



WIKIPEDIA

Marketing and Reputation-Building

YOUR NAME IN LIGHTS – ON WIKIPEDIA?

By *David Gould, Staff Editor*

Dry, dignified and strictly factual, the entry begins like this: *“Claude ‘Butch’ Harmon, Jr., born August 28, 1943, is an American golf instructor and former professional player. He is the son of 1948 Masters champion Claude Harmon, Sr. and has been in the golf industry since 1965.”*

So, yes—Butch Harmon has attained the lofty status you enjoy when you’ve got your own Wikipedia article. And so has David Leadbetter. Same goes for Sean Foley, along with the Stack & Tilt team of Mike Bennett and Andy Plummer. Being the subject of a Wikipedia entry puts these golf coaches in the company of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, Gandhi and Amelia Earhart—household names readers would want to know about as part of their basic education.

Or at least that’s the idea behind encyclopedias, which became popular in the 1700s. The Internet has produced a pretty amazing digital version of the original hard-cover product—at one point not long ago, Wikipedia was ranked the 17th-largest website (by unique visitors) on the entire web. Some 500 million readers have surfed the site, most of whose

traffic comes from Google, apparently because Wikipedia does the best job of answering questions that get typed into Google search boxes. Either way, legitimacy and credibility arrive in a big way if you can make like Leadbetter, Harmon and the rest by scoring an individual entry on the site.

Michael Kwan, a writer for one of the better-known advice websites for online entrepreneurs, johnchow.com, put it aptly when he wrote: “If you want to establish yourself as an expert in your industry, it certainly doesn’t hurt to make a big name for yourself. Getting featured in major media outlets is one part of the equation, and you know you’ve really ‘made it’ when there’s a Wikipedia page dedicated to you.”

Kwan was once hired by a successful company to create a Wikipedia article describing the firm and spotlighting its achievements. “I told them upfront,” he recalls, “that I could not possibly guarantee that the page would ‘stick,’ and that there was a distinct possibility the page would be deleted due to reasons of ‘vanity.’ And despite all of our efforts—though they didn’t have the budget for all my recommendations—that’s exactly what happened.”

That comment points to the don't-call-us, we'll-call-you nature of the website. Any golf instructor with a computer could type up an article about himself or herself and try to get it inserted among the roughly 5,400,000 articles (in English) found on wikipedia.org. Getting that article to "stick," as Kwan puts it, is a big challenge. The best way to think about your career and the journey to Wikipedia-entry status is in terms of "organic news." In other words, as the site's own guidance states it:

"Wikipedia bases its decision about whether an organization is notable enough to justify a separate article on the verifiable evidence that the organization or product has attracted the notice of reliable sources unrelated to the organization or product."

Translation: Other media outlets have given you publicity. What the decree from Wikipedia forgets to point out is that attracting "the notice of reliable sources" is partly the result of having an efficient public-relations machine. So, if you've been working through the years to get your name out—first locally and then beyond your natural geographical market—you've been doing the spade-work toward attaining that Wikipedia aura.

Interestingly, there is a Wikipedia entry titled "Golf Instruction" that has opened the door to a handful of other active teaching professionals (beyond Leadbetter, Harmon, Foley etc.), by naming them in the article and hyperlinking their names to a starter page of sorts that invites anyone who's interested to go ahead and try to write an article that the website's gatekeeping editors might find acceptable. That, by the way, is how these things come to be—they're written by amateurs, often by the person who is the subject of the entry.

Jim McLean, Chuck Evans, Ben Doyle and Proponent Group member Mike Bender all appear in the current version of the "Golf Instruction" article and all have links from their names to a template page. The text found after click-through reads (we'll use the Bender example) like this:

"Wikipedia does not have an article with this exact name. Please search for Mike Bender in Wikipedia to check for alternative titles or spellings. Log in or create an account to start the Mike Bender article, alternatively use the Article Wizard, or add a request for it. Search for "Mike Bender" in existing articles."

A word of mild warning: Even Wikipedia says that getting an article about yourself on the site

isn't necessarily a good thing. "Wikipedia seeks neutrality," says a statement on the site. "An article written about you should be editorially neutral. It will not take sides and will report both the good and the bad about you from verifiable and reliable sources. It will not promote you." This latter point is subject to interpretation—it means the tone and language of the article can't sound biased toward you, or in any way praising.

That said, it's hard to deny the reputation-burnishing effect of the Harmon and Leadbetter articles. And then there's the two-sentence conclusion to the Haney article, which reads: *"Haney has a video game of his own, Hank Haney's World Golf, that was released for Windows on November 16, 2010. A Mac OS X version was released under the name World Challenge Golf 2011 by Virtual Programming on September 28, 2011."* If that isn't promotional, even indirectly so, it's hard to imagine what would be. Furthermore, the embarrassment Haney suffered during his long years of bizarre driver yips isn't mentioned on his page, despite the publicity it garnered when Haney admitted the problem.

"Once you have become a celebrity, your personal life may be exposed," the Wikipedia "warning" statement adds, using Tiger Woods as its prime example, along with swimmer Michael Phelps. The article on Sean Foley is noteworthy for how much information it contains about Woods and his various injuries and comeback attempts during the years he and Foley worked together. It's also clear that the Foley article and the Bennett-Plummer article somehow intertwine, perhaps with each supporting the "notability" factor of the other. Consider this excerpt: *"In Stack and Tilt the weight starts left (for right-handed players) and goes more left during the swing. This idea collides with mainstream golf instruction, but is shared by Sean Foley."*

It's not known who originated the idea that there is "no such thing as bad publicity," but over time that statement has prompted plenty of disagreement. The value of the comment lies in the idea that warts-and-all coverage of one's life and career is worth the trouble, if you end up set apart from the rank and file of your profession and viewed as a true leader in your field. In this day and age, a Wikipedia entry is one clear example of that recognition. **PG**

