

Is Golf in Good Hands?

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02/10/2020

Golf is at a pivotal crossroads, strategically working to reshape its image and address perceptions that it is prohibitively expensive, overly time-consuming, and often out of sync with an increasingly inclusive society. Historically, the game has catered primarily to an older male demographic, with an average age of 54. This focus is not only unsustainable but also unprogressive in today's diverse world.

Despite facing some lean years, the sport appears to be experiencing a resurgence. Currently, over 60 million affiliated members are playing golf regularly worldwide, making it one of the largest participation sports on the planet. With an estimated 450 million fans globally, golf ranks just behind the NFL and basketball in popularity, and membership numbers are on an upward trajectory.

Key Factors Driving Change :

The Women's Game

The sustainability and growth of golf hinge significantly on the junior game, particularly among girls. Initiatives like SNAG (Starting New at Golf) and Golf in Schools have been instrumental in boosting junior participation. In Canada alone, Golf Canada has reported that the sport is now offered in over 2,200 schools, paving the way for a new generation of players.

A notable trend within junior golf is the increase in female participants, which has risen dramatically from around 15% just a few years ago to more than a third of all junior players today. This surge in female participation has caught the attention of the golf community, with the potential growth of the women's game recognized as a valuable market. St. Andrews, the home of golf, has notably rescinded its outdated men-only membership policy, a move that other prestigious clubs, such as Royal St. George, have mirrored. This shift is incredibly positive for the sport, as women bring an inclusive and family-oriented presence to golf clubs, which is essential for fostering a welcoming atmosphere.

Moreover, the landscape of golf instruction is changing, with a significant increase in female teaching professionals who tailor lessons specifically for women. This development not only inspires the next generation of female golfers but is also crucial for promoting women's golf. Enhanced media coverage and marketing efforts surrounding the LPGA are further influencing women's participation in the sport, creating a positive feedback loop of growth and visibility.

Emphasising Fun

The game is evolving, and the days of cobbling together makeshift junior clubs are behind us. Today, it's more affordable than ever to invest in a half set of junior clubs that feature larger sweet spots and lightweight graphite shafts. This accessibility is monumental; we all know that golf can be a frustrating game, and if children don't find it enjoyable, they will quickly turn their attention elsewhere.

Junior academies now focus on fun, skill-based games instead of rigid technical instruction, making the sport more appealing to younger players. Initiatives that utilize oversized clubs and balls encourage playful engagement, keeping the spirit of golf alive for 7-year-olds and beyond. This playful approach fosters a love for the game that can last a lifetime.

The Power of Role Models

Children are naturally drawn to heroes, and the PGA and LPGA tours are showcasing an exciting new generation of players who are youthful, vibrant, and unafraid to break the mold. This "new brand" of golf emphasizes athletic conditioning and a fearless, aggressive style of play, making it thrilling to watch. Players like Rickie Fowler and Jordan Spieth resonate strongly with the junior ranks, not just because of their talent but also due to their relatability. Their success makes the aspiration of becoming a professional golfer seem more attainable.

In recent years, we've also seen a marked increase in individualistic swings on Tour, diverging from traditional instruction methods. Bryson DeChambeau has become a significant talking point, showcasing a unique approach to the game. Meanwhile, rising stars like Matthew Wolff and Joaquín Niemann are captivating audiences with unconventional swings that challenge the conservative norms of golf. This refreshing take on the sport is immensely attractive to young people considering taking up golf.

Conclusion: A Bright Future Ahead

In conclusion, golf appears to be in good hands as it navigates this transformative period. With growing female participation, an emphasis on fun, and a new generation of relatable role models, the future looks promising for the sport. The challenge will be to maintain this momentum, ensuring that golf evolves alongside society while retaining the essence that makes it a cherished game. As the landscape continues to change, the question remains: will the sport continue to embrace inclusivity and innovation to foster a vibrant, diverse golfing community? The answer will shape the next chapter in the rich history of golf.