

# TOWN

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JULY 2018  
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# Swing Dance

Seneca native and brand ambassador for The Cliffs, Austin Ernst is raising her status on the LPGA Tour while raising money for Safe Harbor

/by Steven Tingle

Growing up, Austin Ernst was destined to either love golf or hate it. Her father, Mark, is a PGA professional at Cross Creek Plantation in Seneca, and, as a kid, Austin spent many hours at the club. Austin's older brother Drew was a top-ranking high school golfer, and the family toured around the Southeast watching him compete. But despite growing up surrounded by golf, Austin was never pushed into the game. "There was never any pressure to play," she says. "As a kid I played everything, softball in the spring, basketball in the winter, then golf in the summer. When I got to be twelve, I said, 'okay, I'm just going to play golf,' because that was what I was the best at, that's what I enjoyed doing the most. I would spend the days at Cross Creek and play with the ladies in the mornings, then with the cart boys in the afternoon, and we'd play until dark."

A combination of natural talent and dedication propelled Austin from casual player to formidable competitor. In 2007, she was the South Carolina 3A State Champion. Soon after, she was named South Carolina's Player of the Year and ranked sixth in the nation in the *Golfweek* rankings. After graduating from Seneca High, Austin played two seasons at LSU, where as a freshman she won the NCAA Division I Women's Golf Championship. "I'd always wanted to turn pro," she says. "But winning that title was when it changed from something I wanted to do to something I knew I could do."

Austin left LSU in 2012 and focused her sites on the LPGA Tour. On her first attempt, she finished fourteenth at the 2012 LPGA Final Qualifying Tournament earning her full professional tour status for the 2013 season. "The biggest thing from going from amateur golf to professional golf is that you just play so much more," Austin says. "I've already played eleven tournaments this year. A typical structure for me is to play three weeks in a row, then have a week at home, then go back out for three weeks. It's about managing your time and how much you play. That's the biggest thing your rookie year—you don't know how many weeks your body and your mind can take."

It didn't take long for Austin to find the right balance. In 2014, at the age of twenty-two, she won the Portland Classic LPGA event on the first hole of a sudden-death playoff. "That was an awesome experience," she


says. "My brother caddies for me, and my dad is my swing coach. To have Drew by my side the whole time and be able to share that win with him and my dad made it even more special."

Austin generally divides her time between the tour and her home in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. But occasionally she can be found relaxing on a pontoon boat tracking across Lake Keowee. "I spend a lot of time on the lake," she says. "My parents still live in Seneca and when I have off weeks I go there. That's where I like to be when I'm not playing golf." Of course Austin is rarely not playing golf. Even when visiting her parents and enjoying the lake she still has her day job to think of. "The Cliffs are one of my partners," she says. "They have seven great properties, and they give me a place to practice when I'm back home."

The Cliffs also hosts Austin's yearly charity tournament supporting Safe Harbor, a non-profit organization that provides safe shelter, counseling, and advocacy for victims of domestic violence. "A few years ago my parents told me that South Carolina was the worst state for domestic violence, and that the county I'm from, Oconee County, was number one in the state," Austin says. "So essentially I grew up in the worst place in the country for domestic violence. I heard about Safe Harbor and thought it was the perfect way for me to give back to the community."

## In the Club:

*Seneca-raised Austin Ernst is in her sixth season on the LPGA Tour, with one tour win already in the bag. Ernst, who is The Cliffs brand ambassador, will host a charity tournament for Safe Harbor at the Walnut Cove course in Arden, North Carolina, on Monday, August 13.*

With one tour win to her name, Austin is eager to add more victories in the seasons to come. Her focus now is to get a little better every day, a goal shared by her competitors, many of whom are also her friends. "We all want to win," she says. "But at the end of the day if I can't win, I want to see one of my friends win. One of my best friends on tour is Jessica Korda; she's won once this year. It pushes me to win because I want to one-up her." 



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