



# *Mija, tú puedes* SoCal and the rise of Latina golfers

It was lizard who found the sun.

She'd been looking for it for ages, crawling over mountains and around cacti, across cold sands and through the darkness that had come when the sun went missing. One by one the other creatures had given up, all except lizard. And when she found it, sleeping under a rock in the desert, and it was awakened, she was hailed by all for her determination. The Aztecs said this is why lizards like to spend their days in the sun's warmth, celebrating the time when one of their own overcame great odds and found the light.

"I have a flag with her signature on it," says Cassandra Espinosa, remembering the time she met Lorena Ochoa. The first Mexican golfer of either gender to become World No.1, Ochoa was great, Cassandra says. "She was really nice to us."

Cassandra is 11 years old and, like her 8-year-old sister Angelique, she's a golfer. Sitting in the cool of the small clubhouse at Arcadia Par 3 Golf Course just east of Los Angeles, the girls are enjoying the shade. Outside, it's brutal. Leave your clubs in the sun for a few minutes and you can't even touch them. And yet the girls are here to practice, as they are so often.

Dreams of playing on a high school team, a college scholarship, the LPGA... Those are here, too, at the table with the girls and their parents, Alfonso and Nena. A few years ago such dreams might have sounded far-fetched coming from two young Latinas east of LA, but because of the flag—or more precisely, because

of the signature on it—and because today there are three Latinas on the LPGA tour where there used to be only one, such dreams now sound entirely possible. That the girls are playing at all is significant, part of an emerging trend that is as important to the game's survival as it is to the Latino community as whole. At a time when golf's numbers are going in the wrong direction, the community can provide players, fans, viewers, and part of a future. And in turn golf can provide the community with a business tool, cultural expansion, chances at education and, at the very top, the kind of success born of young girls' dreams. The Espinosa girls know all of this, and their generation of Latinas might have the clearest view yet of where the game can take them. But for Cassandra and Angelique, born around the time Ochoa retired and President Obama came into office, let's consider where Latinas in the game have been. →

World War II still had nearly a year to go when American golfing women got their first pro tour: the Women's Professional Golf Association. It, and later the Ladies Professional Golf Association (founded in 1950), were open to all ethnicities from day one. In contrast, the PGA TOUR (founded in 1929) didn't eliminate its "Caucasians-only" clause until 1961. And yet America would see both the end of WWII and the movie *Star Wars* before it saw its first pro Latina golfer. Nancy Lopez, the Mexican-American daughter of a mechanic in Roswell, New Mexico, burst onto the scene in 1978 with a rookie year for the ages: Nine victories, five consecutively, and all kinds of awards. She was a household name from the start, as much for her charms as for her skills on course, and so Lopez was immediately famous in the Latino community—even if they didn't know what she did exactly.

"I became aware of Nancy Lopez at first not because I was a golfer, but because she was such an important figure," says Azucena Maldonado, founder of the Latina Golfers Association. "She was one of these people we celebrated in Hispanic Heritage month. It wasn't until I really started golfing 15 years ago that it all came full circle and, *Oh my God!* Now I realize the importance of her, and to know that a Latina played such an important role in the world of golf made me super proud."

Inspired by Lopez and by her own personal journey as a woman who found that golf opened doors, Maldonado founded the LGA to get more Latinas playing. Over nearly a decade she's connected thousands of women to golf in the belief that the game brings success on and off course, especially as a networking tool. She and the LGA members also have taken a keen interest in supporting potential future pros, raising money to cover expenses, cheering them at tournaments, and stepping in to help when possible. When current LPGA player Lee Lopez turned pro, one of her first sponsors was Vivacity Sportswear, owned by LGA member Vivian Ricuarte Sayward. And before Lizette Salas found an agent, Azucena says she helped the three-time Solheim team member with PR and media. Looking forward to more Latinas in the pro ranks,



L-R above: Stephanie Gonzalez, Azucena Maldonado, Desiree Dominguez; Nancy Lopez (opposite); Briana Chacon (below); Espinosa sisters (previous)



Maldonado is thrilled with the potential, but she says obstacles remain, and one in particular:

"It really does come down to money," she says. There are plenty of programs that get kids into golf, "but what happens when that youngster ends up being really good—is that family prepared to take that young girl to the next level? And many times they're not because, number one, they know nothing about golf. They don't understand how to maneuver the junior golf competition world, which is pretty immense and pretty complicated. And then they need financial resources to travel to wherever these tournaments are going to be, and that is the track that they're going to be on if their daughter is going to be a professional golfer. There is still a gap there that we need to bridge."

If you talk with junior golf instructors in Southern California (SoCal), Hispanic participation is up in communities historically challenged economically—way up, and so those cost questions are only going to become more pressing.

"Junior golf has changed so much in the last 10 to 15 years," says Stephanie Gonzalez, 20, a part-time teacher with the Southern California Golf Association's junior program and a student at Texas A&M International, who played golf there her freshman year. Raised in the same area as Salas and Lee Lopez, Gonzalez played on her high school boys



golf team (like Salas, her school had no girls team) and says her journey through the game didn't come with many resources—a point underlined at competitions.

"I'd go to tournaments and see girls and it's like, 'Wow! Where did she come from?' And my coach is like, 'Oh that's so-and-so. She's the fifth generation from this country club... She's had four instructors and all this.' It's like, *Man!*

"Even in our instruction program, I've heard stories where kids are like, 'Hey, I can't be in the program because my mom had to use that money for rent.'"

Gonzalez's friend Desiree Dominguez, 25, who runs the SCGA's junior program at Bell Gardens, agrees, but points to a massive uptick in participation regardless. "It's like the Heartwell [junior golf] program in Long Beach," she says. "When I was in it I didn't have to wait. Now I heard you have to wait like six months or something... When I went to [high] school, none of my friends golfed. It was not the cool thing to do."

Acceptance came, she says, the longer she stuck with it and the better she played. But it never got easy. "It's like that saying: 'It's not what you know it's who you know.' I feel, like, no disrespect to them, but there are some kids, they have that where it's 'My dad's in a country club. He knows this person, he knows that person.' That's good, but for us, there's no one. It's us pushing and getting our name out there instead of somebody just being like, 'Oh, here you go.'"

One girl getting her name out there is Briana Chacon, a 15-year-old top-ranked junior golfer from Whittier. On a Wednesday this August, she was finding space for the first-place trophy she'd won the day before at a junior tour event in Coto de Caza and preparing for a weekend qualifier for the U.S. Women's Amateur.

For Briana, lessons started near the age of 5, junior golf tournaments at 7, and by the time she was 9, 10, and 11 years old, she was winning everything. Her father, Oscar, moved her up to a tougher division where she sometimes played against girls headed for college, and while the trophy stream slowed down he says her competitive nature was sharpened, and it's only been good for her game. Working with her coach, Greg Castleman, whom Oscar praises for putting Briana in a "competitive position," she's already earned a full ride to Oregon State, despite still having a year left at La Serna High School.

"Ever since I was little, it was my goal to get a full ride to a [Division I] school," Briana says. "I want to try to go pro after college. I mean, I've always strived for that since I was 6 years old."

Such determination. Who was her inspiration? "I mean, they're kinda before my time," she says, mentioning Nancy Lopez and Lorena Ochoa.

"But when I was about 10 I met Lee Lopez and I always saw myself in her, always wanted to be

It's us pushing and getting ahead instead of someone being like, 'Oh, here you go'



## I'm very proud of my parents and their hard work, and I'm very proud to be a Latina

exactly like her. She was such a successful golfer at a young age, and she inspired me to work hard and to work toward my dreams. She's my main role model."

Lee, who joined the LPGA Tour in 2016, is 11 years older than Briana; there's a 24-year age difference between Nancy Lopez and Ochoa. Lee learned to golf with her father, as many Latinas do, and like many Latinas she stressed that her family's and her community's support were crucial to her success. If Lee didn't have her choice of role models, as today's girls do, there was at least one:

"My room was full of books, a couple of landscape pictures, and a poster of Lorena... The only golfer who ever made my wall was Lorena Ochoa," she says.

Lee was on the first girls golf team ever at La Serna High School, where Briana now goes, and she was the first there to earn a golf scholarship—to Long Beach State, from which she transferred to UCLA in 2009.

"College, that's when we really got spoiled," she says. "I didn't use a golf glove until my first year of college. They were so expensive—they cost like \$24 or something!"

Lee's college experience sounds like that of a foreign student, and speaking from her home in Mexico Lorena Ochoa suggests as much.

"I'd never seen that equipment, those facilities," she says, describing her arrival to University of Arizona. "It's just beautiful in the States. Once you get there and are making so many sacrifices, coming from a long distance, sometimes you just take more advantage of the opportunity... If you are giving up your family and your language and you are away making a really big change, you open your eyes to how lucky you are to be able to play there, you don't take things for granted, and so you work maybe harder and take more advantage."

"It was everything to us," Lee says. "Yes, I earned a full scholarship but my parents invested a tremendous amount of their time and money when I was growing up. It's frustrating to hear people say to my dad, 'You're so lucky, your daughter got a scholarship.' No, my dad paid for that scholarship."

Lee spent her childhood winters in Mexico and says Spanish was her first language. Visiting family there and hearing her parents' stories—her mother arrived in the U.S. at 17 and her father near the age of 12, she says—grounded her.

"They grew up very, very poor," she says. "It was hard for them. For them to be able to dream, to think 'maybe we can have an educated Latina and set a good example for everyone...' I'm very proud of them and their hard work and I'm very proud to be a Latina."

Though she acknowledges that some in the Hispanic community see golf as "a rich old white man's sport," to quote an oft-repeated stereotype, she doesn't see the barrier to Latina participation being cultural per se.

"The bigger issue is how difficult it is for low-income students, regardless of your heritage or your background," she says. "A child with a wealthy background... they can have 10 chances trying to find something to do with their lives. A kid from a poor barrio has one chance."

For her, she says, "The odds were very small and they were not in my or Lizette's favor."

Lizette Salas, who grew up near Lee's neighborhood, and Gerina Mendoza Piller, who like Nancy Lopez grew up in Roswell, bridge the pro Latina gap between Ochoa and Lee Lopez, and neither had it easy. ○→



**Top:** Lee Lopez;  
**Below:** Gerina Piller & Lorena Ochoa



I live 15 minutes from where I grew up. My family and culture are very important to me; I don't plan on leaving

As *ESPN* reported following Piller's strong performance but heartbreaking loss at the Olympics last year, the pro only took up golf (at the age of 15) because her family thought it was her best shot at getting to college. She did that, at University of Texas El Paso, made the LPGA Tour in 2010 and then the Olympic team.

For Lizette's part, a 2012 *New York Times* profile pointed out that, at the time, "nearly 82 percent of the students in the high school Salas attended are categorized as 'socioeconomically disadvantaged.'" The article also detailed Lizette's and her father's lives when she began playing on what was then the FUTURES Tour (now Symetra), logging 15,000 miles in his Toyota pickup and sleeping in rest areas at night with Lizette in the cab and her father, Ramon, "stretched out in the bed of the truck beside his daughter's golf clubs."

"That's true," she says today, approaching her third Solheim Appearance. "Where I went to high school in Azusa, all of my classmates didn't even realize there was a golf course in our town.

"My dad was a mechanic, and I think I got pretty lucky," she says. Her dad worked out a deal with a golf pro friend, Jerry Herrera, that in exchange for handyman work at Herrera's house and around the course where he taught, the pro would teach Lizette on Saturdays.

Saturdays turned into a couple of times per week, then came junior tournament victories, then high school and playing on the boys team (there was no girls golf team at Azusa), then USC and here she is, following in the very few footsteps that came before her.

"Nancy [Lopez]," Lizette says. "That's who I started looking up to. Even though it's different decades I kind of related to her story and how her dad introduced her to the game. He was a big part of her career, and I have a similar relationship with my dad.

"I live 15 minutes from where I grew up. My culture

Lizette Salas

and family are definitely important to me. I love my family, adore my family... My parents still live in the same home I grew up in. When I'm home I still practice at the same course I grew up at. I don't plan on leaving."

While she's been on tour, Lizette's father and Herrera launched San Gabriel Junior Golf, a program to help area kids with life as much as with the game, and it is a success. Lizette has helped with that as much as an LPGA player can, also leading by example from afar, as she did at this year's U.S. Women's Open when she played despite some protests regarding the host course's owner, President Trump, and his charged relationship with the Hispanic community.

"I said, 'I think I make a better difference if I play, even with all of the commotion going on,'" she says. "I think I make a bigger statement and a bigger impact for golf in general, for myself, my family, and my country. Now it would be even a bigger statement if Hispanics took up the game."

Lee Lopez will understand that, as will Stephanie Gonzalez and Desiree Dominguez. Perhaps Briana will as well. But for the Espinosa sisters and for other young Latinas across the country, the idea that they could be making a statement simply by playing golf might be tough to fully grasp just now, young as they are. And maybe that's OK, because isn't that the point, that golf is everyone's game? One day soon the courses could be full of Latinas making their dreams come true. For now, there's Lizette, Gerina, Lee. Today more than ever, little girls can see the light on the path.

"There's this universal Spanish phrase," Lizette says: "*¡Sí se puede!* It means 'Yes we can!' So my father always says it to me before I tee off on the first: *Mija, tú puedes*—'My daughter, you can do it.' And you know, those three words go a long way."