

Strand Drives Nebraska Golf Forward with Historic Start

At the secluded golf course located just outside the small town of Challis, Idaho, Kelli Ann Strand takes her stance at the blue tees. She settles the Titleist-labeled ball on the right side of the eighth tee box, knowing there's a tricky creek waiting for her drive at the end of the long fairway.

Beautiful, brown-chiseled mountains engulf the 6,497-yard course that serves as the exclusive golf destination in the town. Natural rivers on both sides of the greens provide a calming atmosphere that enhance the natural beauty of the bowl-like course.

The green-stained ball stares at her as she settles her feet into position. With the course being the only one in the area, her outings have shifted to practicing match-like shots rather than aiming for the lowest score.

No. 8 has forever been a personal favorite of hers, both because of its difficulty and the confidence she gains from completing it. It's a par four littered with ups and downs that have mirrored Strand's career path to this point.

"I'll always love the challenge hole eight gives me, and it was the first one I took a chance on," Strand recalled. "When I was 14, I decided that I'd try and drive the hole and sure enough I hit my driver 280 yards onto the green."

Impressive for such a young golfer, but the ability to strike the ball has never been a problem for the Idaho native. In fact, it's one of the strongest parts of her game and reaffirms what Strand's current head coach, Nebraska's Jeanne Sutherland, has raved about.

"Physically, she is a great ball-striker and hits the ball in line which is tough to coach," Sutherland said. "She also has a very personal aversion to bogeys and it seems to me she will do about anything she can to not make a bogey."

Strand chuckled when hearing her coach's comments, but seemingly took it to heart based on her accomplishments thus far.

It all started with just a ball and a net. Sounds simple enough. With the unpredictable weather that comes with living in the heart of Idaho, Strand was forced to get creative when practicing her game.

While others in warm-weather states enjoyed the luxury of being able to golf year-round, Strand knew she needed to even the playing field. So, she pieced together a net in her two-car garage and stretched out a putting green in her living room, like a rug the way it covered the floor.

“Obviously being from Idaho means I can’t play all the time outside and get the real-life practice I need during the winter,” Strand said. “I literally just grabbed an old net in our storage area and set up a green inside the house to practice.”

Her strong game and decorated resume speak for her commitment to practice over the years.

Strand is a three-time Class 2A State Champion, a three-time Idaho Golf Association Junior Amateur champion and a Division I recruit. Oh, and she never lost an individual match during her high school career.

At age 14, she participated in her first Idaho Women’s State Amateur in Boise, competing against several collegiate golfers at the time.

“It gave me a true test when I was younger and it’s something that has prepared me for what I’m seeing at the college level today,” Strand said. “I wouldn’t trade that experience for anything.”

Although, you’d never know how good she is if you met her. Just like Strand’s genuine hometown 60 miles from the next closest community, Strand is as humble as they come.

“I just like to go out there and compete and let everything else work itself out,” Strand said. “Golf is such a mental game that focusing on staying calm and level-headed does more for me than you’d think.”

Standing as the biggest town in Custer County, albeit with only 1,000 total residents, Challis is home to a pair of schools. Her mother, Stephanie Strand, teaches elementary students at the K-5 learning center with the other serving as a combined junior and high school.

Strand was the valedictorian of her class and graduated alongside 15 other people, with just one other girl in her class. Not uncommon for small towns in Idaho, but still puts into perspective how tight knit her school and community is.

“Everyone knows everyone in Challis and it’s nice to know people are looking out for you,” Strand said. “That’s what I’ll always love most about that place.”

However, if just one golf course and the sporadic weather wasn’t challenging enough, Challis High School did not field a varsity team while she was there. Well, that is before Strand decided to build one from the ground up.

Strand went to her older brother, Lane, who shares the same love and passion for the game that both have played since they were kids. Strand can recall becoming enamored with the sport after traveling tirelessly to numerous golfing clinics with him as an eight-year-old.

Together they have risen through the ranks to playing collegiately. The two remain close still as he finds himself playing Division II golf in Idaho, with Kelli Ann at Nebraska. Both constantly encourage one another to achieve those dreams they had over a decade ago.

“She and I did so many things together growing up, and golf was just one of those things that we both had a knack for,” Lane said. “It brought us closer than we already were and to this day is something we both can relate to during our bad days.”

Knowing they needed a minimum of six players to officially register a team, they began to recruit anyone who would listen. And frankly anyone who had the free time. Almost all who joined never had any interest in playing golf or had even picked up a golf club before.

Against all odds, Challis fielded a golf team in 2020 and even earned a postseason berth that year in state with her uncle at the helm. Suffice to say, golf runs in the family for the Strands.

Although the Challis native didn’t technically take on a coaching role, Strand’s expertise played a large role in the team’s development. It’s where she found her knack to lead by example and realized that golf is a team game at its roots.

Flash forward to present day and Challis High School has fielded competitive boys’ and girls’ golf teams, for the last three seasons, thanks in large part to the legacy the Strands have left behind.

“I still keep in contact with a lot of people from my school, and some of them still wish me good luck before tournaments,” Strand said. “It just represents what the town of Challis is about and what it taught me.”

Growing up over the summers, when she wasn’t golfing, Strand would help at her family-owned shop 60 miles southwest in Stanley, Idaho. River 1 is a local shop owned by her parents that serves as a multi-purpose store in the mountains selling home-brewed coffee and outdoor-brand clothing.

The store’s name, “River 1”, originates from its proximity to the Salmon River, and the jaw-dropping scenery that surrounds the property. Being in the mountains is not out of the ordinary for Strand, who enjoys spending every second she can outside with her loved ones.

“Every day as a kid over the summer I was either at my family’s shop or on the course,” Strand said. “I really didn’t have time for anything else besides golf, school and family and I hoped it would pay off down the line.”

Safe to say it paid off.

In November of 2021, Strand accepted a full-ride scholarship to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and signed her letter of intent. Not only is she the first golfer in recent memory to come out of Challis, but certainly the first to ever compete in the Big Ten Conference.

The genuine people in the Cornhusker State remind her a lot of her cozy home in Challis. Along with the unmatched academic resources the university provides, she said it was an easy decision to choose UNL. It’s a choice that has paid off early in the season with the Huskers.

Although the first few weeks of adjustment to college were tough, the 18-year-old has adjusted accordingly and continues to improve and become more comfortable day-by-day.

Now, amid her first season with the Huskers, Strand has already garnered national attention through her first two matches.

In her first ever college tournament, Strand tied a freshman school record when she shot a 202 at the Green Wave Classic in New Orleans. The performance earned her Big Ten Golfer of the Week, and helped NU set a new school record for a three-round team total.

“That first tournament was a lot of fun and a memory that I’ll keep with me for the rest of my life,” Strand said. “It’s not every day you win a collegiate tournament, let alone your first one ever.”

With the season still relatively young, Strand is determined to bring that energy and leadership she displayed in Challis to her current team. Her drive and competitive nature have helped her grow both on and off the course as a golfer, and also more importantly as a human being.

However, if there’s one thing small-town Challis taught her, it’s that golf is more than just results and numbers, but rather the relationships you build during the process.

“In my four years here, I want to be the best golfer I can while also being the best teammate I can be,” Strand said. “If all that happens, then I know I’ve done my job.”