

Challenge Tour - Hotel Planner Tour Media Conference

Friday, 17 January, 2025

Jamie Hodges

Tim Hentschel

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are delighted to announce that The Challenge Tour and HotelPlanner have agreed to a multiyear partnership with the travel technology company becoming the Tour's travel partner from the start of the 2025 season. I'm pleased to be joined by Jamie Hodges, the HotelPlanner Tour director and Tim Hentschel, HotelPlanner's CEO.

Jamie, how pleased are you to have secured The Challenge Tour's first travel partner?

JAMIE HODGES: Yeah, delighted, thank you.

Obviously today's announcement is a hugely significant one for our tour. We believe it will further enhance our tour and we've seen over recent years real positive momentum and growth. I think today just adds and builds on that momentum. It shines a spotlight on our tour. It highlights the commercial appeal of not just the Tour but also our events.

And I'd like to thank you, Tim, and everyone at HotelPlanner for sharing our vision and for making this long-term commitment today. Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: And how will the Tour be strengthened because of this deal?

JAMIE HODGES: So it was obviously vitally important to us that this agreement benefitted all our stakeholders; so whether that's the players, caddies, existing partners, our promoters and of course our fans. So HotelPlanner committed to grow our tour through both increased prize funds and elevating the standard and the quality of our events.

So thanks to HotelPlanner's investment, we will be playing over the 2025 season for a record prize fund of over 9



million Euros, and we've been able to increase the prize money at all of our European events to a minimum of 300,000 Euros which sees 16 events in total benefit from prize fund increases.

As well as that prize money investment and in addition to their title sponsorship fee, we and HotelPlanner together and ourselves have made a commitment to elevate the standard of our events, and in 2025, six events will benefit from that investment, which is really designed to improve and elevate the quality of everything we do on our tour.

So thank you, Tim. We're very grateful, as I said before. Our goal and our objective is to deliver the best parafit to golf's global tour and with today's announcement, we have done that.

THE MODERATOR: How exciting is it for HotelPlanner to become sponsor for The Challenge Tour?

TIM HENTSCHEL: It was so exciting; I jumped overnight on Emirates just to be here. I haven't slept in over 24 hours. That's how exciting it is. We're excited. Couldn't ask for better partners.

We're a fast, young, growing company and we're partnering up with the best young, up-and-coming talent in golf. So what's not to be excited about?

Oh, and one thing I want to add, we are going to be giving away tens of thousands of pounds in free hotel rooms to the players, as well. So obviously players need to travel and hotels is part of the cost, so we're going to reduce that for the top players.

THE MODERATOR: And how can HotelPlanner use its assets to help grow the Tour?

TIM HENTSCHEL: Well, you know, we've got a lot of technology that we can make useful, especially around obviously the travel sector, but we also do big work in AI.

hotelplanner.ai is cutting edge technology where we actually automate reservation agents. We're going to be expanding that to customer service agents. I think we are



on the cutting edge of AI, and obviously that's the future, so any way we can help on the Tour on that side, we're happy to do; bringing our partnerships, we have partnerships with the biggest names in tech in the world, and we want to bring them on board to help us grow this tour and make it the best.

I have to tell you, I'm super excited because we had such big plans for taking the HotelPlanner Tour and potentially doing a huge event where we challenge other tours around the world to compete against our best players. So we have big plans. It's not just going to be a satellite tour, a steppingstone to the next tour. We want to create our own ethos and our own excitement around what the next gen of best European golfers are doing on a day-to-day basis; and there will be a big aspect of social media to that, and we specialize in that, too, obviously being a tech company.

So you know what, when I get up after I check my e-mails and do my daily chores as a CEO, the next thing I'm going to do is just think about what I can do to make Jamie's job easier and make the Tour that much better to play on. If you look at our history at HotelPlanner, whether we put our efforts and momentum behind something, we usually -- we have about a 95 percent success rate in making it extremely successful, especially in an organic growth sense. If you want to look in the background on our company, we have taken no private equity and have no VC funding. We are 100 per cent bootstrapped.

If we can do that in tech and get to where we are, imagine what we can do in golf, especially on the grass roots level, which is why this tour was so exciting for us. It's up-and-coming and these are players that are bootstrapping their ways to the pros, to the DP World Tour, I should say.

Yeah, everything is possible, and we're super excited.

THE MODERATOR: Jamie, you've been in charge of The Challenge Tour for a good few years now. Is this the most significant development in your time?

JAMIE DONALDSON: Yes, undoubtedly. I feel proud of the growth that we've delivered over the sort of three or four years that I've been here. In 2021, our minimum prize fund was 190,000 Euros. And for us this year, to have a prize fund of 300,000 Euros is obviously very significant, and is ultimately what our purpose is, which is to support our members and help maximize the earning potential of our membership.

Yes, is the simple answer to your question. It's hugely significant.

Q. With tradition, looking at the name, The Challenge Tour disappearing, like The European Tour became the DP World Tour. Is this just evolution in golf?

JAMIE DONALDSON: I think so. Any potential arrangement, you have to look at everything, and we looked at everything. When we look at how, as I said, what our core purpose is, which is to support our membership, there's no doubt with all of the things that we've laid out here today that we're doing that. So yes, I think so.

Q. I think I'm right in saying that you were involved in the old PGA Euro Pro Tour?

TIM HENTSCHEL: Correct.

Q. What is it in golf that attracts you?

TIM HENTSCHEL: So much in golf. I love it that it's a game of trust and ethics. You keep your own score. For my kids, I have three boys, 7, 12, 14, and I have them on a heavy dose of tennis and golf. Because both sports, it's heavy in ethics and morals.

In tennis, you call your opponent's lines scores. In golf, you keep your own score. They are sports you can play around the world and they have a community around them. You can play them your entire life. They extend your life, as shown in the studies that are coming out.

Now, I love all sports. If you look at HotelPlanner, we have been in everything, all the Olympics sports. Lawrence Okolie is one of our brand ambassadors. He's here with us today. From U.K. boxing, triathlons, you name it, we have been in it, gymnastics.

But golf and tennis are special because they are global and because they have such great reputations for building ethics and morals, and that's where we want to be.

So yeah, that's why we love golf. Thank God it's here by the way, too. Lawrence Okolie is right over there if you want to say "hi."

Q. For either or both of you, I think you said it was a multiyear deal. Wonder if you can be more specific. Is there a significance to the fact it's been announced here? Obviously the DP World Tour finishes up in Dubai. Challenge Tour traditionally finished up in Spain. Is there a shift away from a grand finale in this region?

JAMIE DONALDSON: It's a long-term partnership. Our commitment to Mallorca remains.



We are announcing this today partly because of the significance of this tournament and having all of you with us but also because our '25 season simply starts on Monday.

The HotelPlanner season will begin next week, and that's why we needed to obviously make sure that we had everything announced before we did so.

Q. The six events, is this being done on a similar idea to the Rolex Series?

JAMIE DONALDSON: Yes, exactly. So how do we elevate those events and how do we improve the quality of those tournaments, not just prize money, but actually the standard and everything that goes with it. So that's very much the intention.

Q. The Tour travels to 18 countries including here in the UAE. How will HotelPlanner's global reach expand that even further, do you think?

JAMIE DONALDSON: I think it will. The Challenge Tour in its prior history has played in 51 different countries. We've ticked off quite a few. But we get interest and opportunity from all around the world, and I don't see that changing. I think with HotelPlanner as our title partner, I see it only being enhanced to be honest.

So we always have to make sure that the opportunity is right and that it makes sense for our players but we are open to continue to grow as a global tour and for sure having HotelPlanner as our title partner will allow us to do so.

Q. I wanted to ask you, in Asia, when your rivals are more better-known brands as such, the global nature of Challenge Tour now becomes the HotelPlanner Tour, how important from the business perspective is it to get the other territories, as well, to make it more global there?

TIM HENTSCHEL: We're a bit different from what you may think of as your typical OTA, which in our industry stands for online travel agency. You know Expedia and booking.com and Ctrip which is now ctrip.com. That's the big Chinese OTA.

When I started with the company 20 years ago, we didn't even have a brand name. I started with a patent of group hotel booking technology.

So what a lot of people don't know is that when you go to nine-plus hotel options from Trivago, Kayak, Priceline, Expedia, Hotel.com, that's going through our platform.

That's our technology.

We also, because we are a technology shop at heart, we in the first of its kind had a cloud-based call center. So instead of call centers typically where you have people in cubicles, this was a call center that was cloud-based. So anybody could take reservations from anywhere in the world. Then we launched hotelplanner.ai with 8 million recorded calls that programmed our AI reservations agents on that.

So along with our partnership where we power OTAs for group hotel booking technology, we are also beginning to power them for AI technology on reservations and eventually on AI customer service.

So to be more specific, we have an office in Singapore. I helped set it up. I actually lived in Singapore for four years. Most of those were COVID years. Asia is big for us, and that was a big part of our interest in this tour; that they have two events in China. We are already talking to our OTA partners in China about getting involved in this tour.

So as I said in the beginning, it's not just about us being part of it. It's about bringing all of our partnerships to the table, too, so we can grow it as big as possible. That's the cool thing about tech, especially travel tech, is we all believe in being frenemies, "co-ompetition." We all partner with each other. It's 20 years of my life, and I've actually been very happy with the industry. We all go to the same conferences and talk about what's the best tech, and we help each other out. It's just the nature of how we got started. Because back 20 years ago, you know, there was nothing there, right. It was just a bunch of people with an idea.

And so if you're one of those original pioneers, you kind of really stick together and have a kinship around that. We really work together, and I'm glad that we are one of the first in the travel technology space to get really heavily involved in golf, and that can mean more of everybody getting involved in golf and other great community sports like this.

Q. Out of the 20 graduates at the end of the 2023 season, I think I'm right in saying three went on to win on the DP World Tour and 15 retained cards. Is that a sign of just how strong The Challenge Tour is at the moment?

JAMIE DONALDSON: Yes, exactly. And two of those guys have gone on to the PGA Tour, and someone from last year is The Race to Dubai No. 1.

Yes, I think I've preached and shouted about it, but



thankfully the records and the statistics back up what you're saying, and hopefully it proves that what we are talking about trying to provide the best possible parfait is working. How can we improve that? We believe today is an important step to help us do so.

Q. Do statistics excite you at this time at the start of this new partnership?

TIM HENTSCHEL: Absolutely. The Wentworth event you guys just had, the BMW PGA Championship, we got to meet with Dan Brown, and we signed Dan Brown as a brand ambassador for HotelPlanner.

So it was perfect timing, because obviously with this deal, now we have a former champion from The Challenge Tour that's on the DP World Tour that represents our brand. So it really shows the players, what they can do.

So he makes a great brand ambassador, not just for our company, but for the whole progress of the Tour from the HotelPlanner tour to the DP World Tour.

Right now Dan Brown needs a little help, so let's all pull for him. Yeah, good thoughts going out to Dan Brown right now.

Q. Is your AI tech powerful enough to get us a cheap hotel in Augusta during the Masters (laughter)?

TIM HENTSCHEL: You know what, definitely try it. I'm not joking. And what's cool about it is you can -- we have got 20 AI agents. They all speak different languages. They have different accents. They have different personalities. We are actually working on putting Elon Musk's personality on hotelplanner.ai. So just imagine whatever you guys can dream of that you want to book through, we can make that personality into that experience.

So eventually, we wanted to make it so you would book with AI faster than you would book on a smartphone. You would have your personal AI, and it remembers you and knows your preferences. So if you want to get to Augusta, it will remind you once you book it: Hey, now is the time to book Augusta again so we can get a good rate.

But you'd be surprised. With all our partnerships, we could probably get you pretty good availability at, I don't want to say it's a good price, because any time there's demand, prices are going to go really high.

But we'll get you something sane, at least.

Q. During the week of the tournament?

TIM HENTSCHEL: Yeah, absolutely. That's what I mean. I mean, you might have to drive a little bit, but we'll find something, trust me. That's our specialty.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time, everyone.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

