

SPORTS

Amid LIV Golf series friction, luxury brands remain mum

June 16, 2022



Ian Poulter, a professional golfer who competed in the controversial LIV series, is one of several players with luxury ties. Image credit: Mercedes-Benz

By KATIE TAMOLA

Controversy is teeing up fast within the golf world, as spectators question the ethics and logistics of professional players joining the Saudi Arabia-backed LIV Golf series.

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With big-name players, including the immensely famous Phil Mickelson, abandoning the PGA Tour for LIV, some wonder if luxury brands will distance themselves from their sporty ambassadors amid ethical concerns. As evidenced in the past, brands often will not disavow their ambassadors or certain events, out of concern for losing loyal consumers who admire their liaisons and other untapped profit potential.

"Why would a brand speak out? Companies have to ask themselves what are they in business for?," said Danita Harris, CEO at [GUICE Wealth Management](#), New York.

"The LIV tournament just opened a door for new and wealthier clients," she said. "It's also opened a door for more diversification within the golf community.

"We are seeing so many changes in the sports world coinciding with the new world order globally," she said. "It was destined to come and people were destined to gripe."

Swing easy

The LIV Golf tour is a series financed by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund. The first LIV Golf Invitational Series began on June 9, 2022, in London.

Many big names within the golf world including those with past and current ties to luxury brands expressed plans to participate in the inaugural series. The PGA Tour, a rival series and the organizer of the main professional golf tours for men in the United States and North America, expressed immediate dismay.

It's here.

Don't blink [#LIVGolf pic.twitter.com/eqJwbAgrw](https://pic.twitter.com/eqJwbAgrw)

LIV Golf (@LIVGolfInv) [June 9, 2022](#)

The LIV Golf series began on June 9

The PGA Tour also responded clearly: any player who participated in the LIV series would be suspended from the PGA Tour.

Players suspended included Mr. Mickelson, Dustin Johnson, Ian Poulter and Sergio Garcia.

"These players have made their choice for their own financial-based reasons," said Jay Monahan, commissioner of the PGA Tour, in a letter to PGA members. "But they can't demand the same PGA Tour membership benefits, considerations, opportunities and platform as you.

"That expectation disrespects you, our fans and our partners."

The suspended players have strong ties to luxury brands.

Mr. Mickelson has served as an ambassador for Swiss watchmaker Rolex since 2014 ([see story](#)), while Mr. Johnson has worked with luxury watchmaker Hublot ([see story](#)).

Mr. Poulter has worked with Swiss watchmaker Audemars Piguet since 2018 ([see story](#)) and Mercedes Benz ([see story](#)), and Sergio Garcia has worked with Swiss watchmaker Omega since 2017 ([see story](#)).

According to *The New York Times*, Mr. Mickelson was paid \$200 million to participate in the LIV series, while Mr. Johnson was paid about \$150 million.

The Telegraph reported that Mr. Poulter was offered \$22 million. It is unconfirmed how much money Mr. Garcia was offered, with several outlets estimating more than \$100 million.

Other professional golf players, who also have ties to luxury brands but chose not to participate in the LIV series, have expressed their ostensible desire to avoid the organization.

In January, private aviation company VistJet tapped Jon Rahm, the then-number one male golfer in the world, as its newest brand ambassador ([see story](#)). The defending U.S. Open champion said during a press conference that he has "never really played the game of golf for monetary reasons," and that he has "always been interested in history and legacy, and right now the PGA Tour has that."

He also said he would not comment on the ethics of other golfers participating in the LIV series.

"I'm not going to get into it," he said. "They're professional golfers.

"They're not politicians," he said. "They're just trying to improve their life and their future wherever they may be.

"I'm not going to comment on that."

Rolex ambassador and number 5 ranked golf player in the world Justin Thomas spoke about the financially-fueled impetus that sparked several of his peers to join LIV.

"It's astronomical money that they're throwing at people," he said in a statement. "Everybody has a price for everything."

A response, if that

Luxury brands associated with these professional golf players participating in the LIV series have remained mum for the most part, even as some consumers have accused Rolex of limiting marketing material with Mr. Mickelson. Mr. Mickelson has also felt the need to comment publicly on the backlash.

Mickelson says he has deep empathy' for 9/11 victims after LIV Series criticism

<https://t.co/g0ZReo6Lhh>

The Guardian (@guardian) [June 13, 2022](#)

Mr. Mickelson responds to claims that the LIV series is unethical

As evidenced by controversies in the past, many brands will proceed with caution and not publicly disavow certain contentious instances or their ambassadors, out of fear of losing loyal consumers and sales.

In fall 2021, NFL quarterback Aaron Rodgers, and North American ambassador for Swiss watchmaker Zenith ([see story](#)), faced a breadth of negative press and fan reactions when he revealed he had not received a formal COVID-19 vaccination and criticized the league's policies regarding the virus following a positive test.

Mr. Rodgers misled reporters in an August 2021 press conference when he said he was "immunized" when asked about COVID-19 vaccinations. None of his sponsors, including Zenith, parted ways with the quarterback following the COVID controversy.

Many luxury brands across sectors enjoy tapping athletes for campaigns, connecting diverse backgrounds, viewpoints and experiences overcoming adversity with their marketing messaging. However, this can be a double-edged sword, as ambassadors' off-the-court behavior can also reflect on brands, for better or worse ([see story](#)).

"Will luxury brands stay quiet? With their own controversies afoot in not-so-distant pasts, I think yes, for a short jaunt, the traditional brands will stay quiet," Ms. Harris said.

"Opening the way for unknown golf brands to emerge in the world's most luxurious golf tournament," she said.

"Who better fitting to introduce such a tournament but the epitome of luxury [than] the Saudis?"

"It's the perfect opportunity to remain silent and quietly maneuver to procure golf on the largest most profitable golf stage."

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