

NEW SERIES: "Tell Me Something I Don't Know"**MILLENNIALS? KRIS HART MAY HAVE CRACKED THE CODE**

by David Gould, Staff Editor

The phrase "leaky bucket" showed up prominently in a recent National Golf Foundation study, to illustrate the trouble golf faces in retaining players it already has. Think of Nextgengolf, a company founded by Kris Hart and hailed for its potentially transformative appeal to Millennials, as a sealant for plugging one of those leaks. Leaving home for college was always a common way for youth golfers to lose touch with the game—but it seems there are solutions for that problem.

Recently featured on Golf Channel's Morning Drive and in Golf Digest, as well, Nextgengolf began as an affordable-golf membership program for Boston collegians called CollegeGolfPass. Having tapped a pool of demand for recreational play, the startup merged in 2013 with something called the National Collegiate Club Golf Association. In year one of the new operation, over 100 new club golf programs were kick-started at colleges nationwide. Now the company has branched into tournament competition—team-based and by all means fun-based—through its City Tour division. These are one-day tournaments, played without handicaps, in either a scramble or better-ball format, or both.

Instruction is the latest piece of the Millennial puzzle that Hart's organization has tried to leverage, an effort that's led to a new partnership with Golf Channel Academy. In certain markets it could extend to Proponent Group members who are not part of GCA.

"Our company does a good job of organizing Millennials as golfers and advocating for them," says Hart, who played D-1 golf for Bryant University in Rhode Island. "However, we aren't golf professionals or golf instructors, so what we've put together with Golf Channel Academy will connect our audience to excellent teaching in a strategic way."

He senses it would be appropriate for instructors and academies to create an initial price package that spoke to who these golfers are and recognized where they're at in life, perhaps in keeping with the cost parameters of Get Golf Ready or "Five lessons for \$99," its companion offer. "The successful teacher's rack rate of \$150 or \$200—that's out of reach for most

Millennials," he says flatly. Beyond being unaffordable as a lesson rate, it could also add to the overall feeling of alienation from golf that younger people from middle-class backgrounds sometimes experience.

Associate Members of Proponent Group are the prime candidates, in Hart's view, for another promising form of involvement with his audience—coaching college club teams. Of all club golf teams either currently active or soon to start up at colleges,

"less than 5 percent of them have coaches," Hart reports.

"These teams are student-coached and student-run, and they do okay, but they would all welcome professional coaching." What's more, the universities allow it.

"By signing on as a club team coach," Hart says, "you gain access to the campus in an official capacity and you gain excellent visibility within this particular market niche." He cites

this statistic: Some 225,000 high school students play varsity golf, and only 7 percent of them go on to play college varsity golf. "The vast majority end up with no competitive golf outlet—club teams give them that outlet, and at the same time they open up opportunities for fellow students who have only played recreationally."

A Proponent member who went this route would be well supported by the tools now provided, from sophisticated software for scoring and team-management to counseling for club captains on the ins and outs of dealing with university bureaucracy. "It may take only a week to get a club team up and running, though sometimes club sports directors are motivated to limit how much they have to oversee," Hart told Golf Digest. The big prize at the end of that bureaucratic wrangling is funding—a goal club teams do succeed in reaching.

If you go with old-fashioned love of the game as the hot button in your marketing, Hart would tell you you're on the right track. "You can't be fake with this audience about what the game of golf is about and why it's so rewarding to play," he says. "The sex-appeal angle isn't something our company would ever try, and I wouldn't recommend it as a strategy to anyone else." **PG**



Kris Hart