‘So, It's Kind of Like, a Kind of a Nail in the Coffin’: The Effects of COVID-19 on the Career and Life of Developmental Tour Golfers

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Developmental tour golfers struggle year in and year out to make a living or break even. Often, they are raising money from family and friends, members at country clubs they play at, or work second jobs to make ends meet. The amount of money a professional golfer can make at the highest level (PGA Tour or LPGA Tour) can be life changing depending on the quality of a golfer’s season and/or career, but overall that life changing money is only available to a small minority of professional athletes (Frank & Cook, 2010). Thus, developmental tour golfers often labor to keep their professional dreams alive due to the financial strain of expenses incurred throughout the year (Fry et al., 2015). Consequently, the emergence of COVID-19 has greatly altered the economic impact of the sport industry, including developmental tour golf. Thus, the purpose of this study was to focus on how COVID-19 is affecting the developmental golfers’ experience, specifically the economic impact using the following research question: How does COVID-19 impact the career path of an aspiring professional golfer?

Given the centrality of power, resources, and exchange of value in the wake of COVID-19 for the developmental tour golfers we interviewed, we used Social Exchange Theory (SET) to guide and serve as the interpretive lens for this research. SET explains that humans desire the maximum positive experience and look to minimize negative experiences. Thus, people participate in activities, relationships and even sports based on the possibility of positive outcomes or favorability by weighing the rewards (tangible and intangible) and costs (disadvantages or missed opportunities) of an activity and their potential consequences. We felt SET was extremely applicable and aided in the understanding of the interviewed developmental tour golfer’s commitment to their ‘tour dreams’ despite mounting obstacles from the economic fallout of COVID-19 and the possibility to retire or leave their sport behind all together. Specifically, we want to expand the model to not only include social constraints as factors that influence commitment or dropout, but also economic and external constraints (e.g., lack of tournaments, lack of qualifying school, COVID-19 health and safety protocols) that are uniquely impacting whether these developmental tour players will continue to commit or retire from professional golf.

We used a descriptive qualitative design interviewing eight developmental tour golfers over the phone to further understand their experiences related to their developmental golf career and how it has been particularly impacted by COVID-19. The findings revealed that COVID-19 has caused limited opportunity for professional advancement due to tournament cancellations and the combining of player statuses for the next two seasons. Furthermore, the exacerbation of economic strains were felt by all the players and many players were contemplating retirement. These findings highlight the economic fallout from COVID-19 from a macro level (tour and tournament structure) and micro level (individual constraints) and further add to the body of literature using SET to explore sporting participation experiences.