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Attracting diverse players and boosting spectatorship in Tampa Bay’s golf industry is now a financial imperative

When Tahisia Scantling joined a group of beginner golfers as spectators at the recent Valspar Championship, she said they wore “blinged-out” T-shirts representing their group, Women of Color Golf. Overall, they had a great time at the event at Innisbrook in Palm Harbor. But a few interactions were indicative of how far the golf industry has to go when it comes to diversity.

“Here comes trouble,” said one person they passed. A tournament volunteer asked if they were on “the right bus.” A fellow spectator kept asking her where they were taking photos. Scantling, a black independent business consultant and real estate agent in Tampa, thought the man wanted her to take a picture of him, but after his puzzled look, she realized what was happening.
Cathy Grant, director of Moffitt Diversity, during a golf class.

"I don't work here," she told him. "We all joked about it, but there were a lot of stares and maybe it was because of the shirts or people were just not used to seeing a group of women there."

Scantling's experience has a lesson for golf execs. It illuminates the long-standing issues around diversity and inclusion in the golf industry, but also spotlights a big opportunity for a $70 billion industry that impacts close to 2 million American jobs and pours about $4 billion into charitable causes, according to Forbes.

"For minorities, they have not been exposed to [golf] at all and there are lots of barriers," said Clemmie Perry. In 2014, she launched her Tampa nonprofit, Women of Color Golf and Girls On the Green Tee, to increase and facilitate minority participation in golf for women and girls. Since then, 350 minority women and girls have been introduced to the basic fundamentals of golf in the Bay region and Washington, D.C.

Additionally, baby boomers are golfing a lot less and millennials are not exposed to the game, Perry said. Scantling needed convincing.

"Golf is for old white people and not a place I would fit in — but that's not true, [Perry] told me," said Scantling. On a recent Saturday morning at the Mypro Golf School in Temple Terrace, she was taking an intermediate class, learning about putting on sloped greens.

"I am still not convinced that I can go through 18 holes," she said of her evolving skills. "There is still a cultural barrier we are happy to break and help get people comfortable."

Despite a few awkward moments at the Valspar event, Scantling said the experience left her inspired to learn more, especially about the professional etiquette of the game.

"I want to make sure I know what I am doing and give it proper attention," she said.

Obstacles to growth
New players can't come soon enough for an industry that has faced a range of threats to its long-term survival. Golf executives said rounds and revenue hit rock bottom in the Great Recession and industry headwinds are numerous: there is a national contraction in the number of courses, golf has a workforce skills gap, and there remain barriers to entry that can't be addressed superficially.

Long-term sustainability of the game and inclusion are top of mind for the PGA Tour and for all tournament operators “top on down,” said Tracy West, tournament director, Valspar Championship and president of Copperhead Charities.

The Ponte Vedra Beach-based PGA Tour recently launched its first new ad campaign in 20 years. It shifts from a decades-long focus on the skill of the players — "These Guys Are Good" — to "Live Under Par," an attempt to reach beyond the core golf fan and attract new and diverse fan segments to the sport," a release said.

The market has stabilized and is coming back, said West. The 2016 Valspar Championship set attendance records largely because of crowd-favorite players like Tiger Woods.

"I do feel there is momentum," said Michael Cooper, assistant dean and campus director at Springfield College in Springfield and a sales agent for visual branding firm OM Inc. in Tampa. He's the former director of diversity for the World Golf Foundation and helped develop the

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SOUND OFF

DOES BUSINESS GET DONE ON THE GOLF COURSE?

"Business is still being done on the golf course, but also at the bar and the restaurant, at the functions we have for business. We've changed how we market to attract business seminars and luncheons and charity fundraisers."

JERRY MOORE, President, Pope Golf
Favorite course: Augusta National Golf Club and Pebble Beach Golf Links, California
Favorite holes: 15 and 17 at Pebble Beach, by the ocean

For the African American women she is exposing to the game, the game's business benefits take on a whole different value.
"For minorities, it's about access to new people and inclusion," she said. "Ladies are seeing they are being connected with other businesspeople they never would have met in their life."

CLEMMIE PERRY, founder, Women of Color Golf, and Girls On the Green Tee
Favorite course: Rogers Park, historically a black golf course; also likes Rocky Point

"It's about building relationships. Sometimes you're just talking about the course and your next shot, but the conversations frequently move to family, community issues, politics and business. The business conversations usually aren't transactional, but more educational and relational."

DARREN RICHARDS, chief operating officer at Tucker/Hall
Favorite course: Palma Ceia
Favorite hole: 13th hole at Palma Ceia ("I got my first hole in one there.")

"Business is still being done on the golf course. I use it. Some of our customers that love to play and I bring them to Concession [Golf Club] and that's a real treat. Efforts to speed up the game and make it more appealing for newcomers aren't his bag. "I don't want the game quicker. I'm out there with good friends. I don't like it when rounds are five hours but nearly four is fine, and it goes by quickly."

TED ABRAMS, president & CEO, Joffrey's Coffee & Tea Co.
Favorite course: Scotland Kingsbarns
Favorite hole: No. 7 at Pebble Beach. Handicap: About a 12 to 13 ("A little higher because of the difficulty of playing at Concession most often.")