

OPINION

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The Unintended Consequences of the PGA Tour-LIV Merger

Published 06/12/23 10:00 AM ET | Updated 06/12/23 01:45 PM ET

Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D.,

The inevitable happened. The PGA Tour and LIV Golf appear to be ending their contentious relationship, announcing that the two professional golf organizations will merge. Although details will continue to be worked out and revealed, money is at the center of the decision. Yet, the unintended consequences of this merger will impact some of the very golfers who benefited the most from the two entities remaining separate.

When LIV Golf was formed, it enticed PGA Tour golfers with higher payouts than they were able to earn on the PGA Tour, bankrolled by the Public Investment Fund, the Saudi sovereign wealth fund. This provided sufficient incentive for some of the very best PGA Tour golfers to jump ship and join the LIV Tour. Highly regarded golfers like Dustin Johnson, Bryson DeChambeau and Brooks Koepka, who won the 2023 PGA Championship, as well as icons like Phil Michelson and Sergio Garcia, provided LIV Golf with instant star recognition, visibility and a potential fan base.

The PGA Tour (as well as the DP World Tour, which is part of the merger) responded by banning all LIV golfers from their events. LIV golfers were still able to participate in the Majors, since those tournaments are controlled by other entities. This quietly kept open a crack in the door for the PGA Tour to eventually embrace LIV golfers. That crack has now become a welcome mat.

Recall that when Jon Rahm, one of the top golfers in the world, was asked why he did not join the LIV Tour, he responded that he wanted to play golf “against the best in the world.” He believed that the PGA Tour offered that opportunity, coupled with “history and legacy.” He will now get his wish, as some of the world’s best golfers on the LIV Golf tour rejoin him and his PGA Tour compatriots.

Many professional sports leagues have been met with and survived competition and eventual mergers. The National Basketball Association (NBA) absorbed the American Basketball Association (ABA) in 1976, with four ABA teams (including the Denver Nuggets, now vying for their first NBA championship) moving to the NBA. The National Hockey League absorbed four World Hockey Association (WHA) teams in 1972 when the WHA ceased operations. The National Football League and American Football League merged in 1966 to become what is now the National Football League, with two conferences that compete for the Super Bowl.

Yet, professional golf is primarily an individual sport, much like professional tennis and bowling, even when some of their tournaments are structured as team competitions. This makes the impact of the merger most felt by individual players.

This explains why PGA Tour golfers felt "blindsided" by the merger announcement, with many expressing concern.

An unintended consequence of the merger is future membership for existing PGA Tour golfers.

When the current LIV golfers left the PGA Tour, they opened spots on the PGA Tour for good (but perhaps not the very best) players. Think about golfers ranked 150 to 200 on the Official Golfer World Ranking (OWGR) who now compete on the PGA Tour. As in team sports, when a star player gets injured, the adage "next man up" applied.

The same idea occurred on the PGA Tour, as golfers on the Korn Ferry Tour were given an easier pathway to gain PGA Tour status, as there were more slots open to them left by LIV golfers. Some will successfully retain their status. Many will struggle and drop back to the Korn Ferry Tour, hoping to regain their PGA Tour status via the Korn Ferry Tour Finals.

The same trickledown effect occurred with the Korn Ferry Tour, as marginal professional golfers who could not make this tour were given an opportunity to compete.



A close up of Matt Fitzpatrick's shoes as he stands on the seventh hole during the second round of the Wells Fargo Championship at Quail Hollow Country Club on May 05, 2023 in Charlotte, North Carolina. Mike Ehrmann/Getty Images

With only a limited number of spots available in each PGA Tour event, adding back LIV golfers will make each spot harder to find. Moreover, once each tournament begins, the elevated level of competition will make it more difficult to make the cut to play over the weekend, earn money — and most importantly, earn FedExCup points that will determine (for some) their tour status the following year.

The PGA Tour can accept that this is the consequence of the merger, effectively restoring professional golf to its pre-LIV Golf era status and level of competition.

To compensate for this effect, the PGA Tour may decide to move the cut line, which determines who moves on to the finals rounds, from 65 to 70; it could expand the field in each tournament by 12 golfers, or add additional events to earn FedExCup points. Anything should be up for discussion as the post-LIV Golf era details are worked out.

Professional golf, like all professional sports, is entertainment, with the athletes paid to perform at the highest level. This is why the Majors, which included all professional golfers who qualify, represents the best test of skill.

The 2023 PGA Championship was won by Brooks Koepka (a LIV golfer), while the Masters was won by Jon Rahm (a PGA Tour golfer). In 2022, one of the four majors was won by a LIV golfer (Cameron Smith). Such discussions will become moot as the two tours become a single entity.

The resulting reshuffling of golfers will take a few years. In the process, fans will once again get to enjoy the very best competition that professional golf has to offer. What it does for the golfers remains to be seen.

Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D., is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He applies his expertise in data-driven, risk-based decision-making to evaluate and inform public policy and has a particular interest in sports analytics, including how data can inform sports strategy, on and off the field.