

Live and Let Live is Not a Value on Social Media, Especially When It Comes to LIV Golf

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One of the survival skills I've developed in this new age of journalism is not to engage in back-and-forth arguments on social media, which is for the most part a pretty anti-social world. My reasoning is that rational, reasonable, informed discussion cannot unfold in 250-character snippets. I say what I have to say and let it stand at that.

Moreover, I find that many of those who raise objections to what I write are not interested in civil discourse. They merely want to attack – and usually in the most vulgar way possible. Also, those who author the most mean-spirited posts on Twitter hide behind the mask of anonymity. Are they Bots or merely cowards? Everything I write -- on whatever platform my words are published -- comes under my name and, on social media, my photo. I own up to my reporting, opinions and observations.

Sadly, there are those who feel that the only valid viewpoint is theirs. And what I find to be true is that when someone lashes out with a personal attack it is because the facts are not on their side – or they have not put in the effort to investigate the facts. Instead, they talk in bumper-sticker language, using a stock series of catch phrases easily exposed as vacuous by even minimal scrutiny.

In this column, I will respond in more than 250 characters to a few of the points some of the name-callers have raised. In no particular order, here we go:

- LIV Golf is not exclusive; it is the PGA Tour and the DP World Tour that is suspending players.

While the established tours have excluded a handful of players, LIV Golf excludes all but 48. That's fewer than one-third the number of players in a normal field at a PGA Tour or DP World Tour tournament and almost 200 people fewer than the number who have won money on the PGA Tour this year. By its very nature, LIV Golf is exclusive. There is no way to earn your way into a tournament, as there is on the established tours. You have to be chosen and then purchased.

- There are tournaments on the Ladies European Tour as well as individual players who benefit from Saudi money.

The big difference is this: Those tournaments and those players are not being asked to engage in a coup against the organizations to which they belong. There is a big difference between a tournament being sponsored by a Saudi company and a tour being owned by the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia. There is a big difference between a logo being purchased on a player's shirt and a player being purchased. I wonder how some of the LIV Golf supporters would feel if the United States government took over the PGA Tour.

- What about the "Yeah, what about" people.

One of the tried and true tactics of those who don't have the facts on their side – or have not bothered to gather the facts – is to try to deflect the argument by saying: "Yeah, what about so-and-so..." In the case of LIV Golf, the most frequent "yeah, what about" is China, where a lot of golf equipment and clothing is manufactured and some tournaments sanctioned by the established tours are played.

Governments and corporations have to behave in complicated ways because the global economy and global politics demand it. For decades, the U.S. has had an economic embargo against tiny Cuba yet does business with massive China and, when it existed, the Soviet Union. There is no moral consistency there; it is simply a reflection of geo-political realities.

The actions of a government are guided by what is best for its people; the actions of a corporation are guided by what is best for its stockholders. People make choices based on what is best for them – and take the money and run is

certainly a reasonable choice – but individuals also have the luxury of making choices that are consistent with their personal values.

There are some who are offended that a Washington Post columnist critical of the ruling family of Saudi Arabia was lured to the Saudi embassy in Istanbul and murdered. And when LIV Golf plays in Bedminster, N.J., -- fewer than 35 miles from where the World Trade Towers stood – there will be survivors of that attack and family members of victims of that attack who will remember that 15 of the 19 hijackers on Sept. 11, 2001, were from Saudi Arabia. That has nothing to do with China or any other country. There is no “Yeah, what about” there.

- The PGA Tour exploits its members and does not share its wealth with the players.

If the conflict with LIV Golf becomes all about money – a battle of billions – the PGA Tour has already lost. Gross revenue for the tour this year will be about \$1.5 billion dollars. The Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia is worth about \$650 billion. The owners of LIV Golf don’t care if it loses money. The PGA Tour is a non-profit organization without the massive revenue streams of team sports like the NFL, NBA and Major League Baseball.

The notion that the PGA Tour does nothing but take from its players is simply not true. It has created the platform that has made it possible for them to get rich. The tour identifies and recruits title sponsors and other corporate partners; it secures venues; it establishes connections with local charities; it negotiates broadcast, streaming and social media deals that are its largest single revenue stream; it provides the agronomy staff that prepares courses for tournaments, the rules staff to set up the course and run the tournament and the support staff like physical trainers, media officials and marketing people.

The platform created by the tours provides the events and the exposure that makes it possible for agents to negotiate endorsement deals for players, deals that in the case of the top players has off-course income dwarfing on-course winnings. The PGA Tour provides the staff that administers the best pension plan in all of sports and manages those investments.

Also, it was the reserve fund of the PGA Tour that helped it continue to provide income for players during the COVID-19 pandemic when tournaments were cancelled. The tour used about \$75 million of that reserve fund to keep things running. Simply put, the PGA Tour created a platform that not only made it possible for players to get rich but also made it possible for them to have the exposure that enabled them to be valuable enough to be purchased by the Saudis.

- The format of LIV Golf will produce compelling entertainment.

In my opinion, this is the issue that will determine how this all plays out. If it's about money, LIV Golf has already won. It has a bottomless pit of petrodollars and operates on a business model that does not need to turn a profit. If it's about moral choices, that's an individual issue and each player or media member will have to live with their own conscience.

But will a format in which the same 48 players compete about 14 times annually in no-cut events over 54 holes under a shotgun start be exciting? Certainly, the team competition within the individual competition is unique and a series of limited team events – almost like the Champions League in soccer – might be a compelling adjunct existing alongside the existing tours.

But the shotgun start is an insult to golf course architects – who set up holes in a particular order for a reason – and to the fans who might face a dilemma in which the 36-hole leader is finishing on No. 18 while someone making a big move in the third round is finishing on No. 4. How does that build drama?

Ultimately, the fans will decide how this all plays out. The best thing and the worst thing that has happened to sports in my lifetime is the same thing – television. The medium has brought the games we love to billions of new eyes and the billions of dollars it has spent to secure the broadcast rights to those events and leagues has thrown the pay scale for athletes in team sports way out of whack with guaranteed contracts.

And now that outrageous you're-getting-paid-no-matter-how-you-perform money comes to golf. Forget what the players want; this will be all about what the fans want. If it's not fun to watch, no one will watch. And if it's not fun to watch, this will be a short-LIVed – and costly – experiment.