A preliminary Analysis Of PGA Tour Players' Career Dynamics

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Purpose: Generally, *Talent Identification* programs focus on identifying young athletes with the potential for success in professional sport (Johnston, Wattie, Schorer, & Baker, 2017). However, player development does not end after the transition from junior/amateur to professional competition (Golf Canada, 2014). Examining the developmental pathways of top performers after they make the step to professional competition may help us understand what distinguishes them from the rest of the field. Interestingly, there has been very little research focus on this phase of development, apart from studies of changes in the athletic performance of middle-aged and senior athletes (e.g., Baker et al., 2007). Past studies have tried to use both golf specific performance metrics and amateur milestones of current PGA Tour golfers to identify potential athlete success. However, once a player turns professional, their PGA Tour career trajectory data could be useful for understanding important career benchmarks and indicators of future success that have yet to be utilized in golf player development. To this end, our study aims to showcase the various developmental dynamics of a PGA Tour player's career.

Methods: Our preliminary sample consisted of the top 125 players (124 after inclusion criteria) on the 2017 FedEx Cup year-end points list obtained from PGATOUR.COM. Data were gathered from professional golfers' first year with a full PGA Tour schedule as defined by a minimum of 15 PGA Tour events. Measures included the players' rank, age, time between year of professional declaration and first full season with full PGA Tour status, Web.com events (developmental tour) played before first full season with full PGA Tour status, PGA Tour events played before first full year of PGA status, and total PGA tour events played once full PGA Tour status was obtained. Due to limited research in this area, we were interested in the descriptive profile of player's advancement across their careers from turning professional onwards. In addition, group-based comparisons (independent sample t-tests) were performed between the top 25 and bottom 25 players on the ranking list to determine how these dynamics might differ between professional golfers at different levels of performance. SPSS was used for all analyses with alpha set at 0.05.

Results: The overall sample of PGA Tour players had an average age of 32.6 (SD: 6.1) years. Furthermore, they played in a total of 182.0 (SD: 129.8) tournaments after gaining full PGA Tour status, played in 26.0 (SD: 25.2) developmental tour events before gaining full PGA Tour status, took 4.2 (SD: 2.8) years to gain full tour status after turning professional, and played in 8.2 (SD: 10.2) PGA tour events as either an amateur or professional before gaining full-time status on the PGA tour. When we compare players at the top and bottom of the points list, the only significant difference between the top 25 and bottom 25 ranked players was for age, with the top 25 Tour players on average were 4 years younger than players in the bottom 25 (i.e., M: 30.8, SD: 5.7 vs M: 34.6, SD: 7.2 years respectively).

Discussion: Results from the current study suggest it may be difficult to establish a common trajectory for a top player's PGA Tour career as a high variability was seen in our sample among the various developmental factors examined. Previous studies have noted changes in competitive rounds played with advancing age in professional golfers; between the ages of 25-30 PGA golfers increased their involvement in competitive play but decreased their completive rounds after this point (Baker et al. 2007). This may help to explain the age-effect that existed within our sample, as higher ranked players were generally younger than lower ranked players. While we also expected to see other differences between top players and those at the lower end of the points list (e.g., in time spent competing on developmental tours), that was not the case in our analysis. That said, there were some limitations to the current analyses and future investigations are encouraged to extend these analyses by using multiple years of data. This would improve issues of consistency and provide a heterogeneous sample by accounting for players who qualified for the PGA tour yet did not keep their status for an extended period of time. Continued exploration of these issues would improve our understanding of career dynamics in elite golf.

Practical Relevance: Currently little is known about athlete progression at the elite professional level. Gaining more knowledge will allow players, coaches, and stakeholders the ability to better select tournament schedules, set achievable career goals, and better inform policy and player support.

References:

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