

[← Back to Original Article](#)

Southern California Careers / Dream Jobs : One Professional Golf Junkie Who's Having a Ball

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Humorist James Thurber once mused that the most pleasurable job imaginable would be "that of batting baseballs through the windows of the RCA Building."

Unfortunately, such a position doesn't exist and, with corporate downsizing, seems unlikely to be created soon.

But take heart, sports fans, there are some dream careers out there.

To a professional golf junkie, for instance, Susan Naylor's job must seem like heaven.

Naylor, co-owner of Darrell Survey Co., works "inside the ropes" at top tournaments around the country, verifying the make and model of clubs, balls, bags, shoes and other equipment used by the pros.

From Pebble Beach to Ponte Vedra, Naylor and her cadre of well-trained snoops follow the regular men's and women's tours, the Senior PGA Tour and the Nike Tour for developing pros--about 150 tournaments a year.

"I call us sometimes the referee between the players and the manufacturers," Naylor, 42, says one recent afternoon at the company's modest suite of offices in West Los Angeles.

To the uninitiated, it might seem to matter little whether the driver that a walloper like John Daly pulls out of his bag is a Callaway or a Wilson. You know he's going to crush the ball regardless.

But it matters urgently to Callaway and Wilson. (In Daly's case, by the way, it's a Wilson.)

Americans buy about \$1.3 billion worth of golf equipment a year, and many manufacturers think the best way to cut themselves a fatter slice of that pie is to persuade Saturday morning duffers that what works for their idols on the tour also will work for them.

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As sophisticated as the technology has become--titanium club heads, graphite shafts, computer-designed "dimples" on the ball--simple endorsements from the top players, plus "the count" from the Darrell Survey, have remained staples of golf advertising for years.

Getting an impartial and accurate count of who uses what is thus of paramount concern to the manufacturers, who subscribe to Darrell Survey Co.'s regular reports.

The reports show, for example, that 42 of 121 entrants in the Ladies Professional Golf Assn.'s Nabisco Dinah Shore Tournament in Rancho Mirage last March used Ping irons, or that, despite the growing popularity of graphite, steel still held sway at the PGA Tour's Kmart Greater Greensboro Open in April, where 72% of the irons in play had steel shafts.

Naylor, who studied art, philosophy and religion at San Diego State University and worked summers selling golf

equipment at a pro shop, is not a statistician by training. But she has a statistician's reverence for numbers.

"We try hard to see that it's accurate," she says. "You feel like a little part of golf history."

Unlike some statistical surveys, the Darrell reports are not based on samples. If Darrell tells you that 69 women at Dinah Shore hit Titleist balls, that means that a pair of human eyes--behind a pair of binoculars--verified each ball.

In the case of clubs, Darrell Survey representatives are allowed onto the first tee at most tournaments to rummage through the golfers' bags as they prepare to tee off.

The players, a superstitious lot who ordinarily wouldn't dream of letting anyone touch the tools of their trade, cooperate with Naylor and her crew because they realize that independent verification helps them. Manufacturers pay top golfers endorsement fees that run into six figures or higher.

"About 10 times a year, a player needs help with verification because of a dispute with a manufacturer," Naylor says. When that happens, she's proud that companies and players trust her as the final arbiter.

Besides, it's fun.

Naylor recalls once standing in the throng of spectators surrounding a green at the Masters tournament in Augusta while Arnold Palmer was putting. Palmer spotted her and came striding into the crowd with a huge grin. "Susie, what are you doing here?" he exclaimed, giving her a big kiss.

Even from a crowd-pleaser like Palmer, ordinary fans don't expect that kind of treatment.

Naylor's career track wasn't necessarily an orthodox one.

"These days, people seem to be groomed for one occupation, but my career sort of evolved naturally," she says.

Naylor's father was a golf equipment salesman who toured the Midwest and made friends with many people in the game. One of his best friends was Eddie Darrell, a rotund and colorful promoter for a golf-ball maker that used to sponsor challenge matches between top players in the 1930s, before there was a regular pro tour.

Even in those Depression-era days, stars such as Walter Hagen could earn a fortune endorsing equipment. The shrewd Darrell was first to recognize that manufacturers would pay for independent verification that their promotional fees were translating into product visibility on the links.

So Darrell founded Darrell Survey Co. and became golf's original Sherlock Holmes, notebook and binoculars in hand. He followed the tour personally, living out of his station wagon for half the year.

Darrell's wife, Virginia, kept the company going after his death in the early 1970s, but as she got into her 70s, the physical demands overwhelmed her. Who better to turn to than Naylor, 20-year-old daughter of her husband's longtime friend?

After traveling coast-to-coast with Virginia Darrell for several years, Naylor finally bought the company in 1980 and enlisted her younger brother, John Minkley, as a partner a year later.

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Naylor has added computers to the home office to help publish the reports and has expanded her network of regular spotters at tournaments to more than a dozen. The basic methods and philosophy, however, are unchanged from the days when Eddie Darrell ran the show out of his car.

Although Naylor is more of an administrator now than a full-time snoop, she personally visits about 35 tournaments a year to maintain contacts with the players and equipment makers who are her constituents. And she can still tell a Spalding from a Taylor Made at a glance.

"We've kept the company hands-on," Naylor says. "It started as a family business and we're trying to keep it that way."

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