

The Driving Force

behind the resurrection of the LPGA Tour

By Paul Prendergast

“The most important thing in this ‘Founder philosophy’ is you need to leave the game better than when found it. The early Founders knew they weren’t going to make any money or get rich but they knew they needed to leave the game better for the next generation of women.”

Mike Whan

In five short years, Commissioner Mike Whan has engineered a complete and stunning resurgence in the LPGA’s fortunes, dragging the Tour from a crumbled and humbled entity to the energetic, global presence in the sport that it enjoys today.

2014 was a special year on and off the golf course for the Tour and its players but with 33 events, US\$61.4 million in prize money and a foothold in over a dozen countries world-wide, Mike Whan and his team have built the platform for even more staggering success in 2015 and beyond.

Whan, who turns 50 on the same day Greg Norman turns 60 (February 10), will humbly avoid talk of him being the ‘messiah’ or ‘saviour’ of women’s golf.

However, speak to any current or former players – and Whan makes the point of consulting with some of the early Founders of the LPGA Tour on a regular basis – and you get a sense of the reverence with which they hold the Commissioner, for elevating the Tour to such a position of strength.

Evidence of his ‘hands on’ style, I was not expecting the Commissioner to answer the phone directly when I called before the Christmas break.

Whan told me he was ‘still grinding it out’ in the office and under strict instructions from his assistant Candace to be at his desk to take my call, while she enjoyed a long Christmas ‘Happy Hour’ afternoon – courtesy of her very generous boss.



Q Mr Whan, ‘Congratulations’ on such a successful 2014, on and off the golf course.

Thank you very much. It’s been a good few years. We’re on a nice run right now which makes me nervous because falling back is not an option! *(laughing)*

Q Is it unfair to ask about your personal highlights for the year, given there were so many and you might not want to single some out and not others?

Yeah, I can think of a handful.

Michelle Wie and Lexi Thompson battling away early in the year in the desert at the Kraft Nabisco, we probably should have known then that something special was coming.

I would say the back-to-back Opens at Pinehurst was a special moment for golf and Michelle and Stacy (Lewis) battling for that made it even more interesting. I’ve been on Tour enough to see Michelle before school, going to school and after school and I know how hard she’s worked, not only to get her degree, but to get her game back in shape so that was an exciting moment.

I think the highlight for me was the International Crown, although I don’t know that the rest of the media and fans would say that. One of the things I always tell my team is that our job is to bring something new and exciting every year even if the media and fans might not be ready for it. That takes us back to the Founders Cup and the Race to the Globe but in 2014, it was introducing the International Crown which turned out to be a huge success.

When you’re launching something that hasn’t been done before: a format, a qualification process; you’re nervous because everything about it was different. We literally stole from nobody to create the International Crown so I was nervous!

I wanted to make sure that the countries competing cared, the players cared and the format worked so it was probably my proudest moment, Sunday at the International Crown. It was something pretty special.

My last moment for the year was probably standing on the 18th green handing the inaugural CME Race to the Globe trophy over. It was such a big moment in the women’s game.

Naples is always the season ender for us and we always get a ton of our customers and season partners come in so we’re really surrounded by family at that event. It was a pretty neat night and then giving the Globe away to Lydia Ko, it was a pretty good week for a Commissioner.

Q You mentioned nerves in a light hearted way but is there some trepidation about trying to back up from the success of 2014 moving forward?

I can't control what goes on inside the ropes and nor do I spend a lot of time worrying about it either. At the end of the day, I can't play well enough to compete on this Tour so there's no point worrying about putts I can't make or chips I can't attempt.

What's really great about what 2014 created was another significant tsunami of interest and my job is to turn that interest into opportunity. It's about continuing to provide bigger and bigger stages, bigger and bigger platforms for the best in the world to compete on.

I'm not shy, nor am I ignorant to know that we don't compete on the same size stage as the men do or that some other sports provide. My job is to make our stage and spotlight bigger and brighter and that's what we'll be doing in '15.

Q You have 33 events in 2015?

We have 33 official events and the 34th this year is the Solheim Cup (between the U.S. and Europe in Germany this September).

Q And you have some exciting developments with the Majors this year?

I know you asked me earlier 'what keeps me awake at night?' and that used to be it – building security in the Majors.

We really wanted to build something that would stand the test of time over the next 10, 15, 25 years. With the women's Majors, they've bounced around a little bit too much and were too prone to change, whether that was sponsor change or venue. So really, the last couple of years have really been about building a Major line up that's tied to partners that can be with us for the long-term.

ANA (title sponsors for the ANA Inspiration, formerly the Kraft Nabisco) and the PGA of America together with KPMG (sponsors of the new Women's PGA Championship) really eliminated the biggest weight off our shoulders when we were able to address those two.

Especially in the case of the (former) Kraft Nabisco, that's not the women's version of anything. That's our own, unique, 43-years of history and I've said to my staff on many occasions: 'I'm not going to be the Commissioner that stops playing at Palm Springs', so we needed to figure that one out.

I feel really good about our Major pillars now and we're with partners who

talk in terms of decades, not in terms of years.

The reality of it is that my job is to build events that stand the test of time and if you're going to do that, you play them where the sponsor needs them to be played, not where Mike Whan needs them to be played.

The home run there for us (with the Women's PGA Championship moving to New York from Rochester) was partnering with the PGA of America and KPMG. Here are two partners who are talking about what we're going to be doing in 10-15 years from now, not 10-15 months, and their commitment to make sure this event is Major in more ways than just on the golf course.

It's impressive, in terms of what we're doing for women in the game, in terms of what we're doing for women in business. Majors are built on tradition and history but also on the impact they have and I think we're talking about an impact with the Women's PGA Championship that's going to be lasting on the women's game, not just on the tournament.

Q I've read you consider the number of events you have now (33) as being around the optimum for what you can support on a schedule and properly service the needs of sponsors. Given the success of the past few years, is it now a headache for you that you might have more people knocking on your door to discuss new event possibilities than you want or need?

The last eight months has probably been the first time I've ever said 'No' to anyone but, bottom line is, I can't get away with having tournaments where five of the top 75 players show up. Other Tours may be able to, other sports may be able to, but in the LPGA's world when I get people to write a cheque large enough to be a title sponsor, they expect a high quality, international field where the world's paying attention and the top players are playing.

I've seen events on other Tours where five of the top people are there and they're missing 45 of the top players, I don't think our Tour can withstand that so if I add another 15 or 20 events where everyone is unhappy, all that results in is

a lot of (sponsor and event) turnover and nobody wins there.

I said to people in the beginning that I was going to invest my time and money in building the schedule up to around 33 or 34 events and then when we get there, I'm going to invest in making those events bigger and better. It won't be any shock to you that for the next 3 or 4 years, we're going to focus on making the events we have better.

Whether it's greater TV coverage, bigger purses, a greater investment in fan experience – these are the things that I was not able to do in my first five years in the job because my effort has been about building a lasting schedule. Now that we're there, it's really giving us the opportunity to think about making what we have better than what they were.

The last thing I wanted to be known as was the Commissioner who brought us back to a full schedule. That sounds incredibly underwhelming to me. We want to be known for making a lasting difference in creating opportunities for women in the game and it's great that we got ourselves back to a position of strength, but I don't consider that as having achieved anything yet.

The goal is to say, 50 years from now looking back, what was our group's legacy to the game and 'what difference did we make inside and outside the ropes?' and now we're in a position to dream big to try to achieve that.

Q The LPGA schedule, global as it is, is well balanced with two hefty international travel legs primarily at the start and end of each year. What were the thought processes behind the construction of that schedule?

We try to make two swings, in the Spring (Bahamas, Australia, Thailand and Singapore) and Fall (China twice, Malaysia, Korea, Taiwan and Japan).

What I didn't want to do and I don't mean any disrespect, but when I look at tennis for instance, the schedule is a lot more nomadic as they just travel all over. As a result, a lot of those athletes just tend to live wherever they live.

With the LPGA, most of the players have made a commitment to live in North America either full-time or for seven to nine months of the year. So I wanted to give them a schedule that pays that off for them, where we travel early



Players from each of the eight competing countries with the International Crown trophy.

and we travel late and in the middle, we're primarily in North America with a couple of trips to Europe.

So it's very easy to have a house, to start to build a family and have a bit more of a normal life. I think it makes us more of a team as we end up living more in the same areas as a Tour, friendships are created.

We don't just see each other Thursday to Sunday. We fly home together; we fly to the tournaments together, so it creates a much tighter group.

Q One of your mantras for your staff and the players has been to 'Think like a Founder' – (i.e. the players that pioneered the LPGA Tour), in terms of reshaping the focus, the priorities and the principles that the Tour is built on.

The basic premise is 'Get over yourself' – it doesn't matter what your title is and what you get paid, what can you do to make the LPGA better?

However, the most important thing in this 'Founder philosophy' is you need to leave the game better than when found

it. The early Founders knew they weren't going to make any money or get rich but they knew they needed to leave the game better for the next generation of women.

And so, to give you an example, back in 2009 we used to put about 3,000 young women through a program called 'Girls Golf' (www.girlsgolf.org) to get young girls playing. This year, we'll put about 43,000 through. To me, that's acting like a Founder and it's one of the great successes of the LPGA Tour.

We're using our opportunity to grow the game and we're really starting to see the impact, in the States at least, of young women coming back into the game. We can't think we have this great success and feel like we have no responsibility to make the game better at the same time.

Q And the LPGA players have responded wonderfully by all reports?

To be honest with you, I really thought I was going to have to educate the players on this but the reality is: they teach me more than the other way around.

I don't have to teach LPGA athletes anything. More often than not, I just have to follow their lead. ●



(l-r) Stacy Lewis and Michelle Wie talk after Wie won the 69th U.S. Women's Open at Pinehurst.