

## For the Love of the Game

By Paul Attaway

This week (June 23-26, 2022) the U.S. Open returns to The Country Club in Baseline, Massachusetts, and it seems fitting as recent events in the world of professional golf have highlighted what it means to be a professional golfer and launched conversations as to why we love and play the game.

It seems fitting because in 1913, twenty-year old amateur Francis Ouimet<sup>1</sup>, shocked the world beating the best in the game at The Country Club to become the first amateur and only the second American to win the US Open, a tournament that had been played since 1895, and in the process wrote chapter one of the story in this country of what it means to be a professional athlete.

Last week, the upstart tour, LIV, hosted its first tournament. The tour is underwritten by the Saudi Sovereign Wealth Fund which means the players are being paid by Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, MBS to his friends, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. This blog post is not about the propriety of accepting pay from the ruler of an authoritarian nation, not that the questions surrounding the payor and his motives aren't important or worthy of discussion, but because that's not what I want to write about today. No, today, I've been thinking about the essence of competition, what we love about it and how it plays out in the game of golf specifically.

### *The Spirit of Competition*

From the game's inception, money has been wagered on the outcome and the primary form of competition is what we call match play. The winner is the player who wins the most holes regardless of the total score at the end of the round. In match play there's only one winner. Match play is still the most popular form of competition. At public and private courses around the country today

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<sup>1</sup> The story was immortalized by Mark Frost in his book, *The Greatest Game Ever Played: Harry Vardon, Francis Ouimet, and the Birth of Modern Golf* and popularized by the movie *The Greatest Game Ever Played*, based on the book.

amateurs playing weekend golf are likely to wager with friends using a match play format.

Even today, a Scottish town may have one public golf course, but it could have had multiple private golf clubs all sharing the same course, and from the earliest days, these clubs would host tournaments, each club putting up their best players against the other clubs' best. Further, it was not uncommon for the members of a club to send their best to a neighboring town to play a match or series of matches against a team sponsored by another club. The winner might receive a jacket, a cup, trophy, or medal of some sort. In some cases, a small cash prize would be paid, the money for which had been collected from the club's membership. Membership in these clubs was typically reserved for the wealthiest people who could spend the time required to master the game. Often, the club would send their head pro to compete for the club. In those cases, the membership would cover the player's travel expenses.

The point being, though, there was only winner; no second place.

### *The Spirit of the Game and the Professional Golfer*

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many of the world's top golfers were amateurs and the professional golfer was the club pro who made his living as the head professional at a private club. His duties would have included making clubs and giving lessons. When Francis Ouimet won the US Open in 1913, nearly every golf professional was an employee of a private club and frankly they were looked down on as second-class citizens.

As the game of golf exploded in this country following Francis Ouimet's victory and the prospects of someone making a living playing tournament materialized, much was written about the beauty and purity of the amateur playing for the love of the game as contrasted with the professional who plays for money. Buried in these words is a fair amount of class-based elitism. Amateurs competing on the world stage at the time were wealthy men who could afford to join private clubs and take hours off to play the game each week. Simply stated, they looked down on working-class people and that's what a professional was, working class. That's all the more reason why Francis Ouimet's victory was so shocking; he was an

amateur for sure, but he was poor and from a working-class family. He was not your traditional, wealthy amateur.

The arrogance of the guardians of the game was on full display when in 1916 the USGA stripped Francis Ouimet of his amateur status because they concluded he was profiting from his fame by using it to promote the success of his sporting goods store. A few years later, in response to an outpouring of support for Ouimet, the USGA quietly reversed its decision. (Francis Ouimet continued to compete as an Amateur and won the US Amateur Championship in 1931.)

While elitism still exists today throughout our culture, in the game of golf, the professional reigns supreme. The attitude towards the professional golfer began to change in the 1930s and 1940s and the great amateur Bobby Jones was instrumental in that change. Around this time, a yearlong tournament schedule was developed, and it became possible for a player to make a living travelling the country playing tournament golf. Match play gave way to stroke play as the dominant form of competition as TV became a larger presence and it was deemed that stroke play was an easier format around which to develop a television audience.

For the tour to survive, however, players must have a realistic chance of making enough money even if they don't win. So, today, a purse is divided up amongst the top finishers at a tournament. But still, the better you play, the more you make. So, while you no longer need to place first to win money, the spirit of the competition was still there. Furthermore, there was no guaranteed money. Often, you had to qualify on a Monday to play in the tournament and then if you did, you had to make the cut after the first two days if you were to make any money. Yes, the spirit of competition survived. Now don't get me wrong. I know how much money the top players make today; they're not struggling to survive, but they had to work hard, and they earned their money by winning regularly.

Nevertheless, the tour can be grueling because if you don't make the cut after the Thursday and Friday rounds, you don't get paid and then you move on to the next tournament, often the very next week. The PGA Tour does provide a pension for its members. However, your payout is a function of what you put in: the number of tournaments you play, the number of cuts you make, the number of

Wednesday Pro-Ams you play, and how well you do in the tournaments, for instance. In other words, the better you perform, the more you make.

I haven't even touched on what it takes to become a PGA Tour Member. The competition is intense.

### *Playing for more than just money*

But the PGA Tour and European Tour players are also playing for more than just money. They are playing for their place in history. Great tradition surrounds many of the stops on these tours. And then there are the Majors: The Open, The US Open, the PGA Championship and The Masters. Finally, two of the most pressure packed events are the Ryder Cup and the Presidents Cup, biannual tournaments played between the best players from the United States against the best European players and the best players from the rest of the world, respectively. There are no cash prizes at these two events. Just pride, national pride.

Although golf is a solitary game – you against the course or you against another player or the field – and it might appear as if you are only playing for yourself, I don't think that's the case. From the earliest days, golfers played for their town or their club. Today, weekend golfers put together bets by which your foursome is playing another foursome. Professional golfers today compete for their country in the Olympics, the Ryder Cup and the Presidents Cup. Even PGA Members who when tournaments seemingly for themselves are elevating the stature of the PGA Tour which benefits not just themselves but their fellow Tour members.

### *The LIV Tour*

So, what to make of the LIV Tour?

Last weekend, LIV hosted its first tournament and the field of 48 players included a few big names such as Dustin Johnson and a host of names that only the most ardent golf fan would have recognized. The players were paid to join the tour and last place at the event paid \$120,000. At the Canadian Open being played at the same time, five players tied for 48<sup>th</sup> place and each one took home \$22,567. If you missed the cut that week then you made nothing. The Canadian Open has been

played since 1904 and former winners include: Walter Hagen, Sam Snead, Byron Nelson, Arnold Palmer, Lee Trevino, Nick price, Jim Furyk, and Tiger Woods. Jack Nicklaus has seven runner-up finishes at The Canadian Open.

On the LIV Tour, you get paid to show up, win or lose. Who cares? I guess we're supposed to be impressed by the great play. I love golf but am the first to admit that I rarely watch it on TV beyond the majors, which, by the way, are acknowledged as national holidays in our household. I watch the majors because of the tradition, the history, and the stakes other than the money. Yes, I watch because they are the best players in the world but also because they are putting themselves out there. They eat what they kill. And simply stated, some tournaments just mean more than others.

The competition on the PGA Tour and the European Tour is real. The nerves are real. Especially at the Ryder Cup and Presidents Cup. How can I get excited about watching folks play golf when they can finish dead last and still get paid and would have already been paid just for foregoing another tour?

### *Independent Contractors, they say*

The players that have fled the PGA and European Tours for the safety of the LIV Tour make a lot of noise about being independent contractors and claim that means they should be able to do what they want. Yes, members of the PGA Tour are independent contractors and, yes, they are contractually obligated to enter a minimum number of tournaments each year, but I wonder if Dustin Johnson and Phil Mickelson are independent contractors anymore. We've read that Mickelson was paid \$200 million to join LIV. Was he wired this money in one lump sum a few weeks ago or will it be paid out over time? I have a feeling it will be paid out over time and that he is obligated to play in the tournaments and promote the LIV Tour. Sounds to me more like he's an employee of Mohammad bin Salman. The PGA has suspended Phil. I wonder what MBS will do if Phil decides to stop playing in his tournaments?

### *For the love of the game*

In 1913, an amateur shocked the golf world. The romance of playing purely for the love of the game gave way to the reality that only a handful of people could spend their lives playing golf without a financial care in the world and room for the professional was accommodated. With the ascendancy of the professional, an amateur hasn't challenged the top players since the days of Bobby Jones but that's okay. When I watch the world's best golfers competing to win a trophy on a famous course that was previously won by Walter Hagen, Jack Nicklaus, or Ben Hogan for instance, I see players playing not just for the money but for the love of the game and for their place in history.

I'm heading to the driving range now. I'm playing tomorrow, and in my foursome, we will throw balls up on the first tee to determine teams and then compete in a \$20 Nassau. Second place gets nothing!