

Nancy Lopez: Final Appearance in the U.S. Women's Open

HUTCHINSON, Kan. (AP) – With a tip of her visor and a bow to the crowd, Nancy Lopez closed out another chapter in a remarkable career.

Cheers rang in her ears and tears welled in her eyes Friday as Lopez played for the 25th and final time in the U.S. Women's Open, one more stop on the farewell tour for one of the sport's most beloved and engaging players.

Her round of 79 at the Prairie Dunes Country Club left Lopez at 20-over 160 for the tournament and she missed the cut by a wide margin.

And while it bothered Lopez to play so poorly, it didn't matter to those who applauded her. And applaud they did – from the bleachers, from the hillsides, from the luxury suites and along the fairway.

"Hey Nancy, wooo," one fan yelled. "Go get 'em Nancy," yelled another.

Heck, even most of the media clapped after her interview.

The cheers reached a crescendo as Lopez walked up the 18th fairway. You would have thought she was winning the Open instead of leaving it.

"I knew walking up 18 was going to be tough for me because I knew that I wouldn't be doing that anymore," said Lopez, who has never won the Open and received a special exemption to play in this one. "But I'm just grateful so much to the fans. That made me so emotional.

"Whether you are winning or whether you are losing, it's always a thrill to walk up 18 and feel the love that the people have for not just me, but for the LPGA."

Lopez, 45, is in her 25th year on the LPGA Tour and announced this spring that it would be her last as a full-time player. The last of her 48 tour wins came in 1997.

She has been saluted everywhere she has played and it continued at the Open, where large crowds followed her both days, showing their respect for a player who always has a smile for fans, who tries to sign for every last autograph seeker, who rarely says no.

"I always said yes because I enjoyed talking to people and I have always enjoyed people," Lopez said. "So saying yes wasn't difficult for me. There's a few times I said no because I knew if I didn't I'd be worn out."

Besides, it's what her father, Domingo, taught her. He died April 15 and it's hard for Lopez

to talk about him with stopping to collect herself.

"He was always positive and that's what I have always been taught," Lopez said. "So if I can make somebody feel good by smiling at them or saying hi to them, then I am doing my job, at least for my dad."

She had plenty of chances for that Friday, especially on 18. As she walked toward the green, Patty Sheehan, one of her playing partners, draped an arm around her. At the edge of the green, Lopez turned to face the crowd, tipped her visor and bowed, eliciting an even louder ovation.

On the 10th tee box overlooking the green, Juli Inkster tipped her visor to the threesome below – Lopez, Sheehan and Betsy King, all members of the LPGA Hall of Fame. They waited while Inkster and her group teed off.

"For Nancy, I'm sure it was a wonderful time for her to reflect on her many U.S. Opens that's she played in," Sheehan said.

Actually, what Lopez was reflecting on were her chances of making birdie with a putt from the fringe. She missed it and settled for par.

"I wanted to make that so I could go, `Yeah,'" Lopez said, shaking her hips. "But darn, I didn't make it. But I was just excited because I hit a good tee shot and hit a good second shot even though it went over the green. I wanted to finish with some good shots into 18."

Many of her earlier shots weren't so good, but Lopez kept her sense of humor. She joked with the fans who gathered around her as she prepared to hit from the rough along the 13th fairway.

After holing out on 12, she gave her ball to a fan, Ron Hudson, of Wichita, telling him, "Hey, would you want this ball? It doesn't want to go in for me."

And then there was that final smile for the fans on the last hole. Lopez hugged Sheehan and King, hugged all three caddies, then walked off an Open course for the last time, tears staining her cheeks.

"I love being out here," Lopez said. "I really loved playing this golf course. If I could get out there tomorrow, I would."

This time, though, there truly is no tomorrow.