Special Feature

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CLIMAX - It really doesn't matter how the Providence Grove High School girls golf team will do Monday and Tuesday at the NCHSAA State 3-A meet, which will be held at Longleaf Golf Club in Southern Pines. There is already reason to celebrate what has turned out to be a campaign that surpassed everyone's expectations.

Prior to the start of the season, it was really unclear if the Patriots would even have an official team as top player Adi Johnson and Kaleigh Kirkman needed a third player in order for PG to qualify as a team. In stepped Campbell Ziemba, who had never even picked up a golf club prior to joining the team and the trio went on not only to qualify for the regionals, but as a team qualified for this year's state meet.

The team has come a long way in a short period of time.

"I had one girl who really came out and did it (Johnson) and my other two girls have exceeded my expectations better than I ever could have imagined," said fourth-year golf coach Allie Nelson, who is taking her third team to the state meet. "They have definitely put the work in and I couldn't be happier or more proud of them."

Johnson has excelled once again in her sophomore season. She won a tightly-contested Central Carolina Conference Championship by shooting a 94, one shot better than East Davidson's McKenna Rust and three shots better than ED's Kaley Pham. She then placed third at the state 3-A regional match held at Seven Lakes Golf Course near Pinehurst.

She is in her second straight state match after finishing 30th last year as a freshman. Johnson, Megan Oakley, who placed fourth in the state last year, and Olivia Coleman, who tied for 31st, sparked PG to a fourth-place finish at the state meet in 2025.

Johnson has been providing even better scores this season.

"She has really stepped up to the plate and taken on that number one spot for our school and has done nothing but improve her golf game from last year," Nelson said. "Every day she wants to get better. She pushes me to become a better coach and I just love being able to come out here and coach the sport that I love."

With one golfer firmly in place for this season, Nelson said she knew she had another in returning golfer Kirkman, who showed steady development throughout last season.

"Kaleigh played last year and she was doing very well at the end of the season," Nelson said. "She came out this year and is doing even better than last year. She's helped us make it to the regionals and make it to states."



Coach Allie Nelson, Kaleigh Kirkman, Adi Johnson and Campbell Ziemba. Photo provided.

Campbell, who has enjoyed a stellar softball career at PG, told her friends she would give golf a try in order for PG to be able to compete as a team.

"Campbell actually came out here as a favor so we could have three girls and have a team," Nelson said. "I couldn't be more grateful to have her come out here and be on the team. She had never picked up a club until this season. She is a great listener and a great learner."

There were some rough times early for the Patriots.

"When we started, it was a big struggle," Nelson said. "From our first match until now, they have definitely improved."

Last year's state 3-A meet was reduced to just one round because of weather. That is a situation Nelson said they are hoping to avoid this time around.

"It was hard because the second day can change any of these school's scores," she said.

Staying strong mentally will certainly be the key Monday and Tuesday, much like it has been all season long. Nelson said Johnson has shared that advice with her teammates prior to the state match.

"She told them it's a big mental game," Nelson said. "She's had to overcome not letting one bad hole on the golf course get to her. She tells the girls don't let one shot ruin the rest of your game because there are a lot of holes to play."

There may have been a bad hole or two during the course of the two-day tournament. But that just didn't matter. Only one thing truly did.

"I told them, 'you guys just need to go out and play your golf game and enjoy it'," Nelson said. "All I want them to do is have fun out there."

Surely that is what they will do.

The NCHSAA state 6-A golf championship features Asheboro High School's Paige Kotlowski, and the 4-A meet includes Southwestern Randolph's Dani Jaeck and Randleman's Layla White.