



Shorter title match, letting fans on fairway prove to be key strokes

Greg Hansen: Changes helped create more buzz

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The first tee at The Ritz-Carlton Golf Club, Dove Mountain, is a strange place to find a man wearing a tie, but at noon Sunday the week's most important foursome showed up not in golf attire but in their Sunday best.

There were Tim Finchem, commissioner of the PGA Tour; Jorge Benitez, managing director of Accenture; Rocco Bene, chairman of the Conquistadores; and Gerald Goodman, executive director of the WGC-Accenture Match Play Championship.

You almost expected Jack and Arnie.

This was the power group of the week, more so than champion Hunter Mahan and runner-up Rory McIlroy, and more so than the man who sold the most tickets, Tiger Woods.

For the first time in six years at Dove Mountain, the Big Four hit it out of the park: This was the best Match Play week of them all, with the most buzz, the biggest crowds, wall-to-wall sunshine and the healthiest outlook for the future.

And the huge merchandise tent was almost sold out of (expensive) golf goods.

It took a while, but we like it. If nothing else, Match Play golf is finally more compelling than the NBA Slam Dunk competition.

The PGA Tour did the right thing by taking Tucson off a year-to-year death watch and extending the tournament through 2014. The Conquistadores sold more than \$3 million in tickets in a down economy. Accenture continued to pour \$7 million and its corporate support onto the WGC. And Goodman, with approval from the Tour and its players association, made Sunday work on a grand scale for the first time, allowing fans in the fairways and cutting the championship match from 36 to 18 holes.

Sunday at the Match Play Championship used to be the most boring day in golf, and that includes the four times Tiger has been in the final twosome.

But this time, using a new format, glamour names like McIlroy and Lee Westwood were on the first tee at 7:25 Sunday morning; buses on Dove Mountain Boulevard were carrying full loads by 9 a.m.

Sure, part of any Match Play event is pure luck.

Among the reasons this tournament is in Tucson and not La Costa, Calif., is that too often California's (yawn) 36-hole Sunday finish pitted Scott McCarron against Kevin Sutherland and, in another year, Andrew Magee versus Jeff Maggert.

Star power has defined the six years here.

Golf is notoriously slow to change in any form, from century-old rules to fan-friendly enticements, but on Sunday the PGA Tour made two huge concessions for the betterment of this championship: It let the fans gather on the fairway grass, getting as close as 20 yards to McIlroy and Mahan, and it didn't make it an all-morning and all-afternoon showdown between two golfers.

The Conquistadores, wearing pressed white shirts and black vests on an 80-degree afternoon, handled the "follow the leaders" masses with aplomb. There wasn't a single incident of some over-served goof breaking through the ropes and making a wreck of the notion that golf fans aren't cretins.

"It creates a good atmosphere," said McIlroy. "There was a good buzz out there."

A few months ago, Donald Trump bought the bankrupt Doral Golf Resort, sparking considerable speculation that the Match Play event would move from Dove Mountain to Doral, and that the eventual trickle-down would create a PGA Tour event in golf-starved Detroit.

At the same time, last week's encumbered PGA Tour event, the Mayakoba Classic near Cancun, signed a four-year contract. It appeared that Tucson could get squeezed off the pro golf map entirely.

But none of that happened. Under Bene's leadership, ticket sales were encouraging from the start, and by Goodman's push, the new Sunday format created back-end interest in a front-loaded event.

This is a good time for pro golf in Tucson and it hasn't always been that way.

In 1980, after several rainstorms, the final round of the Tucson Open wasn't played until a Tuesday. In 1984, in the first Seiko-Tucson Match Play championship at Randolph North, the players rebelled because the top eight players were seeded into Saturday's round of 16, and it snowed on the first day of play.

And in 1999, Tucson was given an encumbered event opposite the La Costa Match Play, leading to a series of minor-league type events won by under-the-radar golfers such as Garrett Willis, Gabriel Hjertstedt and Frank Licklitter Jr.

Now this golf tournament has such a reach that Phil Mickelson's absence was of no consequence.

The working motto has become: We can't wait till next year.

Sunday's matches

Semifinals

- No. 6 Hunter Mahan def. No. 10 Mark Wilson, 2 and 1. Mahan won the first two holes, going 2 up, and never trailed. He extended his lead to 3 up through No. 7 and avoided mistakes the rest of the way on a day he shot 1 under par.
- No. 1 Rory McIlroy def. No. 1 Lee Westwood, 3 and 1. Westwood sizzled early, winning three of the first four holes, all of them with birdies, but didn't make another birdie until No. 15. By then, McIlroy had won six holes and taken a commanding lead. McIlroy played 5 under for the round.

Consolation Final

- No. 10 Mark Wilson def. No. 1 Lee Westwood, 1 up. Wilson never trailed but couldn't shake Westwood, who rallied on the back side with birdies at 14 and 15 to get within one.

Championship

- No. 6 Hunter Mahan def. No. 1 Rory McIlroy, 2 and 1. It wa all square through five holes, then Mahan won the next three and had only one birdie; he benefited by McIlroy misplays and bogeys at Nos. 8-9, and then stretched his lead to 4-up at the 10th hole.