



## LPGA's lesson in relationships



**Steve Eubanks**

**ORLANDO, FLORIDA** | A week when broadcast deals, licensing agreements and sponsorship contracts sucked a large percentage of the oxygen out of the golf room seems like a perfect time for a case study in how corporate sponsorships are supposed to work in our game.

Saturday afternoon, the 18th green at Lake Nona Golf & Country Club was like a boogie night at Studio 54, a see-and-be-seen affair where you had to stand close and speak up to be heard over the thumping of music spun by a professional DJ. There was Alfonso Ribeiro, host of "Dancing with the Stars," ripping a tee shot into the center of the fairway, leaving a 9-iron to the green. "That's a good golf swing," said a young guy looking up from his beer to catch a second of the golf tournament behind the party.

A few minutes later, an older man moved to the music with one tapping leg and a bob of the head. He had a wistful look that implied he might have been all that in the '70s when the song being sampled by the DJ made its first run up the charts. Then, out of nowhere, he pointed to the fairway and said, "Hey, that's Tom Glavine throwing darts. Just like the old days." Only this time, Glavine, the Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher with the Atlanta Braves, hadn't thrown a slider. He'd hit a pitching wedge to 8 feet, a putt Glavine missed by a foot and a half.

Phones came out en masse when a pink golf cart rolled between the grandstands and the rough line. The old man who knew Glavine showed no recognition, but he was in a minority. Everyone under 50 recognized Paris Hilton, the granddaughter of the late hotel magnet Conrad Hilton and one of the modern cadre of celebrities who are famous for being famous. Hilton wore bedazzled sunglasses and driving gloves the color of a Mary Kay Cadillac.

Meanwhile, Brooke Henderson, Nelly Korda, Maja Stark, and Charley Hull battled it out for the first LPGA Tour title of the year. They were among 29 pros, past winners from the previous two seasons, who were paired with a bounty of celebrities from sports and entertainment in an event that has grown organically into something that can't be found anywhere else in the game. That is because the LPGA is open to these kinds of experience-enhancing spectacles. And their corporate partners, obviously, love it.

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**MARK WANG**

In case you don't keep up with such things, the LPGA leads all women's sports in brand and sponsorship deals, signing 940 such deals in 2022, a 30-percent increase over sponsorships from 2021 and an 18-percent rise in new brand partnerships. And the lead isn't small. According to a [report by SponsorUnited](#), the LPGA led the Women's Tennis Association by 17 deals. In third was the National Women's Soccer League, which trails the LPGA by 446 deals.

It happens because LPGA sponsorships are not transactional. They are relational. As Mark Wang, the CEO of Hilton Grand Vacations said, "I look at this as a partnership. I see a partnership with the LPGA. I think we've created something here that is incredibly unique for everyone and something that is really special for women's golf."

How do you qualify that? What makes a relationship and an event special?

The 18th green at Lake Nona is one example. The concerts and parties throughout the week were another. En Vogue, the female vocal trio from the '90s, played the pro-am draw party, and singer Ellie Goulding put on a show on Saturday night. Throughout the week, the grandstands teemed with fans who wouldn't ordinarily visit a golf tournament.

"One of the things we're building on is a spirit of experience," Wang said. "When you talk about events, we have about 4,000 of them. We'll entertain HGV members to suites at Orlando Magic games. We do chef's tables. We have a private concert series that is extremely popular. We'll have 30 to maybe 100 families at the most at private concerts with really talented artists. We signed LeAnn Rimes, for example, for six concerts this year."

"But what's really exciting about (the HGV Tournament of Champions) is the engagement. We think, by having the celebrity component, we're really broadening the exposure to women's golf. A lot of our members might come out to see Roger Clemens, for example, so we are bringing people in who might not otherwise attend a women's golf tournament. And they seem to be loving it."

Wang isn't much of a golfer. He participated in the event where he said his goal was not to hurt himself or anyone else. But he's all in on the partnership. The LPGA has worked with him to make this event must-see TV in addition to being a talked-about season opener. So good has the relationship been that Wang has signed Annika Sörenstam and Nasa Hataoka as Hilton Grand Vacations ambassadors.

"This is clearly our biggest commitment in terms of one single event," Wang said.

"Nothing comes close to it, so it's very important to us."

"The feedback from the players is, they love this tournament. It's fun. It's more relaxing. They enjoy interacting and getting to know the celebrities. They're also building relationships.

"And I had the president of Hilton Americas tell me that some of their partners told him this is the best event they've ever been to in their lives. It's so wonderful to hear that."

In a world that is increasingly narcissistic and transactional, there is also a lesson in there, one every stakeholder in our game would be well served to learn.

## E-MAIL STEVE

Top: The LPGA's season-opening event puts a priority on engagement and relationships, including bringing Annika Sörenstam as a Hilton Grand Vacations ambassador.

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