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PGA takes timid steps to join the growing social media world

During a 2010 review of the sport of golf, Jalen Rose — a former 13-year NBA star turned ESPN sports analyst — urged the PGA to “move forward and embrace social media to the max,” noting that PGA.com’s Facebook page only had a little over 35,000 fans and its Twitter account had just about 19,000 followers. Even five years ago, those numbers were staggeringly low for a sports organization with worldwide viewership.

Last month, the PGA announced that Turner Sports would take over the league’s Twitter feed during the last major tournament for the year — the 97th PGA Championship held at the Whistling Straits near Sheboygan, Wis. Aimed at engaging and growing the sport’s younger fan base — a smart move given that the top three golfers in the world are under 27 — the Turner takeover featured behind-the-scenes livestreaming on Periscope that included fan Q&As with leading golfers, hole walk-throughs, practice-round footage and goofy match moments.

The coverage culminated in a Periscope interview with Jason Day, the 27 year-old Australian golfer who captured the day, won his first major championship and broke Tiger Woods’ record for most strokes under par during a tournament by finishing at an amazing 20 under par. At the end of the match, competitor Jordan Spieth tweeted: “That was a clinic @JDayGolf ... Really impressive by you and Colin. Great people and great champions.”

Some commentators have criticized the PGA-Turner use of Periscope as hypocritical, given the association’s revocation of blogger Stephanie Wei’s season media credentials for her use of the online tool last spring. Wei used Periscope to broadcast live video of Masters Tournament winner Jordan Spieth during a practice round in the days leading up to the World PGA

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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Golf Championship Match Play event, in violation of the PGA’s mobile device policy applicable to both media and fans.

Wei explained that she was “trying to spread fanfare for the tour, its players and the event,” but acknowledged to Mashable that she did think it “pushed the envelope” of allowable usage. She had found a “new, cutting-edge platform” and thought it “would be good to engage fans and give them what they want to see.”

Relying on the “ephemeral nature” of Periscope streams — they disappear after 24 hours — and the fact that Wei’s video content did not include competitive action, the blogger reportedly assumed her broadcast wouldn’t cause too much trouble. On top of that, other reporters have argued that Wei’s offense didn’t warrant such harsh punishment by the PGA.

PGA Tour chief marketing officer Ty Votaw told Sports Illustrated that Wei was “stealing” when she posted the Periscope video of Spieth. Although golf has a reputation for being a bit behind-the-times when it comes to social media and online content, the PGA’s handling of unsanctioned livestreaming is in line with the policies of other major sports. So far, only the MLB has embraced live video uploads by non-league and non-network sources. The

NHL also bans livestreaming and the NFL apparently is “evaluating streaming during the off-season.”

What’s the issue?

Sports broadcasting is lucrative and amateur livestreaming poses a threat to partnerships among the leagues, networks and sponsors. According to media industry intelligence company SNL Kagan, “sports programming rights in 2016 totaled \$22.5 billion,” even without taking into account revenue generated from sanctioned online video postings and related advertising. Periscope and other livestreaming platforms like Meerkat don’t yet offer high-resolution video, the kind found on television and official streaming services. But they could.

And when they do, content quality will be much closer to network coverage. Brett Hutchins, an associate professor at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia who studies the impact of modern technology on sports media, commented that “the intensity of the policing going on around major sports has to do with what’s going on in the larger industry ... [i]t’s a constant moving feast around who gets to own the footage.”

As the popularity of these platforms grows, broadcasting

companies and their partners will have to decide whether to explore ways to use livestreaming to their advantage — or continue to fight the tide.

With the PGA-Turner partnership that used Periscope to livestream content at the PGA Championship, golf — somewhat surprisingly — appears to have become one of the first major sports to experiment with this online medium.

Turner Sports’ Senior Director of Social Media Morgan Dewan explained that Turner and the PGA “feel like it’s a new content distribution platform. And it’s really going to complement our coverage on TNT, PGA.com and the PGA Championship Live app.”

This year’s coverage involved a higher level of production as compared to amateur smartphone video streaming; Turner employed a producer and small crew to craft high-quality, talent-hosted video, shot with a steady-camera holder and microphones, as a TV segment would have been shot.

According to Dewan, “[w]hen you bring that level of authenticity to fans, that’s really where Periscope shines. No other platform captures that type of access in real time. We love it [too] when talent is willing to get on their phones, flip the camera around selfie-style and just take questions from fans.”

The companies reportedly are “being deliberate” in their approach to Periscope, Facebook Live and other streaming and social media platforms — fully vetting those platforms and developing “playbooks” for providing and protecting top-notch online content.

Private companies also are expanding golf’s reach into the realm of online technology. Premiering at the January 2014 PGA merchandise show, John McGuire’s Golf Game uses sensor-fusion and geo-space technology to map golf courses, locate a golfer’s location on the green and measure the distances off of a club.

Pros like Lee Westwood, Jim Furyk and Graeme McDowell have used this technology, consisting of a wearable device and little tags that screw into the top of clubs to collect data. The company's software uses that data to recreate a round of golf, allowing users to view the strike distances and stats of other players, including the pros, encouraging virtual competition and "upping golf's social game."

Golf Game affords another online forum for players and fans to interact, even if not in real-time, as they would on Facebook, Twitter and Periscope.

As golf expands opportunities for online interaction, fans might just see more exclusive footage and a lighter side of the sport. Caddies — who already sell ad space on their shirtsleeves and caps — might negotiate with the PGA, broadcasting networks

and advertisers to offer body camera-style livestreams of players' shot prep and rounds of golf. Or, as the PGA Championship's most viral moments of 2015 have shown, fans might be treated to more integrated (and somewhat silly) tweets, live streams and memes, like those around Matt Jones' handling of the championship ninth hole, when his ball landed in a spectator tent. He had to

find it and hit it back onto the course from that position.

The meme joked, "Excuse me, I'm trying to find my ball. This is golf." Tweets exclaimed "most incredible shot I've ever seen from under a tent! Awesome bit of TV." This gives fans the relatable moments (reminiscent of times when their shots had gone awry, too) that are the key currency of social media interaction with fans.