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Sheri and Brian Horn, left, Fausta Vitali, Carl Stoehr and Jack Bradley have volunteered at the Toshiba Classic for several years.

Volunteers ain't green

Toshiba Classic has a way of keeping folk around; it's been 15 years for Fausta Vitali.

By S.J. Cahn
Daily Pilot

Under bright blue skies Wednesday afternoon at the Newport Beach Country Club, Toshiba Classic volunteer Fausta Vitali was quick to predict that the sun would continue shining through the weekend.

"I'm in charge of weather as well," the Italy native and now Laguna Beach resident said in a voice that still holds hints of her homeland.

Around her, a handful of fellow volunteers laughed and seemed just as sure the weather would hold.

After volunteering with the tournament for 15

TOSHIBA



Scott Simpson strikes a drive on the 15th hole during the Toshiba Classic pro-am competition Wednesday.

years, Vitali, they all agreed, gets her way.

If there is any sure sign that the Toshiba has firmly cemented its place in the Newport-Mesa community — not to mention Orange County — it is the return each year of

Vitali and the 600 to 700 other volunteers who keep coming back to work as a way to support the tournament and its main beneficiary, Hoag Memorial Hospital

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Presbyterian.

"Every year I think, 'Maybe this is it,' " Vitali said. "But it's the friendships, the warmth, the camaraderie. As long as I'm able to do it, I'll be here."

Camaraderie, community, friendship, reunion. Those words were repeatedly on the tongues of volunteers as they described their experiences with the tournament.

"I wasn't going to do it, and then Hoag took over," Vitali said, adding that she's watched the tournament grow under director Jeff Purser's leadership.

Purser and his fellow tournament leaders all came in for lengthy praise from the volunteers. (They earn it right

back. "It wouldn't be the same without Fausta [Vitali]," volunteer chairman Ira Garbutt said.)

"This tournament is the jewel of the tour — because of Jeff Purser mostly," said Becky Dahl, who with husband Bill is in charge of professional hospitality and also worked last week's Champions Tour event in Valencia. "Newport Beach is a wonderful place to put on a tournament. The community is so involved, and the community itself is so beautiful."

"And Jeff treats everybody fabulously. He really cares — he goes the extra mile to treat the volunteers."

Along with the Dahls, Newport Beach's Sheri and Brian Horn are among the seven couples acting as co-chairs of the various volunteer committees.

"Everyone comes in here with such a great attitude," Sheri Horn said. "They're happy, they're cheerful and they're glad to give back."

There is a serious side to the volunteers' commitment, Brian Horn pointed out.

"Every dollar this tournament makes is a dollar that goes to helping someone who's dying at Hoag," Brian Horn said. "We keep that firmly in mind."

Hoag also produces volunteers from among its current and former employees.

Karol-Jeanne Merikle and Lyn Lacanienta, the finance co-chairs, are former Hoag employees.

"It's another way to give back to the community," Merikle said.

"It's a way to stay connected to the hospital," Lacanienta added.

Kristi Rietzel was using her

vacation from Hoag, where she works as a postpartum nurse in the new Women's Pavilion, to spend her first year volunteering with the tournament.

"Everybody's been so great. It's so easy to meet people," she said.

Rietzel will find out that it is so easy, in fact, every year is like "a big reunion," Becky Dahl said.

It's that familiarity — with the players as well as the volunteers — that attracts volunteer Bob Mihalko, whose pro golf tournament experience goes back to the 1967 Los Angeles Open.

"I just love being in that environment; I love the people I work with," he said, and then he stepped back to work, calling out the name of a pro and his four Classic Pro-Am partners, as he has at the tournament since it moved to Newport Beach Country Club in 1996.