

IBM AND THE FUTURE OF GOLF

WASHER: Welcome to a podcast on The Future of Golf. I'm Tim Washer. We're here today with Pete Bevacqua with the USGA and Rick Singer from IBM. Gentlemen, thanks for being with us today.

BEVACQUA: Thanks for having us.

SINGER: Thank you, Tim.

WASHER: Pete, let me start with you. If we looked at the game of golf over the next three to five years, what do you see as some of the key objectives around growing the game?

BEVACQUA: I always try and factor in three different elements. I see a lot of great future in the women's game. I think we're finally starting to see the benefits of Title IX take form.

More women are playing game. More girls are playing game...playing the game at an earlier age.

And I think with new media now and the impact that has had on the game and of course, looking at our new relationship with IBM, how can we start talking to junior golfers directly? That's always been a handicap in the game of golf.

You always had to talk to kids through their parents. I think finally what we're able to do on usga.org and usopen.com, we can start having that conversation with young kids directly and start getting them out to the golf course.

And lastly, if you look at the USGA we're the governing body of golf for the U.S. and Mexico. If you look at how the population is going to grow in Mexico and here in the United States among Spanish-speaking people, we have to make an impact in Mexico

SINGER: Yes, if I could touch on an area that Pete was talking about, and that's kids. It's interesting when you look back 20 or 30 years when we were kids and the way I learned how to play golf, was my father would take me to a driving range or we would play putt-putt miniature golf, pitch and putt, whatever it was, you just go out and you swing.

And that's how kids were exposed. And depending upon where you lived, depending upon your level of interest it wasn't all that accessible. You know, you really had to really work at it to experience the game.

But now kids, my kids, play PS3 games. They'll play games on the Wii. They're experiencing golf in a different way. So they're building up an affinity for golf, which then we hope will enable them to grow it and become players.

I think a lot of the community, social networking, all those sorts of tools enables people to not just learn about the game and how to play, but the personalities.

Tiger has his own Web site; many other golfers do. And how you can bring those people, make them into real people that kids can identify with and people really of all ages can identify with.

WASHER: Rick, in addition to gaming, what have you seen in the social media space

SINGER: Well, I think you'd have to take a look at, you know, examples of other, whether they're sports or entertainment properties, because I'm not sure we've done it yet with golf as we will right now. And I think golf, probably more than other sports and properties, has the most to gain.

BEVACQUA: With the social networking component, we have to figure out a way to talk about the Tiger Woods and the Lorena Ochoas and the Annika Sorenstams of the world, but also about, hey, where did you play golf yesterday? What kind of driver did you hit?

What did you think of that hole? What did you think of that golf course? I heard you played the Bethpage Black Course, did you like it? And for the USGA, it's a great challenge of ours. We have a million members, and we give them member benefits and we give them information about the USGA.

But for us, in my opinion, for that membership effort to really take off and to be something exciting, we have to have those million people talking to each other. And that's something we hope to figure out in the next couple of years with IBM's help, is how do you have those people talk to one another about golf, about players they like, about the U.S. Open, about where they went on vacation with their families and good places to play golf.

WASHER: So there's probably a model you can look at that happens in the real world, right? Where this little community forms. Obviously on the golf course and then maybe at high school, et cetera. I mean, are there some of these areas where you're seeing people congregate that you wouldn't expect well, I guess one is gaming, you know, around a Wii.

SINGER: Well, certainly gaming, everybody knows from their personal experiences, I'm a huge...I'm a Notre Dame grad, I'm a huge Notre Dame football fan, and I start every day with going on to a Notre Dame site devoted to fans. And we talk about recruits. We talk about what happened, you know, when we played USC last year. And it goes on and on and on.

And there's no world at that in golf. And there's so many more golfers out there that want to talk to each other about the latest in equipment, and great golf courses to play, and you know, what Tiger Woods did last week, and how's his knee.

Somebody has to give them that opportunity, and I think it has to be the USGA, because we are very much about everybody who plays golf. We're about the super elite, Tiger Woods, Annika Sorenstam, and we're just about the people who've just picked up a club yesterday for the first time.

SINGER: It's obviously very huge in Europe, many other parts of the world. But all the emerging markets we all talk about, you know, places like China and India and even Russia and many other markets where there are true opportunities, again, using technology to build an affinity for the sport.

If they're fans of the sport, they'll consume content, you know, whether it's telecasts of the events or any other content that we have to deliver.

But what the Internet helps us do internationally is things like IPTV. You know, rather than the USGA necessarily having to negotiate a big television deal with CCTV 5 in China, there might be alternative ways for them to reach on a one-on-one basis people in China who are really interested in this sport or to build that interest in the sport.

Or to partner with, you know, Web providers in certain cities or provinces in China or India or wherever, to get the content into people's hands. Never could do that before. So you'd have to negotiate it in a very high level, very challenging.

SINGER: In golf when you talk about growing the game, you know, we've always talked about playing, you know, participating, which, to your point, it sets up all of these challenges that are outside of our hands.

We need developers who are willing to build the facilities and all of that, which makes this a bigger challenge. And that's why I say, what a lot of us can do is just try and build up interest. But ultimately it's a much higher bar to clear than trying to get people, a few more people to tune into the Yankee game or to tune into watch Manchester United in the Champions League final.

BEVACQU: I always say the great downfall of junior golf is there's no Little League. There's Little Leagues, you can play baseball anywhere in the country. You just sign up for Little League and there you go, you start playing.

We don't have that in golf. And that's something. It's not going to be a quick fix, but it's something that we have to work towards.

And now, you know, golf's becoming, and I put this term in quotes, it's becoming hipper. When you have people like Tiger Woods, and you look at the LPGA and the players are young on the men's tour and the women's tour, and they're fashionable and they're exciting. And it's no longer the kind of Leave it to Beaver version of golf of the middle-aged American male taking off on Saturday for five hours to go play golf with his buddies. That's still there, but that's not where the future of golf is.

WASHER: Although to be fair, I got into golf because of Wally Cleaver.
[LAUGHTER]
So let's not knock that too much.

I want to talk about two sides of technology as far as on both the course side and also equipment. I was in high school, I played on the golf team. And that was my exposure. And it was really hard for me to get into it, because I was just terrible. If I had a better driver and what-not.

SINGER I'm sure it wasn't the swing, it was the technology.
[LAUGHTER]

WASHER: But if I had some more forgiving equipment, I could have got pulled into there a little bit more. How are you seeing some of the developments in technology equipment or even GPS? Is that working to help bring some new players in, make this more accessible?

BEVACQUA: I think it is. And I'm a self-proclaimed golf equipment junkie. I'll walk around the golf stores and just gaze at the equipment knowing that I'm not allowed by my wife to buy any more equipment at this point.
[LAUGHTER]

But I think it's absolutely, it's helped the game in terms of, back when you and I were kids, there were sets of clubs and great technology and great golf clubs and balls out there...

And obviously all the data that's at your hands, at your fingertips, really allowing you to become more of an expert in your own game. So I think technology has certainly helped. And of course, our role in the equipment side, what technology has enabled us to do, is we utilize technology to control technology.

We want to...our fundamental purpose in the equipment world is to make sure that skill is always the ultimate factor in golf.

WASHER: What other types of innovation do you have to help make sure that the skill of the golfer is what's most important in having that person succeed?

BEVACQUA Well, again, now what you're able to do with the tracking of the performance of high-level players on any golf course, it enables Mike Davis, who is our senior director of rules and competitions, and who sets up the U.S. Open golf course, to factor that in.

So in 2006, when we had the U.S. Open at WingFoot, Mike Davis introduced graduated rough, realizing when players stray off the fairway where they're hitting their golf balls, he made the rough more penal the farther you hit the ball.

And that has really helped him develop a science for the U.S. Open setup. We want the U.S. Open to be the toughest test in golf, but you have to walk a fine line when you have the toughest test of golf. If you don't do it right it becomes too tough.

And yes, we have our 156 of the greatest players in the world and the science, the technology that Mike is able to dial down and utilize really does allow for a measured systematic setup that he can respond to, that he can change with inclement weather, draws in.

SINGER: You know, it's interesting, because golf is a game of incredible traditions. And it's 18 holes. The rules are altered slightly, but pretty much the rules have stayed the same. And when we talk about getting other people interested, it's tough.

I have two boys, 14 and 11. And they've just started to take up golf. And they enjoy it. But, man, to get them to focus for 18 holes, even the 14 year old who should be able to do that, is very difficult.

BEVACQUA: It's funny you say that, because our research that we've done recently in terms of going out to the everyday golfer and asking them, what can the USGA do to help you, to help the game, one of the number one answers we had was pace of play. Everybody's concerned about pace of play.

Everybody's always been concerned about pace of play. But it's always, you never here a compliment we did that round in three and a half hours, isn't that great? But you always hear the complaints: it took five hours, the group in front of us was so slow.

And now people are more and more pressed for time.

And I've heard of some recent courses, courses recently that are rewarding fast play. And I can think of a couple of examples in the area here in New York where the starting times on Saturday morning are dictated by the pace of play you had the weekend before.

So you're rewarded for playing quickly. And that helps. But anything we can do to speed it up, without losing. It's always going to be 18 holes. I think nine holes are obviously more relevant.

We're hearing of golf courses, newly constructed golf courses that are purposely making sure that the clubhouse is accessible after every six holes. So you can play six, you can play 12, and you can play 18 and always come back to the clubhouse

SINGER: I think, I also find, it still amazes me, my two kids, they'll compete on anything. So we'll go to the driving range. And if one of them hits the 100-yard marker by mistake, you know, they've won. You know, and they figure out, can you do it?
[LAUGHTER]

But it makes it fun for them that hitting a ball can lead to a very quick return on that investment of hitting the ball. And again, finding ways to figure out how do we make the game more competitive for people aren't very good.

Now, there are things, you know, we play the Wii golf at home, and it's interesting how the kids are learning about golf through that. And maybe there are other things that we can do like that that gives them that feel and helps them learn the game using technology to build it up so that again they want to go out and play the full 18.

WASHER: Well, thank you very much for your time and the conversation. Pete Bevacqua and Rick Singer, thank you for joining us.

M: Thank you.

M: Thank you, Tim.

[END OF SEGMENT]