driven. She just needs experience, and you can already see the improvement she has made in just three college tournaments."

Georgia Southern Coach Emily Kuhfeld

"I saw their scores and all the women's golf stuff, and dad was like, 'you can play here one day,'" Newton recalls. "That's when it hit me, and then it just became a dream. I never really thought how I would achieve it, but I'm sitting here now."

With a viable avenue to realize a college golf career, Newton continued to play high school basketball but began shutting down the basketball-related recruiting overtures she was getting from various colleges.

"For me with high school basketball - there was nothing like it - but I knew I didn't want to do that for the next four years," she says. "I just knew it wasn't right for me. I chose golf and I'm thankful I did. It was a leap of faith, but I was dead set I was going to play college golf somewhere."

There was only one problem. She had gotten off to a bit of a late start and was in the early stages of getting noticed by college golf coaches while most players were making verbal commitments. She was getting looks from Division II schools and about to commit when Kuhfeld came calling.

The 2019 Southeastern Junior Golf Association TPC Sawgrass Classic proved to be an eye-opener for both Newton and Kuhfeld. Newton rolled in a long par putt on the last hole to win it, topping a loaded field stacked with good competition. It was the moment Newton became convinced she could play at the Division I level, and shortly after the victory, Kuhfeld went to Sea Island to watch her play.

"We were keeping an eye on her because we had heard things from people around town, and we knew that she was very athletic and a great kid," says Kuhfeld. "When we saw her at Sea Island, it became very obvious that she had tremendous potential and where we could help her invest her time to improve her scoring."

Newton came on her "visit" to Georgia Southern about two months before the fall signing period started in 2019. She knew all about the school, but meeting the team made it an even easier sell.

"She lives like down the street so we weren't showing her anything she hadn't seen already," Kuhfeld says with a laugh. "We had to think creatively about how to construct her visit, but it was definitely important for her to meet the team and see the fit."



Kuhfeld gave her the offer before she left campus and asked her to make sure going to school so close to home was what she wanted before making her decision.

"I called her back the next morning and said, 'I'm coming!,'" Newton recalls. "It was not a hard decision. I loved the team when I came and visited and the golf part of it. It just feels like home. You know everyone. It's just perfect for me - a really good fit."

Newton has been in the lineup for every tournament this season and has proved to be a quick study in course management. Growing up a highly-competitive athlete, she has always had success being the aggressor, but with golf, she is learning to pick her spots.

"I'm not sure I've coached a more pure athlete, and she is so competitive and so driven," says Kuhfeld. "She just needs experience, and you can already see the improvement she has made in just three college tournaments."

Newton's golf journey will come full circle when the Eagles host the Stutter Gus Invitational, their home tournament, this weekend at the Georgia Southern University Course. There is likely to be a large but socially-distanced gallery following the homegrown girl. For Newton, it will be a dream come true.

"I loved Statesboro, and I loved growing up here and I knew I didn't want to leave," she says. "I knew I would end up here; I just didn't know if I'd be playing a sport or not. When I realized I wanted to play golf, Georgia Southern was my dream school."