

NOT BLACK

NOT WHITE

GRACE

A change of heart for the LPGA's **JULIA BOLAND**

Julia Boland is not, in her own words, crazy about golf. When she arrived on the LPGA Tour in 2013, she couldn't identify more than a handful of players—those she had played with in college and her Hall of Fame countrywoman, Karrie Webb. Beyond that, even if you'd won a major, Boland had no idea who you were. How could she? She refuses to watch Golf Channel.

Hailing from Tamworth, New South Wales, Australia, Boland grew up as many Aussies do: in love with sports. But the interest was as much personal as national for a girl who was the youngest of four children. "I just wanted something where I could compete against my siblings," she says.

In her small hometown, golf was truly popular, but you were not allowed to tee it up on the course until you were 12 years old. "It always killed me that my siblings were out playing and I didn't have the opportunity. So when I finally turned 12, it was like, *Wow! I finally get to play this awesome sport.*"

With an attitude like that, Boland pushed past the fact that she was the only girl in town who played the game, and her skills progressed. But in her mind, golf was only second. Basketball held her interest more, and she thought it might even be her avenue into professional sports. After graduating from high school, though, she took a year off to earn some money for college, and the offers that arrived in the meantime were for golf, not basketball. She paid no attention.

"That's a story in itself," she explains. "I got sent the application and I ignored it. My father would get on my back about it. After a while he went ahead and applied for me. So when I got the phone call and they said, 'Congratulations, you're in,' I had no idea what it was for! But my dad felt like I had a chance, so that was kind of cool."

At university in Australia, Boland's game only inched ahead. She didn't like to practice and firmly denied any interest in turning pro. But as she moved toward graduation in 2008, the financial crisis hit Australia and job prospects were



thin. So she started to travel, "almost playing professional amateur golf," as she describes it. "I wasn't being paid to play, but I was being supported to travel around Australia and play golf. At that point I thought, *Wow, this is pretty cool.*" So after graduation, she stuck with it, squarreling away what little money she made working between golf stops.

Now her game did improve, and as the top-ranked amateur in Australia she received a \$10,000 scholarship to spend a week with Webb at the U.S. Open. She packed her bags and stretched the dollars across Europe and Canada before arriving in the United States.

"I got to play all the major amateur events, and I did really poorly in Europe," Boland recalls. "I really thought I would enjoy Europe, and always thought that if I did turn pro it would be in Europe."

"And then I came to America. I was not looking forward to America; I did not have any intention of living here. But I kind of started playing well, and I really enjoyed it. I was spending a lot of time in the South and I thought, *These Southerners are really nice and serve good food!* I won a tournament, the Trans-Amateur, and because I climbed to sixth in the world, I was offered an opportunity to come to Texas A&M for

my master's degree."

Boland's university play in Australia left her with only one year of NCAA eligibility, but she played that year, winning three college tournaments. Her second year at A&M, she helped coach the team and it was during that stint that she began to recognize a desire to play the sport professionally.

"I wanted to give it a shot," she says. "I was certainly prayerful about it. It's funny that I say that now, because I'm not actually sure I knew God. I could define grace for you and spit out Bible verses, but I didn't know what it meant to me personally."

A sponsor, Alvarez and Marsal, stepped up at a time when Boland didn't have money even to fly home to Australia, let alone to get a visa or pay for the qualifying tournament. She didn't make the LPGA Tour first time out, but she did do well enough to get a card for the Symetra Tour, the LPGA's developmental circuit.

Her game was steady there but not impressive. "I was always sort of up around contention but could never cross the line," she says.

In June of 2012, the week after Boland missed a cut, the tour moved to South Bend, Indiana, for a Symetra major, the Four Winds Championship. Boland went 4-under on a tough golf course and edged former U.S. Open champion Birdie Kim and Jenny Suh by a shot to win the tournament, catapulting her up the money list and setting her up to gain an LPGA Tour card for 2013.

"I'm not an avid golfer at all," she confesses. "But obviously I knew what the LPGA Tour was, and all golfers know that if you want to play for a living, you want to be playing on the LPGA."

Boland's 2013 performance in her rookie year on the LPGA Tour was stronger on lessons learned than money earned. With an early injury also contributing to a limited season, she made just \$216 more during the year than she had in that one Symetra Tour win. The result? A trip back to the qualifying tournament's final stage in December.

That experience was not as successful as she had hoped, but Boland will have places to play in 2014: the Symetra Tour and a few LPGA events, as well as the Women's Australian Open.

Boland has never shied from lessons and challenges, not since her days as a child when she wanted only to prove that she could keep up with her family. But none of these quite prepared her for the eve of the Four Winds Championship that she would go on to win. Her own words carry the story along.

"I remember one night, the Thursday before the tournament that I won. I couldn't get to sleep, and I was sharing with my roommate, my caddie. I was like, 'You need to pray over me because there's something going on that I don't understand.' I was crying and sobbing. I couldn't feel at peace with God. I couldn't feel at peace with myself. I'm not someone who suffers from depression, but if I could imagine what depression is like, I'd imagine it like that. It felt like a huge black pit that I was in and I just couldn't see a way out. It honestly came on really quickly.

"I told her, 'Man, I'm not right with God. This is a big deal. I don't know how I can get right with God, because I've done everything right my whole life.'

"So my friend heard me and she





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encouraged me to pray to God. I'd prayed to God my whole life and I just prayed to God and was sobbing at this point and just being honest with God at this point, saying, 'I've fallen short and I truly understand my depravity.'

"That's when I understood what grace was. Before that I was so black and white. When I had done something that I considered a big sin—God doesn't have that scale, but what I considered a big sin—I was like, 'Well, God can't save that, because I have my own rules and that's a black thing and that's not a gray thing.' That night was the breaking point.

"I'm not sure what it was, a salvation moment. I think I was saved when Jesus died on the cross, but that was the moment when I truly understood grace and I truly saw my deep need for God. It was an incredibly humbling moment."

That night changed Boland's perspective on a lot of things, beginning with God himself and how he relates to us. It also increased her desire in terms of personal mission—what might she do to tell others about Jesus? She found a new boldness on Tour, for one. But she sees far beyond the boundaries of any golf course.

About the same time Boland was moving to America, her parents began traveling to Africa, engaging in work among orphans in Tanzania and Uganda. As an engineer and a teacher, her parents were equipped to help in practical ways, but they were excited to connect with a group called Mosaic Vision, and their excitement spilled over to Julia.

"Everything I've seen about these people is legit," she affirms. "Over 90 percent of every dollar you give goes to the children. The work that they're doing is life-changing, and most importantly they try to tell people about Jesus. There's no point in giving someone hope

in this life if we can't give them hope for the future. Regardless of whether we live in a house or what we've done for our education, we're all going to meet our Maker."

If it sounds like Boland could be Mosaic Vision's spokesperson, that's because she is. And her experience with the work they are doing is not only secondhand. In September of last season, she sat in the LPGA Tour Fellowship with a handful of other players when she asked them for prayer. "My parents leave Friday to go to Uganda," she told them. "It's not safe. There can be a few things that go on, so pray for them." But even as she was making the request, she asked a question of herself, "Why am I not going?" Her season, she knew, was done that week. She prayed with her friends on Wednesday night, got her necessary vaccinations on Friday, and was on a plane to Africa on Saturday.

"I went out every day and did things through Mosaic Vision—for instance, getting down and hugging a child, giving them a Frisbee. Or putting some ointment on some scars or where they have infections. The highlight was trusting God, because in America I would have been like, 'Hey, let's go to the doctor' or 'Let's put some gloves on so I don't get infected by what you have.' Whereas in Uganda, there is really nothing. So you spend so much time praying without ceasing, saying, 'Lord, I can't heal this child, so if you want this child to be healed, they're going to be healed. I feel like I should put this ointment on them. I pray that I don't get infected by this, but Lord, if you want me to get infected, I'm going to get infected anyway.'"

The children Boland saw often lived in box camps, with three stones for a "kitchen" and six dollars in annual income. It's a far cry from being a Tour player, even one who fights to make cuts and collect a paycheck. "Even when I

was struggling on the Symetra Tour," she says, "I still always had food, I always had the ability to put gas in my car and go to the next event. Even though the day I won I had just \$28 in my bank account, I never really have struggled in the way that Ugandans struggle. That's a challenge for us living in a world where we are rich."

Boland, then, effectively lives in two worlds: the clubhouse environment of professional golf's top tours and the dire mud-and-brick domiciles of orphaned children in Africa. The two don't easily align. But like LPGA Hall of Famer Betsy King, whose retirement efforts have centered chiefly on her leadership of Golf Fore Africa, and like Dodger Cy Young Award winner Clayton Kershaw, who each off-season visits Africa with his wife to spend time with the orphans they support, Boland has found a way to meld two rich callings. She pursues the rewards the world upholds as best only because they can afford her the increasing opportunity to minister among those who have no such chance at riches that do not last.

"God opened pathways," she says, "and he opened up a passion in my heart to play golf. I never had that passion. In 1 Corinthians 10:31, we read, 'So whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.' I think right now he's said, 'Julia, you're playing golf.'"

What he'll say next, when her playing days are done—well, that's something Boland can take a pretty good guess at. But since black and white are in her past, since grace is where she wants to live now, she'll let God take control. She'll wait and see what is to come. She knows she can trust him to deliver his best for her. She has seen it many times, in many places. **J**