

The power of publicity - When blurring the lines of sport and entertainment goes wrong

 By [Rob Garden](#) , issued by [Levergy](#)

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Powerful publicity is about creating a compelling story for new and prospective fans to follow. In a previous piece I examined the Floyd Mayweather vs Conor McGregor bout as an illustration of this. "The Money Fight", as it was dubbed, was an event which began as nothing more than a circus sideshow but which, through captivating storytelling, was transformed into a crossover sport/entertainment spectacle, becoming one of the most commercially lucrative single sporting events in history. This event arguably created the blueprint on how to create a made-for-tv entertainment marvel through sport.



Off of the back of this however, there have been examples of sponsors missing the mark in attempting to apply the money fight model - creating case studies illustrating the dangers these events can hold if not executed effectively.

The prime and most current example of this is "The Match" – Tiger Woods vs Phil Mickelson in a \$9 million winner-takes-all one-day exhibition.

In determining my stance on how this event has been positioned, as a fan of golf and Tiger Woods, I set out with the goal of illustrating the shortcomings of "The Match" while uncovering if it may have any redeeming examples of great publicity. In my guise as a sponsorship and PR practitioner however I cannot (with credibility) position this as anything but a standout example of how not to go about using sports stars to create publicity for a brand or their sport.

Tiger Woods is arguably the greatest golfer to have played the game with Phil Mickelson being his greatest adversary throughout his career and a universally loved character in golf. They have both won events within the last year with Tiger in the middle of one of the greatest comebacks in sporting history.

Based on this, one may argue that this is perfectly set up for an entertainment spectacle the likes of which golf has never seen. Their achievements however do not guarantee a successful event or any goodwill for those who associate themselves with it.

Mayweather and McGregor, two fighters at the pinnacle of their respective sports and two of the greatest self-promoters

ever, combined to create electric pre-match pageantry by bringing together two different worlds and by playing characters within the event storyline. Woods and Mickelson undeniably do not have similar abilities in the context of how "The Match" has been positioned.

The awkward and clearly orchestrated social media banter between the two which has characterised the build-up to the 23 November event symbolises everything wrong with this exercise. Neither of them has ever been a genuine showman and both are well past their prime. Tiger is a cold, distant character and Phil, although outgoing and likeable, has no appeal outside of a traditional golfing audience. Further there is nothing unique about their match – it is everything a golf fan sees week in and week out with nothing more than a brand-sponsored enormous payday added to entice viewership.

The narrative being peddled around the event by its participants and the PGA Tour is one of taking the sport of golf to a wider audience through an innovative broadcast offering and a pressurised, high-stakes, big-money match-up.

Of the event, Mickelson said, "It's an opportunity for us to bring golf to the masses in prime time during a period where we don't have much going on in the world of golf."

In actuality, this event symbolises everything wrong with the game of golf. Reliance on multimillionaire aging stars (in an era when there is more marketable young talent than ever before) and utilisation of a storyline around making them richer, to promote a sport which is viewed as elitist, unattainable and out of touch. For a financial institution such as Capital One (the title sponsor) to tie themselves to this seems counterintuitive.

If the PGA and the sponsors' objective is really to grow the game of golf, why not hold the event at an accessible public course rather than an elite Las Vegas country club? Why not allow public attendance rather than limiting to invited VIPs? Why not change the traditional golfing format we have all seen time and time again and create something unique? And finally, why not have the winner donate an unprecedented amount of money to a charity of their choice rather than making the rich richer. This would surely make for a more compelling storyline, thus attracting new viewers and building goodwill for sponsors.

While Mayweather vs Macgregor made no qualms about its objective to make as much money as possible through the creation of a never-before-seen entertainment event, "The Match" is clearly a Las Vegas gambling affair positioned under the confused guise of aiming to benefit and grow the sport. It won't fool anyone.

Consumers are not stupid. The truth is 'The Money Fight' had no lasting legacy other than a potential continuation of the storyline through a rematch. What it did however illustrate is that through a powerful narrative and the creation of engaging and authentic content off of this, these 'spectacles' do have the potential to offer commercial and brand value for participants and sponsors alike. When they are positioned as anything other than what they truly are (in the case of "The Match" - nothing more than a shameless money grab), they become a dangerous exercise with the potential to damage the reputation of the brands involved. For a true golf fan "The Match" is offensive, a dilution of a gentleman's game, for a prospective golf fan it offers no real reason to tune in. It thus may create sponsorship revenue in the short term but has the potential to end up having a negative effect on the image both golf and its sponsors in the long run.

Give me Rory McIlroy vs Lexi Thompson going head to head at Soweto Country Club with the winner pocketing \$3 million dollars and every cent of the proceeds from the event going to the Sports Trust – that's something I'd watch. An elitist event designed for Las Vegas punters falsely claiming to benefit the sport – thanks, but I'll pass.

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