

PGA Tour vs. LIV Golf Will Be Decided by the Quality of the Competition

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While the standoff between the PGA Tour and LIV Golf involves moral choices, business decisions and competitive questions, how this all plays out most likely depends on the quality of the competition. If LIV is not a product people want to watch and players want to play, it will not be a threat to the PGA Tour.

The moral issue about whether or not to accept Saudi money is an individual choice. Some have flat out been wooed by silly amounts of money, including people I know in the media who have moved onto work for LIV Golf. Simply put, they were made an offer they couldn't refuse. That's their choice, as it is a choice for the players who want a guaranteed payday.

If this conflict is decided by the business model of the PGA Tour versus the business model of LIV Golf, then the PGA Tour has already lost. The PGA Tour has a finite revenue stream and a fairly fixed budget within which it must operate. It can't run at a loss and stay in business. The tour did a heroic job navigating through the COVID-19 cancellations by spending \$75 million from its reserve fund.

On the other hand, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), the sovereign wealth investment fund of Saudi Arabia and one of the largest in the world, finances LIV Golf Investments, the parent company of LIV Golf. The crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman is the head of the PIF. LIV Golf doesn't have to make a profit; it can lose billions and still be a success as a public relations vehicle for Saudi Arabia.

So that brings us to the competition question. Will LIV Golf be compelling enough that fans will care about it? Again, for the business reasons stated above, it may not matter to the backers of the venture whether anyone ever

goes to the tournaments or watches them on whatever broadcast/streaming outlet it finds.

But it might matter to the players that LIV it is trying to poach. Certainly, Rory McIlroy, Jon Rahm and Justin Thomas have been quite articulate about why they play professional golf – to be measured against the best players in the world, both past and present. They want to play the PGA Tour because that's where the best players are now and that's where Hogan, Snead, Nelson, Palmer, Player, Nicklaus and Woods set records.

When Charl Schwartzel won the first event in London, the social media outlet for LIV Golf tweeted his photo over the caption: "CHAMPION." And someone retweeted that posting and asked: "OF WHAT?"

McIlroy, Rahm and Thomas not only want to compete against history, they want to compete on a stage that matters; they want to feel the buzz at the major championships but also at tour stops like Phoenix with its massive crowds, Colonial with its history, Pebble Beach with its spectacular views and TPC Sawgrass with its fabulous finishing stretch.

Great athletes feed off the vibe; it's part of why they play the game. They live for those moments in the spotlight. They compete for that adrenaline rush. The very structure of LIV Golf eliminates that buzz from the competition.

LIV Golf has 48-player fields (there were 156 at the recent U.S. Open won by Matthew Fitzpatrick in a stirring Sunday duel with Will Zalatoris), competing over 54 holes (as opposed to 72 holes on the PGA Tour) and tee off in a shotgun start, meaning all the players start at the same time, each threesome on a different hole. That means all players finish at roughly the same time and on different holes.

Think about that...

Let's say the 36-hole leader starts on No. 1 in the last round and someone six strokes back begins on No. 8 and has a great final day, closing with a 65 to catch the leader. But the leader finishes on No. 18 while the hard-charging challenger ends his round on No. 7 -- at the same time. How do fans follow that? You can't wait at No. 18 green for the contenders to finish. How does drama build between the two players?

Logistically, all that is compelling about stroke-play golf is eliminated by a shotgun start. It's akin to the shotgun start I play each year at the Provincetown Lion's Club charity outing, except we don't get a guarantee of \$120,000 for last place – just free grilled linguica sausage on No. 11 tee.

Then there is the 54-hole format. If there is one thing that's proven time and again in golf, it's that the longer the competition the more likely the best player wins. There are fewer upsets in 36-hole match play than in 18-hole match play. Under an 18-hole format, Tiger Woods would have not won three consecutive U.S. Amateur Championships. He trailed in each after 18 holes.

If the major championships had been 54 holes in 1986, Greg Norman would have completed the calendar-year Grand Slam. Instead he has the Saturday Slam – leading all four of the majors after 54 holes but winning only The Open.

And then there is the 48-man field with no cut. Part of what is great about the PGA Tour right now – and the DP World Tour for that matter – is that the last person in the field has a chance to win. On both tours, someone frequently comes out of nowhere to win. That's how much talent there is.

Those larger fields – primarily 144 to 156 players – inspire new talent. Someone gets their tour card or Monday qualifies. They learn how to make the cut. They learn how to finish in the top 10 to be exempt into the next event. They learn how to win and lock up their card for another couple of years.

Smaller fields, shorter tournaments, guaranteed money for last place all seem to undermine the quality of the competition, not encourage it. The shotgun start seems to undermine the intensity of the competition, not enhance it.

“To be honest, part of the format is not really appealing to me,” Rahm said about LIV Golf prior to the U.S. Open at The Country Club. “Shotgun, three days to me is not a golf tournament, no cut. It's that simple. I want to play against the best in the world in a format that's been going on for hundreds of years. That's what I want to see.”

As long as the best players in the world feel that way, the PGA Tour is safe. LIV Golf can go on with mostly has-been players and a few wanna-bes and function as a money-losing PR platform for PIF. And the PGA Tour will continue to be the destination of choice for the cream of the crop.

Yes, some adaptation may be necessary. Perhaps a more formal relationship between the PGA Tour and the DP World Tour – perhaps even a merger. At the very least, a better coordination of schedules to ensure the best players can be in the same field as often as possible.

But the confrontation between the PGA Tour and LIV Golf will be decided where it should be decided – on the golf course. The quality of competition, the intensity of the events and the role the tournaments play in the legacy of the game are what matters. And right now, the PGA Tour has a big lead in that regard.