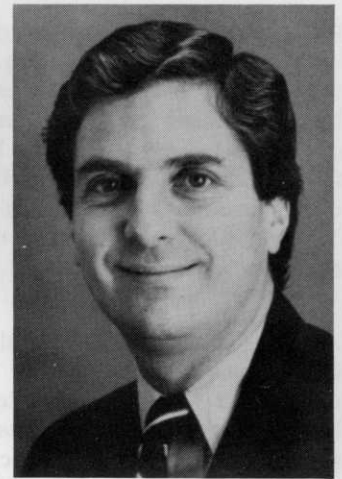


The Future of the LPGA

By RAY VOLPE



The question that the LPGA Staff and I seem to get asked most frequently involves the growth of the LPGA Tour over the past five years, so I relish this opportunity to take a look into the future, trying to determine what the next five years or so might have to offer.

Nevertheless, I think it's important to begin any analysis of the future with a look back. There is no denying that in the past half-decade the LPGA Tour has experienced remarkable growth in all areas: purses, galleries, media interest, number of players and quality of play. There are a number of reasons for this, but suffice it to say that these improvements were overdue, and that now the LPGA is recognized as a viable and significant entity in the world of professional golf.

One of the dangers we face in the coming years is that people will expect the growth to continue at the same rate as it has in the recent past. It is important that the players, the media — everyone — recognize the fact that this will not be the case, that the rate of growth is going to level off. The business proposition the LPGA has with its sponsors is sound, perhaps the best in professional sports, and we don't want to jeopardize the solid foundation we have built by promoting purse escalation just to keep up with past performance.

If the past five years have been a time of growth, then, the next five will be a time of stability and balance. We will have to determine what is the optimum number of tournaments and length of the tour. Do we schedule 35 or 42 events each year? Do we play for eight months or year 'round? More importantly, we will be striving for balance in the rise in purses. As our sponsorships solidify and become more long-term, our goal is for each event to increase its purse by \$25,000 each two or three years, giving the tour an average rise in total purses of about \$500,000 every two years, which we feel is a reasonable rate of growth at this point. The success of the LPGA Tour has been built on the premise that each event must be a solid business proposition for each individual sponsor, and we can do nothing to undermine that premise without damaging the structure and the future of the Tour.

The future of golf on television — specifically the position of the LPGA on the major networks — is perhaps the most important facet for continued growth of the Tour. Team sports

get massive newspaper coverage nationally because there are teams in virtually every major city with a constant supply of home games to insure continuous coverage. An individual sport like golf, though, has to rely primarily on television as its only form of national coverage; radio and golf certainly do not mix, and newspapers provide coverage only on a local basis, with the national wire services modestly filling in the holes.

There are many signs that golf will continue to weaken in the eyes of the networks, and that consequently network coverage will lessen in the coming years. The PGA Tour is the most vulnerable to this trend, since it has many more events telecast than does the LPGA. If the number of PGA Tour events on network TV is reduced in the next few years, the LPGA will be riding a double-edged sword. Knowing Madison Avenue as I do, the prevailing attitude among advertisers will likely be: "We failed with the men, why take the same chance with the women?" They will probably be reluctant to pursue professional golf as a viable advertising medium.

But if we are successful in opening up new advertising channels, we can benefit from the increase in available dates. In the past we have tried to avoid having an LPGA telecast on one network against a PGA Tour event on another; it doesn't attract a new audience, it serves only to split the existing one. With open dates, that competitive situation is eliminated.

The key, then, will be to interest new advertisers to invest in time on LPGA network telecasts. Hopefully we can lure companies targeted for the women's market — companies that spend millions each year on daytime television — to think on a broader scope and take an active role in sponsorship of LPGA events. There is a lot of territory we can cultivate.

At the same time we will have to invent new formats, new television innovations, to generate new interest in watching televised golf. Golf tournaments all tend to look alike on TV, and the lack of sustained action leaves a lot of dull moments. We need to come up with new approaches that command people to watch that particular event, yet continue to respect the game itself.

In the coming years we will also continue to delve into alternatives to network exposure. In 1978 we started the LPGA Syndicated network, in which we produce our own telecasts, clear the stations and sell the time. We are syndicating four tournaments in 1980, and look to more in the future. The amazing growth of cable TV in recent years opens up another possibility that we actively pursue; cable TV and all professional sports will be brought together more regularly in the future.

Another media-related problem that we hope to resolve in the months ahead is the failure of wire services and newspaper sports editors to recognize official names of LPGA events when they involve a corporate entity. When the Elizabeth Arden Classic, for example, shows up in a wire service story as "a \$100,000 LPGA tournament in Miami," it undermines all our efforts. The press seems to regard using a corporate name as free advertising, an archaic attitude considering the corporation may invest several hundred thousand dollars in supporting the event for the good of the game, with the bottom line being the great amount of money generated for the participating charity.

The inconsistency of the sports media astounds me when it comes to this very serious subject. What is the difference between corporate sponsorship and corporate ownership? Why does the Honda Civic Classic fall under this discriminatory policy and not the New York Yankees or the Miami Dolphins? Major league teams are commercial, profitmaking organizations. A sponsor of a golf tournament is lucky to break even, contributing substantial monies to charity nevertheless.

There is more to the growth of a sports organization than just money and media exposure, and in the coming years I expect the LPGA to grow in a number of other areas. For example, there should be a steady increase in both the quantity and quality of player coming onto the Tour. The advent of the women's movement in the past decade, the acceptance of women as athletes, the Title IX Bill and the resulting number of athletic scholarships now available to

women and the caliber of competition for women on the amateur and collegiate level have all served to better prepare players for the level of competition they can expect on the LPGA Tour. This trend will certainly continue.

I also anticipate a growth in women's golf internationally, with the LPGA participating. We have had in recent years tournaments in England, Japan, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Phillipines and have had feelers from a number of other countries. The possibility of increasing our foreign schedule and perhaps having a "world tour" on a small level definitely exists.

I have saved for last an area that I consider of paramount importance to the future of not only the LPGA but the game of golf in general: the promotion of junior golf. All statistics in recent years indicate a severe decrease in the number of people playing golf, and this can only be changed by instituting a massive national program to get more junior players involved. The problem now is that each organization — the PGA of America, the National Golf Foundation, the USGA, the PGA and LPGA Tours — all have ideas, thoughts on what to do and programs that have been implemented, but it is clearly not working. We need to eliminate this fractionalization by joining all the groups together and coming up with a unified, powerful program nationwide. Egos and titles must not be allowed to stand in the way of the game of golf, or they will prevent the cultivation of new players at the grass roots level.

In summary, our goal for the early 80s is to establish a pattern of steady, intelligent growth and insure the relationship with each sponsor is a sensible business proposition. As for the LPGA players themselves, they will have to continually reassess their commitment to the Tour, never losing their respect for the game and their feeling for the paying public. We all — players and staff alike — must avoid falling into the Fat Cat Syndrome which I find so repulsive, not letting recent successes go to our heads to the point where we lose our enthusiasm. The LPGA Tour sustains itself on our constant and continued energies, and we must all appreciate where we came from and recognize the efforts of all who have helped us grow to where we are today.

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