

IN DEFENSE OF THE SILENCE

BY LPGA MEMBERS ON TRUMP

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BEDMINSTER, N.J. – For months now I’ve been trolled on social media by individuals and organizations trying to get me to weigh in on the U.S. Women’s Open being held at Trump National. That was not a conversation I was willing to have in 140-character sound bites. Hopefully, this will be a more thoughtful presentation.

First off, the tournament went well. There was minimum disruption in having the President of the United States on property, the golf course proved to be good enough for a major championship, a rising star was the winner after a compelling back-nine tussle that included a 17-year-old amateur and the USGA, as it usually does, ran the event in a professional and efficient manner.

The only real bump in the road came early in the week when players were asked repeatedly to take a stand on the fact the national championship for women was being held on a golf course owned by someone who has, on multiple occasions, said offensive things about women.

Pretty much to a person, the players declined to answer the question, saying they were there to play in the most important tournament in women's golf. I want to defend their silence. It took great discipline and it was the right thing to do.

From where I sat, there were times I wanted to weigh in just to correct factual errors. Many, for example, didn't know the difference between the LPGA and the USGA and exactly who was running the U.S. Women's Open.

I saw commissioner Mike Whan criticized for not attending the news conference of tournament officials the day before the event started. In fact, the LPGA commissioner never attends that news conference because the tournament is run by the USGA.

But like the players, I chose to stay out of it.

Juli Inkster, who is 57 and has competed under seven different presidents, was in the interview room the day before the U.S. Women's Open started and in five words hit the nail right on the head.

“It's a no-win situation,” she said.

There have been very few players who've made their views on Trump known. Natalie Gulbis spoke at the Republican National Convention. Lizette Salas, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, has expressed her feelings. And when Brittany Lincicome tweeted that Trump should stay away from the U.S. Open, she was criticized for bringing politics into sport.

And that is exactly the problem. Lincicome was not making a political statement. She was making an operational statement. She thought the presence of a sitting president would create a distraction and

disruption. It was an extremely valid observation on her part.

In fact, whenever the president moved at Trump National, the course was locked down and it would halt play for 10 or 15 minutes. In fact, there was a level of security you'd expect from having the president on property. And, in fact, there were awkward times when the gallery behind the 16th tee had its backs to the players as they tried to catch a glimpse of Trump in his observation tower.

But Brittany was battered for pointing out the obvious.

The fact the tournament was being played on a Trump course was a question that had to be asked. But some of the queries had an accusatory tone. To not understand the reluctance of players to express an opinion shows a complete lack of knowledge of the economics of women's golf. At one point, it was suggested that LPGA players were not taking the same highroad as Venus and Serena Williams travel when they speak out on controversial issues.

Talk about comparing apples and oranges. The Williams sisters have power. They are each worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Tournaments want them in their event. There is no one in women's golf with that kind of leverage. A better example might be Colin Kaepernick. He has been punished for taking a stand – or refusing to stand.

Those who care about women's rights, women's sports and women's golf need to face this fact: The players on the LPGA compete for about one-fifth the prize money available to PGA Tour members. And women players are similarly discounted when it comes to endorsement dollars.

That has to do, in large part, with TV rights fees, which is the financial underpinning of all sports. Women get equal pay in tennis majors because they are playing at the same venue as the men, at the same time as the men and under the same TV contract and with the same ticket sales. They share the same pot of gold.

That's not the case at the majors in women's golf. But at the U.S. Women's Open, the prize money is greater than two-fifths what the men compete for in the U.S. Open. By that measuring stick, the USGA provides a tournament more than twice as rich as what the women play for week in and week out. Those who think women should have boycotted the tournament just don't understand the dollars and cents of women's golf.

The only entity involved in the U.S. Women's Open who could be held responsible in any way is the USGA. And even there I'd point out that the decision to hold the 2017 U.S. Women's Open at Trump National was made in 2012 – which seems an eternity ago – and that reports that breaking the contract the organization had with Trump would have caused a legal nightmare are likely accurate.

In any case, to point an accusing finger at LPGA players and say their silence in some way makes them complicit with distasteful words or actions is akin to saying a person who pumps gas at a BP station is responsible for an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Like that person pumping gas, last week the players were just doing their job. Getting drawn into a political argument would have been a distraction on the most important competitive week of the year, and it could have financial consequences.

There are many ways to be a good citizen. There are many ways to do the right thing and not all of them are public. You can give money to candidates and causes. You can vote. Yes, everyone has not only the right to an opinion on matters of consequence, they have a responsibility to have an opinion on those issues and to be as well informed as possible.

But they don't have an obligation to make their opinion known. Sometimes, silence is golden.