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Modernized rules could remove hurdles for millennial fans

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DAVIES**

At the 2015 Sport Innovation conference, hosted by Stanford, the PGA Tour partnered with a company called IDEO, which specializes in design thinking, otherwise thought of as professional brainstorming. Conference attendees were tasked with using IDEO's brainstorming techniques to answer the question: "How do we get millennials engaged with the PGA Tour?"

This welcoming of ideas from the tour was an encouraging sight, as golf participation in North America is stagnant and the golf world is often slow to embrace change. If there is hope in growing the game, efforts must be focused toward understanding how this younger generation wishes to engage with the sport, both in the live PGA Tour events and on the golf course.

As part of attending this session, the tour provided the room with tickets to the World Golf Championships-Cadillac Match Play Championship taking place in San Francisco a few weeks after the conference. At the event, it was clear why millennials (ages 18-34) could be both impressed and turned off from attending future PGA Tour events. The attractive feature for this and many other tour events was the ability to stand within feet from your favorite professional golfers. You can hear the golfers talk through an upcoming shot with their caddie. You get a real sense of how thick the rough actually is, or how much the putt really breaks. In my case, you also can be standing next to the sixth green when an errant shot lands on the green right in front of you and it turns out to be Rory McIlroy's tee shot off the fifth!

This live experience is truly special and tough to replicate. As a millennial myself, I wanted to Snapchat, tweet, Instagram, post to Facebook and Whatsapp the moment to share my experience with everyone I knew. My sharing of this moment may have enabled other friends who have yet to attend

a PGA Tour event to understand the value of being on the grounds, so close to the action and in turn prompt increased interest in the tour and future attendance at tour events.

The PGA Tour cellphone policy generally notes:

“If you are bringing a cellphone to [INSERT TOURNAMENT NAME], the device must be on silent at all times. Calls may be placed or received only in designated cellphone zones. Video is not permitted at any time. Fans may take photos, but not of play or any official competition.”



Tiger Woods is photographed during a practice round at the 2014 WGC-Bridgestone Invitational. Rules prohibit fan videos, photos of official play. Photo by: GETTY IMAGES

Under this language, I should be able to snap photos of Rory walking up to his ball and analyzing his options in front of me, but given the aggressive nature of the volunteers on “mobile device watch,” fans were scolded if their cellphones were out as a player came anywhere in range. There was a lack of consistency from volunteers as to what photos were allowable at this event as well. While one volunteer was berating any fan with a cellphone in their hand, another explained nicely that the click made from the mobile device when taking a photo was what causes problems and is therefore prohibited. Much of the thrill felt by fans after an amazing shot and wanting to capture the excitement, like many other sports fans are able to do at their live events, is lost when you have a constant threat of reprimand present.

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While no official made note that there were any copyright infringements at play from photos or videos taken on the course, all tour officials and volunteers I’ve spoken with regarding photography on the course have pointed to the fact that the noise the cameras make when the photo is snapped is the problem, as it interferes with players’ concentration. To alleviate the on-course struggle between fans trying to take photos and the volunteers trying to police the noise, new on-site policies could be implemented to promote proper etiquette and rules during play. For example, just as it is customary for fans to ensure their belongings are free from contraband (e.g., outside food, weapons), security also could check that fans’ cellphones can take photos on silent. This would enable fans to first be reminded that their

phones should be on silent and provide an opportunity for security to explain proper protocol. Fans are already trained to keep their voices quiet during play, so it is quite probable that they will learn to follow suit with their devices.

Organizers also could allow fans to earn official wristbands by checking in with the social media hub that tour events are starting to host on-site. This could provide tour personnel with the opportunity to describe the

benefits of the new PGA Tour app, provide relevant hashtags for the event, perhaps allowing fans to take photos with a green screen and engage with the social generation. Upon demonstrating that the phones are silent and have the capability to take photos on silent, fans can receive a wristband or a sticker placed on the back of the phone to note that they are “Authorized for Photos” or “Phone Silenced.” This way, volunteers around the greens won’t have to worry about fans with the authorization and instead can spend time monitoring and educating those fans without wristbands.

When it comes to recording video at the PGA Tour events, there are surely legalities at play between broadcast rights and fan footage. The tour protects its content so as to generate and maintain value in the rights to distribute this footage exclusively. The problem from a fan’s perspective, however, is that much of the content spread across the golf course is not covered or cannot be viewed at home. The television coverage often only follows a few marquee groups, which leaves many players unseen, many shots seen only from one angle, and much of the fun left unshared.

After attempting to give fans more of what they want, golf blogger Stephanie Wei had her media credentials revoked for the remainder of the 2015 PGA Tour golf season. She used Periscope, the live video streaming app from Twitter, during the WGC-Match Play practice round (where no TV broadcast existed). Meanwhile, the golfers seem to be on board and allowed to use Periscope to promote their own brand (at U.S. Golf Association events), as was the case when both Bubba Watson and Ian Poulter used Periscope to provide fans with behind-the-scenes looks at their play during part of the practice round for the 2015 U.S. Open. In a recent golf.com article, Wei said, in response to the revoking of her credentials that “this is a much bigger issue than just a few video clips. What this is really about is the tour needing to modernize its policies.”

If the PGA Tour is really looking to grow its game with millennials, then its old-fashioned policies will be about as effective as trying to win a long-drive contest against Watson with wooden clubs.

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