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Kristen Ambrosino's father and brother both work in commercial real estate, and she remembers something they both used to say while she was growing up that intrigued her.

"Since I was little, I've heard, 'I have a round of golf tomorrow, I need to get some business,'" Ambrosino, now 28 and with her own job in real estate, recalled. "I always thought that it was just an excuse to play and not be in the office. But as I grew in my role in the real estate world, I realized most deals really do start and close on the course."

Ambrosino, of Huntington village, is among a growing number of women of all ages on Long Island and elsewhere in traditionally male-dominated professions who are realizing what men in these jobs have known for more than a century: Playing golf can up your business game.

These women are breaking the "grass ceiling" — literally equalizing the playing field by learning the sport, or brushing up on their golf skills, to boost their chances of career success. There are even groups that have been formed for the express purpose of teaching business-women golf so they can hit the links to network with prospective male clients and other men they deal with as part of work.

"I am seeing more and more women executives taking up the game," said Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA)

commissioner Cathy Engelbert, who is also on the executive committee of the United States Golf Association (USGA). The 58-year-old resident of Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, worked for 33 years at Big Four accounting firm Deloitte and became a partner in 1998.

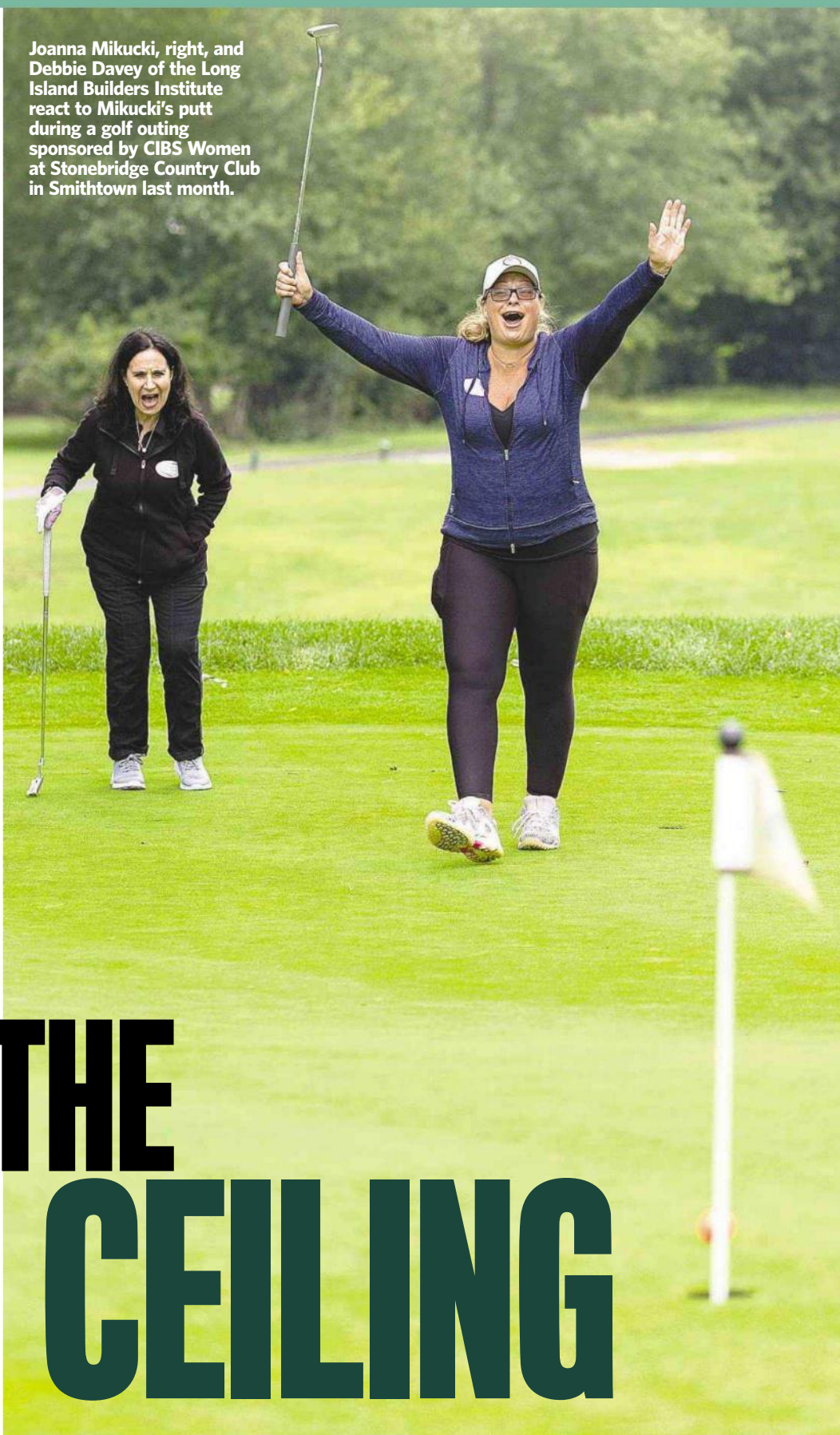
Engelbert said she learned golf for pleasure when she was about 30 years old, but after she had her two children she didn't play much for about 13 years. Then she went back to playing more frequently when she became Deloitte's first female CEO in 2015.

"I started to realize that golf would be an important networking tool, especially as a woman in the C-suite," Engelbert said. "And what really triggered it for me was when I was sitting in the office of a CEO of a Fortune 500 company, and we got to talking about golf." She said they had a "good business conversation"

See GOLF on A32

Professional  
women  
embrace  
golf as way of  
doing business

Joanna Mikucki, right, and Debbie Davey of the Long Island Builders Institute react to Mikucki's putt during a golf outing sponsored by CIBS Women at Stonebridge Country Club in Smithtown last month.



# BREAKING THE GRASS CEILING

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# BREAKING THE GRASS CEILING

## GOLF from A31

and he invited her out for a game. “It was then that I realized how important golf could be to building my network of business leaders.”

Engelbert noted that knowing how to play golf has helped in her basketball job, too.

“Being commissioner of the WNBA requires a lot of relationship-building in an ecosystem that is not that much different than being a leader in the corporate world,” she said. “So now by playing golf, I have built a nice network of sports and corporate executives who also play.”

### ‘Good ol’ boys’ network

At H2M architects + engineers in Melville, senior vice president Mike Gentils has seen a growing number of women join the golf classes he teaches for the firm’s Women’s Leadership Employee Resource Group. The program, designed to teach female professionals the basics of the game, started this year.

Students get lessons on golf

slang and what to expect at a corporate outing, and then head out to the driving range for one-on-one instruction on the proper grip, swing sequences and the function of each club.

Gentils, an Islip resident, said in recent years he’s seen more women at the charitable golf outings he attends as part of H2M’s business development program.

“There are a lot more women in positions of leadership today than there were 10 to 15 years ago,” he said. “It does feel like the ‘good ol’ boys’ network of the past does not strictly apply anymore.”

That “good ol’ boys” mentality in golf culture has been so pervasive that there’s a widely told joke that the word “golf” is an acronym for Gentlemen Only Ladies Forbidden.

Golf as we know it today started in 15th century Scotland where it was enjoyed by both royals and agricultural laborers, with lower-class Scots having raucous games usually involving drinking and playing the game on public land with makeshift



H2M architects + engineers this year launched golf clinics to teach women professionals at the firm the basics of the game; in April, participants tried their hands at the SUNY Farmingdale driving range.

equipment. By the mid-1800s there were private institutions dedicated to playing golf, and by the mid-to-late 19th century American businessmen and other members of the middle class were enjoying the opportunity to escape the city and belong to exclusive clubs with others of their social stature. While others still played golf, clubs with costly and male-only memberships dominated.

One of the reasons golf was said to be appealing to businessmen is because handicapping, which allowed a player’s score to be adjusted according to skill level, made it possible for players of different skill and physical abilities to compete, allowing the worst player a chance to win, unlike in other sports.

New York played a main role in the history of golf when it started becoming the game of choice for affluent businessmen who used to play polo and cricket and hunt together, but found golf more conducive to conversation. St. Andrew’s in Hastings-on-Hudson, founded in 1888 by Scotsman John Reid and some friends as a place where they could get to know potential business associates in a relaxed setting, is one of the oldest golf clubs in the United States. Among its most notable members from that time were tycoons John D. Rockefeller and

Andrew Carnegie.

Ambrosino, a controller at ACC Real Estate Services Inc. in Mineola, is a member of the Commercial Industrial Brokers Society of Long Island (CIBS), and oversees the day-to-day property management of more than 3 million square feet of Long Island real estate that includes residential, office and medical properties. Her duties include maintaining current clients and developing new ones, but she said that because she is a young woman, she can sometimes feel uncomfortable in certain situations.

When Ambrosino decided she needed to learn to play golf to most effectively compete in her profession, she took advantage of golf lessons offered just for professional women as part of CIBS’s component for women — CIBS Women.

“I would say that the majority of people that I work with and

Learning to play golf . . . allows me to connect to others on a more personal level, which I think is very important in trying to create new business.’

— Kristen Ambrosino, 28, of ACC Real Estate Services



BARRY SLOAN





JEFF BACHNER

From left, Patti Kielawa reacts to a missed putt during a round with Elene Bara and Mell Goodman at the Town of Oyster Bay Golf Course.



BARRY SLOAN

Melissa Naeder of Cushman & Wakefield at an outing sponsored by CIBS Women, an arm of the Commercial Industrial Brokers Society.

meet in my industry outside of my company are male,” Ambrosino said. She noted it is typical for the men to go on golf outings with clients, so when CIBS Women introduced golf outings

last year she decided to sign up. “Being a younger woman in the commercial property management world, I have often felt out of place walking into business development events and

being not only one of the youngest people, but also one of the only females,” Ambrosino explained. “Learning to play golf and being able to attend outings — not just networking dinners — allows me to connect to others on a more personal level, which I think is very important in trying to create new business. It creates a more personal connection that meetings and phone calls don’t achieve.”

### Golf ‘reveals personality’

The bucolic setting of a golf course and the nature of the game provide a perfect networking atmosphere for learning a lot about the personality of someone whom you might potentially work with, and for determining the true character of the player, others say.

“Besides being a great game that is played outdoors, usually in a beautiful setting, in what other networking event can someone spend four hours together, playing a game and building camaraderie?” Gentils asked.

Medford resident and Syosset attorney Karen Dowd, 61, is president-elect of the Long Island chapter of the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Amateurs, which has more than 500 members. It was formerly the Executive Women’s Golf Association, founded in 1999 to encourage Long Island women in

largely male businesses to learn golf.

Dowd learned to play around 1993, taking lessons with a friend so they could meet people, and because she had played field hockey and other sports in high school and college and was looking for another athletic outlet. She said she was surprised to find out how good golf was for business.

“In any networking setting, it is about building relationships,” Dowd said. “How you play golf can be an indication of how you will be in business. If you cheat at golf, it gives the impression that you might not be trustworthy in the business setting.” She added, “Also, a round of golf often reveals a person’s personality and whether this person would be easy to work with, or someone who is knowledgeable in their field.”

Another attorney, Loretta Gastwirth of East Hills, says that knowing how to play golf for a lawyer is almost essential.

“Playing golf gives women opportunities to be part of golf outings and client events — that is an important part of marketing,” said Gastwirth, 65.

Melissa Naeder, 49, of Melville, is a senior director for the global real estate services firm Cushman & Wakefield. She is the founder and chair of CIBS Women. Associate member

Patti Kielawa, who is on the CIBS Women board, brought golf to CIBS Women three years ago and is chair of its golf committee.

Kielawa, 63, of Huntington Station, is a Hanover Bank contact officer charged with developing new business and banking relationships nationwide.

“Since I began playing golf with some of my customers, I have been introduced to many prospects,” Kielawa said. “One customer told me [playing golf] was the only way he would introduce me to prospects.”

### Elevating the whole team

Golf allows some men to see women in business as their equals with similar goals, Naeder added.

“I think it elevates the playing field for both men and women,” Naeder said. “At the end of the day we all want to further our business.”

Mell Goodman, owner of the All Boro restoration, remediation and construction company in Amityville, and Arthur M. Katz, owner of Knockout Pest Control Inc. in Uniondale, agreed. Earlier this month they played a match with Kielawa and another CIBS Women member, Elene Bara, 50, of Smithtown. The two men are the women’s customers. Bara is a senior business development manager at Henricksen, a corporate interiors company in Manhattan. She started playing golf three years ago, learning through CIBS Women.

Goodman, 54, of Dix Hills, has been playing golf for 10 years and usually only plays with male golfers at charity events. However, Goodman said, “I actually was taught golf by a woman — she was my sales manager at the time. I find [women] more competitive and it’s good to have them on our team.” He added, “The golf course is a great place to do business. People are relaxed and the common denominator is they want to help each other. And add a few drinks . . .”

Katz, 72, of Jericho, describes himself as an “avid golfer” who learned the game in 2002. He plays three or four times a week, met Bara through a business networking group, and now sometimes invites her to charity events because he enjoys her company. He and Bara teamed up against Kielawa and Goodman, and Kielawa and Goodman won by three strokes.

“Golf is a fun activity,” Katz said, “but you’d be surprised at how much business can transpire.”