

ENDORSEMENT DEALS

The Endorsement Game: A Few Ways to Play It

That company logo on your sleeve or hat can send positive signals about your skills and reputation. It might also lead to new opportunities and visibility.

By David Gould, Staff Editor

Golf is a brand-conscious, image-conscious corner of the world, known for its “pyramid of influence.” That’s the hierarchical structure we hear about often—it’s got a McIlroy or Woods at the top and Joe Golfer at the bottom. Somewhere in the upper half of the pyramid is the highly competent, in-demand but less-than-famous teaching professional. Between lessons and clinics and email sessions that pro might occasionally stop to ask, “Why don’t I have an endorsement deal for golf equipment or apparel?” He or she could further wonder if a non-golf deal might be possible for them.

These are by all means valid questions. Proponent Group member Brett Packee says the answer lies partly in the time demands of the core job, teaching and coaching. “It may require a professional in the deal-making world to make endorsements happen,” Packee says, referring to past efforts he’s made to negotiate with a local Acura dealer and a sporting goods store for endorsement income. Each offered promise but didn’t pan out for the Vernon Hills, Ill.-based coach.

“I’ve also tried to get ads and sponsorships on my website and on my V1 Branded Academy page, but without success so far,” says Packee. It’s not for lack of professional recognition, given Brett’s status as the only Illinois PGA member ever to win both Player of the Year and Teacher of the Year honors.

Trillium Sellers Rose, director of instruction at Woodmont Country Club in Rockville, Md., points to the obvious reason for pursuing various endorsement initiatives. “Teaching golf is not an occupation you make a fortune at,” she says. “As a respected golf instructor I feel I can bring some value to a brand. If, in return, there is added income that will bolster my baseline, that’s good all around, provided it’s the right sort of a brand.” Currently, her principal endorsement deal is a standard setup with Titleist involving merchandise only. “I’m a fan of their product and I relate well to the people at Titleist,” says Rose. “Through my TPI training, I became friends with Lance Gill and other people there. For me professionally Titleist has been a core relationship.”

Because it’s an agreement that involves no cash, Rose

isn’t tied exclusively to the brand. Therefore she can do some here-and-there branding work with other golf companies. “If I’m scheduled to do a Golf Channel appearance I can call Polo or Nike or Ecco and usually they’ll be glad to send me clothes and shoes,” she says. “Same thing if I’m set up to do a shoot with Golf Digest. For the apparel company, that can mean a full page showing their apparel and logo,” she says. “Those are good relationships for both sides.”

Of all brand names, Nike Golf may be the one that can

invest the most in getting its logo worn by influential golf instructors, for the simple reason that clubs, balls, apparel, shoes and everything else it sells in the

golf market comes under that one nameplate. Unlike Titleist with Foot-Joy and Scotty Cameron or TaylorMade with adi-

das, all of Nike’s presence in golf carries that one name plus the swoosh symbol. Cheryl Anderson has been a Nike Golf endorsee for a good portion of her professional career, benefiting in terms of gear, apparel and some bo-

nus money but perhaps all the more due to the contacts and peer relationships she has built.

“Being part of the Nike staff of instructors has had benefits beyond providing equipment and apparel,” says Anderson. “One of the most valuable parts of being on their staff has been the increased opportunities to meet with and trade ideas with the game’s top teachers like Pia Nilsson, Lynn Marriott, Chuck Cook and many others. Those opportunities have opened many doors for my career over the years.”

Bernie Najar has been around long enough to see the heyday of pro-staff agreements come and go. The director of instruction at Caves Valley Golf Club in Owings Mills, Md., prefers to build relationships with the smaller companies whose business is connected to the golf industry’s teaching-coaching niche. He has an agreement now with Swing Catalyst that originated in his long-held belief that the study of golf



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improvement was ignoring the important interaction between the ground and the golfer's feet. "I bought one and became fairly knowledgeable in how to use it, and I gave some presentations on the subject," says Najar. "That has helped my visibility, including the chance to present at the PGA Teaching and Coaching Summit," he says. Now he is in talks with another company whose business relates closely to the ground-force dynamics that Swing Catalyst built its model around.

Jess Hansen, a Proponent Group member based in Blue Springs, Mo., has a new staff deal with Mizuno that covers personal-use clubs and golf bag in the first year then upgrades to gear plus apparel next season. Hansen reports that he has sold a dozen or more custom-fit Mizuno sets to his students in just a few months since signing on. Several years ago, he purchased a SAM (Science and Motion) PuttLab system and offered to serve part-time on the sales force. "They send the leads to me and I pick things up from there," says Hansen. "I've sold 10 or more systems in three years, which is very satisfying. The commission schedule is generous and this is something that's strategically on the mark for my core business."

In the 2015 Proponent Group Compensation Survey, there was a chunk of valuable baseline data on endorsement benefits enjoyed by members. To the question, "How many endorsement contracts do you currently have?" 36 percent said they currently had none. Of the teaching professionals who didn't give the goose-egg answer, 52 percent said they had one endorsement agreement. Most of the remaining coaches reported having two or more endorsement deals.

What was the merchandise value of those agreements? The most common figure given for "cash-equivalent" value was \$3,000 and the median dollar figure was \$2,500. Actual dollars, it goes without saying, don't exactly get thrown at golf coaches by the brands they have deals with. That said, of the Proponent members who said yes to the endorsement question, there were indeed about a quarter of them who said cash was part of the arrangement. Most cited a figure from \$2,000 to \$5,000 annually, while a few gave smaller numbers, down to \$500. On the high side, a half-dozen disclosed higher amounts, including three who were receiving \$20,000-something in cash payments.

Generally speaking, the Proponent member who is in full-time employment at a golf facility is working for a private club. That describes Mike Carbray, who can be found daily during the golf season at Butterfield Country Club in Oak Brook, Ill., a Chicago suburb. Recently Carbray made a trip to the site of the

2017 U.S. Open, Erin Hills in Wisconsin, as part of his endorsement deal with Cleveland Srixon. He is paid commission—a percentage of dollar sales—on the business he does with the brand at Oak Brook, as well as at his winter indoor academy. "They were hosting some big-box customers at Erin Hills and they wanted me there to play golf and socialize," says Carbray, a longtime Proponent Group member who moved strongly into teaching after starting in the golf-operations track.

He values the relationship highly due to the ease of his personal interactions with top-ranking Cleveland Srixon executives. "If I do a custom fitting for one of my students and there is a back-order on the components, I can make a phone call to a vice president there and have the clubs built the next day," says Carbray. "That means more to me than going to another company that might pay me \$5,000 a year straight out but I wouldn't have any close personal relationships established." The private-club setting makes logos and brand relationships less important as a credibility-builder in his view. "Early in my career I thought about it a lot," Carbray says. "At a club, word-of-mouth travels fast and it's not as important as it would be at a daily-fee or an academy range."

Brett Packee makes an effort to grasp the question from the perspective of a golf equipment manufacturer, philosophizing that "a golf company is not going to just hand you money if you are not making sales for them." The exception, to hark back to that pyramid of influence, would be a teaching professional with exceptionally high visibility. "It's hard to say what my true worth is to a golf company," Packee muses. "The fact that I have my name on a Mizuno bag 40 hours a week on a public range creates brand awareness," Packee says, "but companies are going to want to see sales, not awareness."

A factor to consider in this regard is the newer company

with impressive products that has almost no awareness and could gain a foothold by partnering with top teachers. At one point Mizuno probably did fit this description. Under its now-shuttered Ambassador program, Packee got a \$500 cash bonus for winning Teacher of the Year, and there were other considerations that paid off for the professionals with that status.

It all comes back to market influence, based on a professional's visibility and reputation. When some potential partner is thinking about having that professional represent, endorse or even sell a product or service, it has to make sense strategically and it has to support the core business. If you can check off those boxes, you're on the right track to something of value.

THE UPSHOT

- Any professional with a following has a right to ask: "What golfers do I influence? And what brands or companies could benefit from that influence?"
- The benefits of endorsement deals are credibility, visibility, professional contacts, comp merchandise and cash stipends, in that order.
- Partnering with a company inside or outside the golf industry can't eat up too much of your time and it has to fit with your goals and career aspirations.