

Thank goodness for Tunisia

Nearly a quarter-century ago I took a call from my then-counterpart at the British PGA, Colin Snape.

Snape was a matter-of-fact guy and he quickly came to the point. "Ken, do you think you could get the tour pros to play for official Order of Merit points in Tunisia?"

"Let me think on that one," or words to that effect, was my reply.

By 1982, the PGA European Tour had established itself with a credible identity as the third tour in the world behind (obviously) the PGA Tour and the Japan Tour. For the record, the schedule was to offer 26 events with total prize money of £1.855 million.

But Tunisia?

That was close, but not actually a part of Europe. The geography

appeared wrong. But wait, everything else was right. The date was not conflicting (you could and we did play any winter week in north Africa); the venue was excellent; the prize money of £60,000 easily would be the biggest available before the tour would reach the British Isles in mid-May. Also it would be a full-field event.

Why should the darned geography beat us, I thought? Where did the European Tour membership come from? Answer: from 25 or more countries around the globe – always had, and still does today. Right, I thought, I'll put the deal to the players and ask them if they wanted to rule it out on pure geography or rule it in on the basis that it reflected the international membership.

We know today the players voted the right way.

Although it would be attractive for me to say that of course I knew this decision would lead to Morocco joining (with £165,000 prize money) in 1987, and put the European Tour in position to say yes to the Dubai Desert Classic by 1989 with a then-whopping purse of £250,000, it would be wrong.

Unquestionably, going to Dubai led to the opportunity to play in Asia for the first time in 1992 with the prize money stakes raised to £500,000 by the Johnnie Walker Classic. We could not, and did not, understand the amazing consequence of that early decision.

In 1982, we were searching for a sporting decision when the sporting world was a very different place.

When the European Tour played in Berlin, we did so behind the Wall at the American armed forces' golf



Ken Schofield

course! Yes, communism was still rife and the idea that we could have played in Moscow, Warsaw and Prague remained fanciful. No, we were not bright enough in 1982 to think that within roughly 20 years or so the

European Tour's international schedule would take up to six of its very best events to the People's Republic of China.

Come to think of it, all we did in taking in the Tunisian Open was to apply a business solution to a business proposition. Thank goodness we did so, and followed in the footsteps of the Scotch Whiskey industry, which happily did not make it mandatory to travel to the land of its produce to enjoy a pre- or post-round "nip!" Or Henry Ford, who quickly realized that people outside Detroit and the U.S. might want to buy his motor car. Today even my beloved Volvo is under Ford's ownership. Best of all, perhaps, is to assure my home-based U.S. friends that, the last time I checked, American Express cards were accepted in Tunisia!

And the implications for European Tour players?

Well, in 2006 they will have more opportunity (to play) and more incentive (prize money) than their predecessors enjoyed 25 years ago. Actually, there are nearly double the number of events and about 40 times the prize money. Yes, the might of the PGA Tour can still trump these sums but not our colleagues in Japan, who largely have stayed within their own geographical boundaries. Maybe we weren't so stupid after all!

Ken Schofield, former executive director of the PGA European Tour, writes occasionally for Golfweek.

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