

# Golf Digest

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## Middle East

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hen the World Health Organisation (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11 last year, experts were swift with cataclysmic predictions for the global economy. Governments were already scrambling, with varying degrees of success, to ensure their hospital systems were not completely over-run by this new invisible enemy and scientists sped to formulate vaccines. ▶ Lockdowns, physical distancing, mandatory mask wearing, hand sanitising and Netflix binges became our norm. Employees were furloughed, already struggling businesses went to the wall and we all fretted for the future in this scary, uncertain time. Unless of course you worked in a non-essential service industry like golf where it seemed likely the inevitable global downturn would only serve to hasten the game's already well-documented participation rate nose dive. With people dying at alarming rates around the world, golf seemed so insignificant. The outlook for the royal and ancient game was bleak.

## Top Outcome

What few saw coming was the almost complete reverse of that doomsday forecast. With the beauty of hindsight, that golf has boomed as we slowly emerge from COVID-19 (or at least learn to live with the deadly virus) is not all that surprising. Even the most pessimistic of epidemiologists agree that a more socially distant and safe outdoor pastime you will struggle to find.

With that, the Emirates Golf Federation (EGF) set about ensuring the game was the first in the UAE to open up post lockdown, initially in 'bubbles' complete with partially filled-in holes, flagsticks you dear not touch and rake-free bunkers. Clubs who had seen round numbers plummet from 54,000 in April 2019 to 12,000 the following April (the EGF officially recorded just 2964 rounds) at least had hope after months of empty tee sheets.

Fast-forward 12 months and the latest statistics are astonishing with 80,000 rounds recorded across the UAE's 18 courses this past April. That "approximate" figure was released at the Emirates Amateur Golf League (EAGL)'s recent 'Future of Golf' forum which shone a light on the state of the UAE golf industry.

So how did we get here and how does the industry ensure the unforeseen spike in participation is not wasted? The answer to the former, in the UAE anyway, is two-fold. It's clear established golfers who suddenly found themselves out of the office took advantage by hitting the links and playing and playing and playing some more. Former players, with equal amounts of time to fill, dusted off their old sticks and it seems in many cases, rediscovered their love for the game.

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We are putting golf clubs into the hands of people that have never had a golf club in their hands before and they are having fun.

— CHRIS MAY, CEO OF DUBAI GOLF WHICH OPERATES TOPGOLF DUBAI

Perhaps the most significant development, which just happened to coincide with the height of the pandemic, was the opening on January 3 of Topgolf Dubai. Since then, the impressive entertainment facility on the old Faldo driving range at Emirates Golf Club has seen an average of 10,000 players a week whack microchipped balls into the floodlit night skies while supping on refreshments and grooving to beats.

It's golf, just not as the UAE has known it before, according to Chris May, the CEO of Golf Dubai who critically own the Topgolf licence for the Middle East.

"Why did we decide to bring Topgolf to the UAE?" May said in response to a question from moderator Joy Chakravarty. "Two main reasons. Firstly, we felt the business model was a good model and it would work in Dubai. That's proven to be true and correct. But secondly and probably more importantly was to grow the game of golf and that has been proven to be definitely correct.

"The one thing that we've seen that has been really pleasing has been that Topgolf in Dubai, 75 percent of the people that play are non-golfers. So we are putting golf clubs into the hands of people that have never had a golf club in their hands before and they are having fun."

Drilling deeper into the makeup of the 75 percentile encourages May even more. "The diversity of nationalities, the diversity of age-groups, the number of UAE nationals and GCC nationals who are picking up a golf club for the first time and playing and having fun, it's really something I don't think we've seen in this region before."

May doffed his cap to the EGF for getting golf back on its feet before turning the heat up on the region's clubs to keep the momentum going. All with an exciting, Topgolf carrot.



“I think golf has a great opportunity because of COVID. We’ve been very fortunate thanks to the hard work of the Emirates Golf Federation... [vice-chairman] Adel Zarouni in particular made us very fortunate to be the first sport that was open post the lockdown and I think that gave us a great advantage in seeing a huge uplift in the number of rounds played in the region.

“Now it is all of our responsibility to take that [participation spike] to the next stage and make sure people are playing Topgolf and then converting to green grass golf.”

The exciting bit? That non-golfers outside Dubai won’t always have to travel to the emirate to discover the joys of the game.

There’s nothing concrete planned yet, May insisted, but “based on the success of Dubai you’ll see other Topgolfs.

“The first one is likely to be in Abu Dhabi but I think you’ll see it around the GCC, other Topgolfs coming up. Perhaps not as big as the one in Dubai but smaller, making sure it is successful in that city, wherever it goes, but I wouldn’t be surprised to see four, five, six in the region within the next two, three years.”

### Fresh Ideas

**W**hen Nick Tarratt arrived in Dubai 31 years ago with “short trousers and long hair” to serve as secretary and golf manager at Emirates Golf Club, the game in the emirate was a very exclusive affair.

“The only way you could play Emirates

**Above: (L to R)**

Moderator Joy Chakravarty, Ismail Sharif, Chris May, Simon Corkill, Mark Chapleski, Nick Tarratt and Roger Duthie at the EAGL forum

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**Dubai has traditionally done this, pushed the boundaries, adapted and that’s why we’ve got a really good place in global golf.**

– FALCON AND ASSOCIATES EXECUTIVE TOURNAMENT DIRECTOR SIMON CORKILL

Golf Club was as a member, member’s guest, corporate golf day or an international guest through a hotel. There was no local pay and play so we’ve gone from there to here.”

There’s still a way to go to entice non-golfers to a sport that is still perceived to be stuffy and rule-ridden by uninitiated outsiders. Even Tarratt struggles letting go of tradition but knows the time has come.

“Let’s not forget I’m a jacket and tie, blazer man who likes the traditional 18 holes, the majors, the monthly medals, I still love that. But to encourage new golfers, the people Chris [May] at Topgolf and all of us here at the forum are trying to encourage, I think it will engage with the youth of today and not just old blazer and tie guys like me.”

The ‘it’ Tarratt was referring to is the Emirates Amateur Golf League (EAGL), amateur golf’s answer to IPL cricket complete with franchise-style teams and live broadcasts of 9-hole matches designed to give average Joes (and Janes) the chance to experience what touring pros encounter every week. The EAGL Mini-Series played before the forum, a dress rehearsal to an annual three-month league scheduled to start in November, was greeted with widespread approval.

Tarratt, as tournament director, clearly has a vested interest but sees ventures like the EAGL as part of the ongoing solution to grow golf’s appeal.

“Is this the short-form of golf [going forward]? Golf has tried Sixes, it’s tried Shot Clock Masters, maybe it was invested in those rather than engaged,” said Tarratt, best remembered as the former chief of the European Tour’s Dubai office.

“And Shiv [EAGL ambassador and four-time Asia Tour winner Shiv Kapur] told me, ‘I think 9 holes is the future of corporate golf’. It’s great for the clubs to work in at quieter times rather than a big shotgun at 12.30pm, peak time; it helps the sponsor, it’s a little cheaper, you’re playing with perhaps more different people. What was great today [the EAGL Mini-Series] was that it was a genuine networking opportunity. It wasn’t you playing with three mates and having fun and just winning the same glass trophy and the same buffets so I must applaud [EAGL founder and CEO] Sudesh [Aggrawal] and all the team. Going forward, I think short-form golf is the future, Topgolf is a great example.

“I think engaging with the youth, short form, having more fun, music on the 1st tee, not on the golf cart...”

Tarratt’s answer tailed off, perhaps because he realises the old blazer brigade are in a losing battle when it comes to what the next-gen needs to be attracted to golf and what they want to stay invested.

### Facilities Rethink

Another veteran of the UAE game is Ismail Sharif, a seven-time national champion who currently serves as Managing Director of Dubai Golf-managed Jumeirah Golf Estates and is passionate about getting the nation’s youth off their screens and out onto the course.

The problem he sees is facilities to meet the newbie end of the market.

“We’ve done a great job so far but [the] only mistake that we’ve done, we’re always focusing on the five-star [experience],” said Sharif.

“If we look at the hotel business, you will see the pyramid is five-star first, then two is four-star, and then come down. Golf needs to be the same if we want to grow the game. But our pyramid is upside down, we are all having five-star golf courses, we don’t have nothing at the bottom to support the [new people] who like to come and play golf.

“Now, with the help of Topgolf and some programmes like here at JGE - we have started a programme called ‘Get into Golf’, it’s for one month, coaching in group lessons for 495 dirhams...normally you would [only] get one lesson for 495 dirhams. This is the things we need to do, work with all the golf courses if we want to bring this business to sustainable [levels] and have more golfers. We need to start somewhere.”

There are indeed new courses in the wings – the new Tiger Woods layout in Dubai will be a top dirham experience but perhaps Yas Acres in Abu Dhabi and the 9-hole Peter Harradine design on ice at Al Barari in Dubai could serve as more affordable entry points to the game. Time will tell.



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– ISMAIL SHARIF

Below: OMEGA Dubai Moonlight Classic

### Global Profile

A fascinating aspect of the game’s overall health in the Middle East centres around the region’s high-profile European Tour and Ladies European Tour events. Two key players in that space are Simon Corkill and Roger Duthie and both shared interesting, even slightly contentious, thoughts at the forum.

Corkill, Executive Tournament Director for Falcon and Associates which run and promote the men’s OMEGA Dubai Desert Classic and LET’s OMEGA Dubai Moonlight Classic, said the region had made an “exceptional statement” by safely running pro events at the height of the pandemic.

“It [COVID-19] continues to cause us all challenges in everyday life but for example, when the Desert Classic was on, the [case] numbers were up to 5000 people a day and it was a really tense time but Dubai came through and demonstrated we could run safe events.

“This is not going away but I see the events at the end of the year, the DP World [Tour Championship] and the events for 2022, we will have events, the players will come, we can run hospitality safely and we can host spectators safely. Dubai and the UAE are right up there as world leaders.”



FORUM: EAGL • MOONLIGHT CLASSIC: TRISTAN JONES/LET



Corkill also wondered out loud if the tournaments he oversees at Emirates Golf Club might also become trailblazers in terms of media engagement.

“The other big change I’ve seen has been the whole clamber for content is becoming really, really strong and we need to adapt. As tournaments, we need to create content that is snackable, it’s engaging and we’re doing it.”

No one in golf does social media better than the European Tour and Corkill believes events need to adapt likewise. In the case of the OMEGA Classics, they might even go a step further.

“One thing that we’re looking at, and this has come around very recently, [is our] policy on press interviews having seen what has happened to Naomi Osaka in the tennis world. We’ve got to assess that situation. Is a press conference right if people don’t have direct consent? We’re looking at these things, we looking at, okay, if players don’t have direct consent on post round interviews, do we encourage all the players to



“**Golf is still getting older. We don’t have that Tiger factor anymore... we need to look for creative, new ways to find and attract new audiences.**

— ROGER DUTHIE

speak on the social media channels pre, during and post the event? I think we might get a really good result out of it. We’re considering it for a trial at our ladies event in October. We’re not sure yet but it’s certainly something we have to look at. We have to work with the times.

“Dubai has traditionally done this, pushed the boundaries, adapted and that’s why we’ve got a really good place in global golf. The events here are going from strength to strength but we adapt quickly and we will continue to.”

Global golf and boundary-pushing. A timely segue to introduce Duthie to the conversation. The former Emirates Airlines sponsorship guru is now Chief Sponsorship Officer for golf marketing and consultancy agency Performance 54 which enjoys strong links to the global game’s most ambitious new market, Saudi Arabia. Duthie is also an Independent Sports Sponsorship Adviser and while he wasn’t asked to comment on the “exciting project” he’s currently engaged in, the room read it as a challenge to the game’s current status quo.

Time will tell if the mooted Super League (formerly the Premier Golf League) will make it from concept to big money reality, but Duthie is adamant the game needs to kick on now the “Tiger factor” is wearing off.

“...over the last 10 years the average age of the TV viewing audience in America, say, is 63 years old. Golf is still getting older. We don’t have that Tiger factor anymore so how do you capture a young audience? Topgolf is one way, right, this forum, today’s tournament [the EAGL Mini-Series] is another way but we have to look at



Clockwise from above: Topgolf Dubai; Naomi Osaka; EAGL founder Sudesh Aggrawal

other ways at attracting that younger audience because, sadly, we're all getting older, decision makers are getting older as well, so we need to look for creative, new ways to find and attract new audiences.

"On a similar vein, it's interesting to note, from a sponsor's point of view, you want the top players to play and I was involved in the European Tour, and I love that partnership, and the Asian Tour. But right now there is about 40 percent of the time when the world's top 48 golfers play in an event, so you're not guaranteed Tiger, Phil, Rory etc, etc. Those are the people the fans want to see and the sponsors want to see and the broadcasters and that's what makes this wonderful ecosystem work.

"We're not having that right now so wouldn't it be wonderful from a fan's point of view, from a sponsor's point of view if you could guarantee once a month, maybe every five weeks, that you could guarantee the top 48 players in the world or so playing in a tournament? How good would that be for the world of golf? Then you could create narratives throughout the season, you could generate new fans, new interest, you could highlight different players if you did a different type of format, there are so many ways to grow the game now. We're looking at it through my business right now and hopefully we'll be successful."

Watch this space. And welcome all those newbies emerging from Topgolf bays to green grass tees with open arms. The game, in this strange period of history, will endure and prosper if we become more inclusive, less exclusive. Maybe even turn up the stereo. – KENT GRAY



**I wouldn't be surprised to see four, five, six in the region within the next two, three years.**

– MAY AGAIN ON THE LIKELIHOOD OF TOPGOLF'S GCC WIDE EXPANSION

## Tourism Rebound

► Mark Chapleski was asked for his thoughts on sustainability, golf latest's "buzz word" as he put it, at the EAGL's Future of Golf Forum. He reported that the region was "ahead of the curve" globally after making "great strides" over the past 30 years with agronomy practices and more recently with the phasing out of single use plastics.

But first, the Dubai-based, Troon International President waxed lyrical on the region's participation numbers announced by moderator Joy Chakravarty.

"You talked about 80,000 rounds in April and that is an incredible number. I don't think any of us sitting here would have ever had of thought it was possible with the local market to do those kind of numbers, so it's phenomenal, it's been incredible what golf has gone through.

"But what's even more incredible is that [number] was with less than one percent of tourists which we would...typically in the peak season we would get at least 10 percent and that's something we are working towards getting more of those."

Troon's Abu Dhabi cluster of clubs – Yas Links, Abu Dhabi and Saadiyat Beach – are indeed working towards opening up the emirate to Green List countries including the U.S., Germany, Italy and Spain.

With more than 93% of those eligible now reportedly vaccinated in Abu Dhabi, Troon Abu Dhabi now has the ability to function as a tour operator, creating a "one-stop hub" for all international golf tour operators to package all required services including additional services such as hotel rooms and restaurant bookings with preferred rates.

A sharp increase in demand for autumn and winter golf breaks is expected as a result.

Said HE Ali Hassan Al Shaiba, Executive Director of Tourism and Marketing at the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi (DCT Abu Dhabi): "Golf is an important part of the sporting ecosystem in Abu Dhabi. The three championship golf courses managed by Troon complement Abu Dhabi's golf offering and attracts professional and amateur players from all over the world. It is exciting to welcome back international golfers to challenge themselves on these beautiful courses in a safe and worry-free environment. The stringent safety measures Abu Dhabi has put in place to protect residents and non-residents alike will reassure our future golfing visitors."