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Alaska's Palin comes from tough Western stock

By JOHN YAUKEY, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — Anyone who thinks Sarah Palin is just a pretty face never looked at her resume.

Or run against her — or gone hunting with her.

The former beauty contestant and first-term Alaska governor has a reputation for knocking heads in the state legislature while pushing through political reforms.

As she's worked her way up through the political ranks from Wasilla City Council to the governor's mansion in Juneau, she has challenged heavy spending and fought to reduce taxes.

She is the youngest and first female governor of Alaska and now the first woman on a GOP presidential ticket.

"She's obviously an attractive lady," said Jed Babbin, editor of Human Events, a conservative newspaper and Web site. "But she's tough and smart. She could be a real game changer for McCain."

The mother of five is strongly pro-life and a lifetime member of the National Rifle Association.

Her political career has tracked traditional conservative values.

After serving on the Wasilla City Council from 1992 to 1996, she defeated the town's incumbent mayor by campaigning against wasteful spending and high taxes.

She won the governorship in 2006 by beating incumbent Frank Murkowski, a former senator, in the Republican primary, then toppling a former two-term Democratic governor in the general election.

For fun, Palin hunts, ice fishes, and rides snowmobiles.

"She has that maverick streak that would be appealing to John McCain," said Deborah Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Palin has been described as colorful, outspoken and has been known to buck her party, Walsh said.

Palin was born Feb. 11, 1964, in Sandpoint, Idaho. The daughter of a father who taught elementary school science and coached track and a mother who worked as a school secretary, she grew up in a family devoted to sports and the outdoors.

When she was three months old, the family moved to Alaska, where moose hunting and distance running filled weekends.

At Wasilla High School, Palin was captain of the basketball team in 1982 when it won the state small-school championship. Her tough play — once on a stress-fractured ankle — earned her the nickname "Sarah Barracuda."

In 1984, she was first runner-up in the Miss Alaska beauty pageant.

Palin holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Idaho.

During a brief stint as a TV sports reporter before going into politics, Palin also helped with her husband's commercial fishing business.

She eloped with her husband Todd, a champion snowmobiler, in 1988 to save on an expensive wedding.

One of their children has Down Syndrome.

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