

CHAPTER
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A Question of Cash

“I remember being absolutely devastated (when I failed at Q School) because it’s your year’s work done. A few of the guys get drunk, a few cry and then, after a few days, you have to think ‘Well, how am I going to pay the mortgage?’. You have to re-group. It’s our living after all.” – Barry Lane, multiple Tour winner and Q School graduate four out of seven attempts.

Like most major sports around the globe, golf is now a multi-billion dollar business. There are two significant reasons behind the spectacular growth in television audiences, prize money and sponsorship. Firstly, there has been fierce competition for TV rights since the early 1990s because of the emergence of more digital television channels covering nothing but sports; secondly, Tiger Woods burst into golf’s world and captivated not only a whole new generation of golfers but also intrigued a wider audience of non-golf fans.

So for the last decade and a half, more TV coverage of golf (including lots of Tiger) has brought in larger audiences which has prompted more sponsorship which has delivered bigger prize money which has led to television executives wanting more golf (especially Tiger) and so the virtuous circle has continued.

Bidding wars between broadcasters now take place over the major championships and the Ryder Cup and the money is staggering. In 2001 when the BBC was due to renew its £10 million, five-year deal to screen the Open Championship, the new price was rumoured to have tripled. Around the same time, the US PGA signed a deal with American broadcasters worth \$900 million.

The change for the players has been just as stark. In 1985, for instance, Scotland's Sandy Lyle won the PGA European Tour Order of Merit with what seemed then like a very large amount of money – almost £140,000. Yet five years later in 1990, Ian Woosnam was top of the money list with £574,166 – more than four times Sandy's amount. Another five years (1995) and Colin Montgomerie was European No 1 with £835,051.

Then golf's global pay TV negotiations added another vital element – Tiger Woods. The man who could become the greatest ever golfer helped take prize money into another stratosphere. By 2000, Lee Westwood's Order of Merit total was over £2 million (€3.1 million) and the European No. 1's earnings peaked at almost £2.75 million (€4 million) won by Ernie Els four years later. In 2006, Sandy Lyle's 1985 earnings would only just be enough to creep into the top 115 on the money list.

For the very best players there is also tens of thousands of pounds or dollars in appearance money. And, if not an appearance fee, then what about a sponsorship. Tiger signed a deal with Gatorade to brand a product with his name and press reports suggest it could pay him \$100 million over five years.

Obviously, Tiger is streets ahead of any other golfer on the planet when it comes to earnings: in 2006 he earned nearly \$12m in prize money and a further \$87m in endorsements according to figures from Golf Digest magazine. The cash has certainly filtered down at least to those regulars on the European Tour and US PGA Tour. Even the 100th best player in Europe is earning over £125,000 (€200,000) a season nowadays in prize money and, although he might well spend £50,000 on travel, accommodation, caddie fees and other costs of the job, there are also plenty of extras.

The tournament organisers have to stand out from the crowd; especially in America, they accomplish this with a range of gifts for the players and even their wives. There might be watches or electrical gifts and gadgets like iPods and GameBoys; perhaps designer clothing, expensive luggage or luxury spa treatments. The countless freebies make golfers feel a little bit like film stars and the very best players then spend their fortunes in ever more lavish ways – a string of magnificent houses (second and third homes in tax havens like Monaco, Switzerland and Dubai are common nowadays), high performance sports cars or vintage automobiles (Miguel Angel Jimenez and Darren Clarke have many), top class racehorses (Gary Player breeds his own thoroughbreds), fabulous paintings (Luke Donald is a collector) and spectacular vineyards (the Nick Faldo Shiraz 2001 is particularly fine or you can visit Ernie Els's huge winery in South Africa).

It is worth saying, though, that such levels of cash and prizes are for the few and the gifts are a little less brash in Europe, but everything given is accepted with alacrity.

So with all this glamour, it is not surprising that the number of players vying

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for the top prize money has grown almost as fast as the cash on offer. But the money does not trickle down very far. Talk to the journeyman pro and he will tell you that only those inside the top 150 of the European Tour money list are making a good living. For every tournament pro with a fat wallet, a garage full of flashy cars and no mortgage repayments on his three uniquely-designed homes, there are hundreds of others who are taking second jobs during the off-season and worrying about their next credit card bill.

Phil Golding is one of the luckier ones. He has won on Tour, he has earned well over £1 million (€1.5 million) over a 17-year tournament career and he has invested sensibly. But his earnings are certainly not in the superstar stratosphere and his near-record number of returns to Q School shows there have been plenty of fallow years. In fact, without his wife's income, Phil would have spent years really struggling. Now, with no Tour Card, the Hertfordshire pro must wonder if his chances of returning to life at the top of the golfing world are over.

Last year Phil's season was a financial disaster as he finished 185th on the Order of Merit. He played a staggering 29 events - definitely at the upper end of the Tour pro's normal number - and his €51,000 in winnings (the Tour uses the Euro as its main prize money indicator) was a paltry return; no one played as many tournaments in 2006 for so little prize money. The point is that the more he played, the more he spent; for the struggling pro, such a scenario is like throwing good money after bad. Phil's golden year of 2003 (when he won the French Open and pocketed almost €650,000 for the season) had allowed him to believe that struggling on Tour would be a thing of the past. The next two seasons after that had been reasonable, including 2005 when he finished 77th in the money list with €300,000. So 2006 was a major shock as well as a disappointment.

"I bought a new car after I won in France, although it took me two years to pay for it, but I remember my accountant saying we should buy property. At that time we didn't actually do that although we did make some reasonable investments like long-term savings plans," he says. But Phil's sudden dip in fortunes have led to him liquidating some of those investments, cutting down on expenses at tournaments and watching his diminishing cash flow with alarm.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not pleading poverty and liquidating the savings plans is OK because, I suppose that's what rainy days are for. But now I'm much more aware of the money. Before, I'd spend a couple of thousand pounds a tournament and not be conscious of it. Now I am."

It is easy for a Tour pro to spend £2,000 (€3,000) every time he tees it up for an event. There are flights and airport transfers; accommodation for at least five nights (providing you make the cut) and a professional Tour caddie who will charge as much as £850 for the week plus a percentage of any winnings. Add in money to your golf coach, perhaps your mind coach and a little cash for spending and there you have it.

The other problem for a player in Phil's 2007 situation is that he will play the events with the smaller purses; these are tournaments that the top players usually stay away from because the rewards are so low. Plus, the low-ranked player will definitely miss his share of cuts and so the pressure to make more money becomes obvious. Phil has already played in two such low prize money tournaments – in Indonesia and Portugal and missed both cuts; it is too early to panic, but he is already half thinking that he will earn less in prize money than he spends this year

“For 25 events a year, that can mean £40-50,000 a year in expenses. You hear about some players almost going bankrupt, some re-mortgaging their homes just to keep going. I know a couple of players who have had to sell their houses and downsize. It's dangerous ground to do that. Fortunately, I don't have a mortgage and I've my Taylor Made/adidas sponsorship this year of about £8,000. They've been loyal to me this season which is good. But I'm deliberately keeping down my outgoings; I'm trying not to spend very much.”

Even though Phil is not among the worst off, there is an inevitable strain on the player and his family. “My wife Sally has been very supportive, but not all players get that; any wife could easily say ‘OK, pack up; go and get a normal job’. This year has been like being made redundant. Luckily, Sally understands. She had a good job with EMI and reluctantly left with a pay-off. She'd been all go-go in a busy world, but now it's the best thing that's ever happened to her. She's said she'd go back to work if necessary, but I hope that doesn't have to happen. She has her own nest egg from the redundancy and if she didn't have that then we would really be struggling.”

Many tournament pros on the European Tour have been winners for much of their career – as amateurs or in regional pro events and on mini-tours - and to hit a level of golf where the chance of winning disappears is mentally tough. For Phil, finding the words to explain his lack of performance on the golf course leaves him slightly tongue-tied. The modern tournament golfer has been taught to find the positives even from the most negative situation. But although this might work easily within the sport itself, it is a different matter to the outside world.

“I kept meeting this guy at my son's tennis academy on weekends and he'd say ‘So you missed the cut again?’. I began to resent him saying that and even the word ‘cut’ was difficult for me to hear. When I'm not playing well, the way I speak about myself is subconsciously positive. I have to make myself speak this way. I've seen Tiger (Woods) interviewed after a bad round and he says: “Well, actually, I'm hitting the ball quite good.” Yet I've just seen him knock it all over the place. It's also important not being around other negative players and sometimes you have to disassociate yourself from them.”

Much of the uncomfortable feelings for Phil relate back to a bruised pride. The missed cuts, the subsequent lack of money, the need to explain himself – the

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tournament pro in the doldrums is not a happy person to be around.

“You do bottle your emotions a lot on Tour. Sally used to say how she’d be treading on eggshells with me when I came home after missing a cut in case she upset me for the next week. I wasn’t easy to live with. Since my son Lucas came along, I’m much better than I was. Before him, I was miserable and sulky and Sally would say I shouldn’t get so low because I need to get back up for the next tournament. Also, pros can be selfish and self-absorbed. I might go practising or to the gym to do what I have to do for my golf; maybe I’d say I’d go out for an hour and four hours later I’d still be hitting balls. I’d come back late and get bollocked for that. Tour pros need a very understanding partner.”

Phil actually dreams of returning to the Tour for two reasons other than money and bruised pride. Firstly, he has a need to be the provider for his family. For most of his pro career, his wife Sally brought home the steady salary and he pursued his golfing ambitions come what may, but more recently Phil has taken over the role as the major breadwinner and it is a role he is happy to play.

“We all like nice things – cars, holidays and stuff – but it’s not about the money now. There are players who have to make a career decision forced on them – either your family or the Tour. You either stay home or your marriage is finished – that happens. But, for me, everyone knows that Sally had a very good job and she played the mortgage for years while I kept on playing. When she packed up, I wanted to be the provider. It’s pride for me. It’s my turn now and I did it in 03, 04 and 05. Last year was a blip. It’s taken a year to find the coach that I wanted and now I need to compete again.”

The second reason for Phil’s desire continuing to burn is his son. “What is keeping me going is to do it for Lucas. It’s a vision for me to win again and have Lucas come out on the green like Ian Poulter’s daughter Amy did when he won a couple of years ago. It’s not about the money. Lucas is the drive for me; I want him to be there when I win again. The other day he said to someone “Do you know my dad’s a professional golfer?” He’s so aware of things now. It’s so sweet; you can’t buy that sort of stuff.”

There are many tournament pros who have never reached the heights of Phil Golding’s career and are living each year from hand to mouth, taking jobs in the winter or asking parents, partners and local sponsors to help tide them over until they make the grade.

Guy Woodman is such a case. The golf bug bit him from around the age of 12, it was then that he started wanting to emulate his heroes, the likes of Nick Faldo, Greg Norman and Bernhard Langer who he saw on TV. But it wasn’t going to be easy. He had some talent, but there was no brilliant amateur career to alert sponsors and no rich parents to pay his way. With only a little help from family and friends, Guy has been funding his own dream for over a decade.

“I’ve always had extra jobs since I left school, just so I could keep playing, both as an amateur and a pro. The deal with my parents after I left school was that if I wanted to play full-time amateur golf and pursue a career in it, I had to get a job. I started in Little Chefs and Harvesters washing up in the evenings, anything I could do; I was 17. I’d play all summer as an amateur and work all winter. And that’s pretty much been the case ever since. I’ve done all sorts – landscape gardening, security guard, stacked boxes in warehouses, whatever’s needed to save some money and play a little. I might go out once a month or once every other week if I’m lucky and if I do go out I don’t drink. I can’t afford to do it; it’s as simple as that; anything to keep the costs down. Basically every penny I earn now goes into my golf.”

And Guy’s costs are not just a bit of travel, accommodation and equipment. “I have to see my chiropractor - £50 a pop - once a month; there’s a masseuse once every other week - that’s £50 as well; and I regularly drive up to Middlesbrough to see my coach Andrew Nicholson. I’ve been working with him for two years and he’s a fantastic coach for me.”

In 2005 to help kick start his career, Guy offered 300 £1,000 shares in himself to friends, business contacts and members of Stoke Park GC where he works. It is a fairly common alternative to normal sponsorship and Guy sold 10 shares in year one, six in year two and another 10 at the start of this year. But this is not money to live on; it simply feeds the dream.

“You aspire to be in the Rolls Royce class, but you start off as a Skoda. Each EuroPro Tour event costs £275 to enter and then another couple of hundred in add-on costs, so it’s effectively £500 each time you peg it up. Even then, you still need to get off to a good start and earn some prize money or then you have to ask your parents or someone for some help. People think all golf pros travel the world and have a great lifestyle, but it’s not like that at all for lots of us. The public don’t know the amount of hard work it takes to get there. People only see the top guys and that’s what they presume you are. When they know a bit more, they say “Well, you’re not a professional then, you’re like a semi-pro.” And I tell them I *am* a pro and I’m working my nuts off to get to the top.”

Like many sportspeople – especially those in solo sports like tennis or athletics – there is often a certain selfishness that golfers show as part of their characters; they push others aside, they defer alternative lifestyles or a quiet, 9-to-5 life; they want their dream and they want it fulfilled on their own terms. The selfishness is not malicious or mean, but a product of the depth of their desire.

For Guy it means a wife and family are not even on his radar. “Before you get involved in any relationship, you have to tell the woman that golf is your thing. And they start off saying they’re fine with it. They have this idea you’re going to be a rich guy in a couple of years time. Then after a while it hasn’t happened and the relationship goes tits up. At the end of last year, my relationship was going

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awry. We lived two years together and we moved back in with my parents and that's where it all went wrong. My closest friends and family know my dream to play on the European Tour and understand it, but there does come a time when they ask what's going on.

"I know I'm one of the luckiest guys alive following my dream, not a lot of people can say that. They might have more money, wife, a family, but they might not be the happiest at work. I'm doing something that I really love. To me it's not a sacrifice giving all that stuff up, but there comes a time when I have to make a living."

Having understanding parents is a must, but the strain of little money coming in is often just below the surface. "My parents only have to say a question in the wrong tone and it upsets me. You're on edge a lot of the time. I know I can be quite grumpy. If I get frustrated, I don't want to talk about it and we have our fall-outs but we know now when's the right time to say something. I shout and scream a bit and in past years we've had moments when my mom's picked every trophy up and thrown them in the bin; she's taken my clothes and thrown them out of the front door and told me not to come back. But a few days go by and everything gets talked over and you make up, so there are the times when you look back and wonder if it's worth it. Some people go through their lives and don't have the same kind of trouble, but these things make us stronger in the long run."

Guy's competitive life revolves around the EuroPro Tour, the third level tour for pros in Europe and, although it is healthy, three-round competition and the winner will take home £10,000, the rest of the prize money does not reflect the effort of the players. "I am a PGA member, so I can play some pro-ams and I would aim to do half-and-half perhaps with the EuroPro this year. But it's a tough tour – 150 guys playing each week for first place. The winning cheque is good and fourth place can get £1,200, but it's costing £500 a week just to enter let alone all the other costs. You play your heart out, finish top 10 and even then you are probably playing for a loss. That's brutal."

Guy will room with a bunch of his pro friends at EuroPro events to keep the costs down and he has almost no social life. He is also trying to become a fully qualified PGA professional, so when not practising or playing a tournament, he is studying or even spending many hours in the club shop at Stoke Park earning extra cash. He lives this strange, spartan existence because his dream of playing on the Main Tour burns so bright.

"I wouldn't give up my dream even if someone gave me money to stop. No chance. The dream is worth a lot. I wouldn't take a million to give up the dream. I'd rather earn it. I know if I was playing good golf then I'd earn that anyway. Not everyone is the same. A lot of guys are doing it just to feel fine. They're out there dreaming but they don't want to put the hard work in. They want to say

that they're a tournament professional trying to get on Tour and if someone dangled a carrot of some money then they'd give up. And there are some who have loads of talent and don't have to work too hard. I'd rather earn through my dream, through my passion. Life would be a bit empty if I just had a million pounds from nothing."

This month, the EuroPro season starts and Guy has high hopes. He sees former EuroPro players like Marc Warren and Ross Fisher both winning on the Main Tour and earning the kind of money he seeks. His early season form is nothing to write home about, but if nothing else, Guy enjoys the tournament atmosphere.

"On EuroPro events I room with a bunch of guys and there's lots of camaraderie, it's good craic. We all talk about golf. We're friends, but we're in it for ourselves ultimately. If you see one of your mates in the hunt then you want them to do well and encourage them. We want a positive atmosphere and we can feed off one another. If it's not yourself then you want one of your buddies to win and make money. If you're up against that person, you have to put friendship aside; we all know that. When it comes to the battle you never wish bad on any of your friends. You want to win with good golf, you want to test yourself and if you're better on the day then so be it, you move on. If you're not good enough then you congratulate them."

Guy is hoping that the battles ahead this year will be significant enough for those words to have real meaning.

If Martyn Thompson ever rises to the heights of a regular spot on the European Tour then his accountant would be the first to notice. As a club pro in Dorset, Martyn is paid a very decent retainer by his club, makes good money from lessons given to members and, thanks to his PGA training and pleasant manner, also makes a living from the profits of sales of equipment, clothing and a host of other golfing items in his pro shop. He may not quite be in the six-figure income bracket, but he is certainly financially comfortable.

Every club pro will receive a retainer from the club itself (maybe around £25,000 or more) as well as income from lessons (he will charge probably £15-25 a time) and profits from sales of equipment, clothing and the rest of his stock in the shop. However, if the club pro were to succeed at Q School and acquire a Tour Card then he would have to give up his pro job and all its benefits and risk going into debt. However, it is a risk Martyn is prepared to take.

The reason is that 11 years ago, when Martyn went to Q School for the first time, he found out that he was good enough to live with the top players who chase the millions of pounds in prize money rather than just be the man working in the pro shop for eight hours a day. That year (1996), he qualified for Final Stage and was actually joint leader after two rounds. "I psyched myself out of it; I'd studied the Q School for years and seen all these great players come through,

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but then got there and wondered why I was in the lead. I thought to myself I should be learning about the event, not winning it. I put myself back down where I thought I belonged at the time that was the middle of the pack. I think I missed a Tour Card by about four shots in the end.”

He was even invited back to the Final Stage the following year via his high position in the PGA British Order of Merit for club pros, but decided he could not jeopardise his final club pro exams that took place the following week.

“I now realise such an invitation could be worth a fortune; I’d give my right arm for that invitation now. But I had an offer of a pro’s job, so I could see me failing at Q School and not doing the preparation for the exams and failing that too. I could’ve been left with nothing. The right option for me at the time was not to go to Q School.”

Martyn does not regret that decision, but it took another 10 years before he felt the financial safety net was in place so that his Tour Card dream could re-emerge. “I have probably got more enthusiasm for the idea now than I had when I went to Q School in 1996.”

But although the rewards are bigger, so are the expenses and potential losses. Martyn believes a Tour Card would generate local sponsors to cover his costs and news of his friends and contemporaries on the Tour provides further incentive. “Now when I see players on Tour doing well who are no better than me, it frustrates the hell out of me. They aren’t more talented, they have just used their time better.”

But as the club pro approaches his busiest time of the year, Martyn’s thoughts of the Tour are becoming fleeting. His good intentions are falling apart, he is still not devoting enough time to practice and First Stage is just five months away. Those around him wonder if Martyn will actually be there at Q School in September and, even if he is, perhaps the more relevant question is whether or not he will be ready.