

Is Golf in good hands?

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Golf has had to work strategically to turn around a game that has been widely considered too expensive, time-consuming, and generally out of step in an increasingly inclusive world. Its long history has predominately catered to an older male demographic with an average age of 54, which of course is not sustainable or progressive.

Despite some lean years, things have seemingly turned a corner, and as it stands, Golf is being played regularly by over 60 million affiliated members worldwide and is one of the largest participation sports on the planet. It has an estimated 450 million fans, just behind NFL and basketball and memberships are trending upwards.

Here are a few reasons why I think things have turned around.

The female factor.

There is no question the sustainability and growth of our game lies fairly and squarely on the shoulders of junior golf, and initiatives such as SNAG (Starting New at Golf) and Golf in Schools have significantly driven up junior numbers. Golf Canada has reported that golf is now offered in over 2200 schools across Canada.

An interesting trend in the junior game is that more than a third playing are now female. This is a dramatic increase from around 15% just a few years ago. The potential growth of the women's game has widely been recognized as an exciting new market, and the fact that the home of golf, St Andrews, have dropped their outdated men's only membership policy, is testament to this. Other clubs such as Royal St George have followed suit. This is extremely positive for Golf because women bring an inclusive family presence to our clubs which is so essential.

Another big shift is that there are now a lot more women Teaching Pros. In return, they are tailoring lessons specifically for females which is inspiring the next generation of teaching pros and imperative to the promotion of woman's golf. Increased coverage and marketing of the LGPA is also having an impact when it comes to females choosing a sport to play.

It's got to be fun.

The days of sawing down an old set of clubs for a junior, normally with very little forgiveness, are gone. It is now more affordable than ever to pick up a half set of junior clubs with big sweet spots and junior graphite shafts. This is huge! We all know how frustrating this game can be, and if it's not fun kids will just go and do something else. Junior academies with oversized clubs and balls are brilliant initiatives where the tuition is much more focused on fun skill-

based games, rather than technical instruction which can be daunting, and let's face it, not terribly exciting for a 7-year-old.

Heroes.

Kids want heroes, and the PGA and LPGA is getting younger each year with a new generation of players who are vibrant and fearless. It's a new brand of golf that combines athletic conditioning with a 'swing for the fences' mentality and it's exciting to watch. Moreover, these young guys and girls are starting to win, a lot. The game needed this boost and players like Rickie Fowler and Jordan Spieth have had an enormous influence on the junior ranks by being so relatable, while at the same time dominating. Being able to associate with your heroes makes aspiring to be as good as them that little bit more attainable.

An interesting observation on Tour over the last 2 to 3 years, is the increasing amount of very individual swings, which is quite a jump from the traditional instruction manual. Of course, Bryson Dechambeau is a big talking point at the moment with his unique take on the game, but also new stars such as Matthew Wolff and Joaquín Niemann are lighting up the fairways with far from orthodox swings and taking the conservative perception away from golf. This is extremely attractive for youngsters looking at taking up the game.