

Exploding into the mainstream

BY GREG MCFARLANE

Once a refuge for white middle-aged men, golf courses have been inhabited by big business, fashion, and every demographic imaginable. Everyone's playing the game, or at least taking an interest. What was once considered the dull five hours of television has turned into a major spectator sport, and participation has increased dramatically.

Yes, golf is quickly becoming a global game. But several issues persist. Who can play? Who can pay? And most importantly, how much money can be made at the end of the day?

Golf has become more than just batting a little dimpled ball up and down lush fairways (or through thick forests, shallow ponds, meandering brooks and treacherous bunkers—but enough about my personal route from tee to green). The sport has evolved into a multi-million dollar fashion and image-making enterprise.

The plaid bell bottom-ish pants that marred the game through the seventies and eighties have given way to khakis and collared shirts emblazoned with sleek Nike ensigns. After being given \$40 million to hawk Nike products to unsuspecting youngsters and willing-fool adults, Tiger Woods and his pearly white grin are moving sales along quite nicely. And David Duval, the PGA Tour's leading money winner this year, is a drawlin' Tommy Hilfiger billboard on golf cleats. It's safe to say that golf has nudged its way into the mainstream, and therefore into an increasing number of wallets.

And the spending can be downright ridiculous. This sum-

mer I found myself on an Ontario golf course (and I'm not lying here) golfing behind a man who had: a Tiger Woods hat (Nike has created a unique symbol solely for Woods), a Tiger Woods golf shirt, Tiger Woods golf shoes and Nike Khakis. Hell, he supported Woods' capital ventures so much you'd think he was a relative.

But Woods' impact on the game goes far beyond his foray into the fashion world. Being a visible minority (he is the son of a black father and Thai mother), he has helped to smash through the stereotype stating that only affluent whites can play and succeed at the game. His success has sparked an interest in the game from the last place people ever expected golf to catch on: American inner-cities.

In turn, the United States Golf Association (USGA) has been quick to capitalize on Woods' unique impact on the game. The USGA has embarked upon an ambitious plan to get as many inner-city kids playing the game as possible. The organization stages free clinics specifically designed for financially-deprived kids in cities across America.

But while it is good that kids are swinging golf clubs in parking lots and driving ranges throughout America, what are the chances of regularly getting these kids on actual tee boxes, or walking down actual fairways, and missing putts on real greens?

Given that most golf courses will take your arm and, yes, even your leg for a club membership or single-day playing fees, and given that the USGA's target audience in this program is children from low-income families, the chances are pretty slim.

For example, nobody will golf on any 18-hole course in the Halifax area for less than 30 dollars. And remember that figure is the minimum. Some courses in the area will immorally charge golfers more than 60 dollars to go around just once.

And similarly, what happens when these kids turn eighteen and

are no longer being helped by the USGA. When they're too old for this minor program, then where do they go?

The USGA really doesn't care. It's a given that some of these kids will be very successful, and enough of them will earn enough money to get to a local public course a time or two every summer to give the USGA a return on its investment on the program. For every golf course created and every new golfer, the USGA has the ability to attract new members, and with them new sources of income. While the USGA's inner-city program is admirable, it also makes

great business sense.

And business is what the game is now about. High profile golf product providers like Titleist and Taylor made advertise everywhere, and every corporation under the sun is eager to have their name attached to the game. Where it was once the norm to escape the office to shoot a round of golf, it is now customary for corporations to hold golf tournaments or employee days. And now it is even more customary to do business while playing the game. So, even moreso than before, business elites dominate the game.

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