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For Father's Day, I Want The Mass Media to Stop Bashing Golf

by Jon Last, Tuesday, June 10, 2014 10 AM

Total upfront disclosure ... the golf industry has been an important component of my livelihood for nearly three decades, so forgive me if I get a little defensive about a sport that my firm and I have studied extensively and that I have enjoyed as a participant and fan for even longer than that.

But as one who also grounds his business in fact-based research, I bristle a little more when I sense that the less-informed are swooping in and trying to pile onto a sport that still presents brands with a relatively squeaky-clean environment that evokes traditional American values of hard work, ethical behavior, personal accountability and self-policing honesty.

In a sports culture where it often seems that the conversation is too much about unsavory behavior off the playing fields and selfish, unrelenting pursuit of win-at-all cost/win as much as you can, golf has always risen above the fray with non-guaranteed player compensation driven primarily by performance, and a commitment to charitable causes that exceeds that of any other sport. Yet, if one were to scan some of the recent general media coverage of the past six to twelve months, you might incorrectly conclude that golf is on life support. That is far from the case.

There has been much public banter that golf is suffering from an unstoppable decline in participation; that golf courses are shuttering their doors at a bristling pace and that the traditions, pace and foundations of the game are at odds with a Millennial generation that will scorn it forever in favor of taking selfies and posting video game screen shots to Instagram well into their middle age.

Sure, if one defines a golfer as anyone who picks up a club once a year or more, we've seen a double digit percentage fall off in the past 10 years, accompanied by a net decline in golf facilities. But beyond that shock-inducing headline is a more proper context. Ten years ago, the phenomenon known as Tiger-Mania was at its apex, as the long-awaited personification of "the next Nicklaus" had won 7 majors and 32 Tour events over roughly a three-year span.

An all-time high of more than 30 million Americans were purported to have picked up a club, at least once in 2003, and new golf courses were popping up everywhere ... trying to keep pace with an unfortunately over-publicized and ill-conceived recommendation to build a new course every day to keep up with the maturation of the Baby Boomers. The courses that were built were expensive. They were too long and too difficult for these new customers. True to their generational values, Boomers sought a multitude of varying experiences, and golf was just one of many leisure pursuits. 2003-04 was the classic definition of a market bubble. Go back 20 years to 1990, and the number of people picking up a club once a year actually increased some 6.5% over the next two decades. See ... it's all about context.

Today's golf industry has evolved to become more efficient. The equipment industry has evolved from highly fragmented to a handful of top-tier competitors, most of whom are part of public companies. Facility management, vertical golf media and golf retailing have also consolidated into the purview of larger, holding companies. The game's governing bodies have continued to upgrade their talent and have committed significant resources towards studying and developing new entry ramps that make the game more accessible to market segments that have not historically embraced the game or been provided with easy and welcoming access.

As you read this, the USGA is embarking on an unprecedented and historic fortnight, where both the U.S. Open and U.S. Women's Open Championships will be contested in back-to-back weeks on the same golf course. Just two weeks ago, the PGA of America and LPGA announced a partnership to create a new PGA Women's Championship. And attitudinally, the most committed group of golfers, those that play weekly in season, are continuing to make the time and express the desire to play the game as frequently or more, than they did in the past.

Even the aforementioned Millennial generation has sought out golf experiences and introductions that, our research has shown, resonates with their desire for greater feelings of community and a welcome oasis that a golf course provides, away from the day-to-day frenetic pace of underemployment and social pressures. They value golf for the core values that it was built upon, and in fact reject the notion that golf isn't cool enough and needs total reinvention. They laugh at some of the overreaction that seeks to cast the game in a contradictory light, perceiving this as forced, unnatural and not what they seek when thinking about a desirable golf experience.

In fact, much of our recent research suggests that golf lends itself quite well to consumer sentiments that place a higher valuation on activities that can bring families together, and demonstrates a strong correlation between avidity of play and being introduced to the game through family. And that makes sense as I think back 34 years ago to attending the U.S. Open Golf Championship at Baltusrol with my father. The two of us have gone on to play countless rounds together over the years. At the risk of making the classic researcher mistake of drawing conclusions from personal anecdote, I still think it's an example worth savoring. On Sunday, we'll celebrate Father's Day, and that's no better time to get out and enjoy "the game of a lifetime."

2 comments on "For Father's Day, I Want The Mass Media to Stop Bashing Golf".

Rob Goulet from **Entertainment Sports Partners, Inc.** commented on: June 10, 2014 at 10:09 a.m.
Well said.

Dianna Gray from **Univ. of Northern Colorado** commented on: June 10, 2014 at 3:05 p.m.

Well stated ... and I appreciate the empirical support for your column. Like tennis, golf is a game that requires some level of commitment to play well, and thus, more serious golfers will continue to play more frequently. Further, in line with your suggestion that Father's Day is a wonderful opportunity to get out and play, research confirms that parental influence is a significant factor in introducing children to many sports.