

USGA Media Conference

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USA

Heather Daly-Donofrio

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: What it means, who it will impact, who will benefit, and really today we're excited to share all those details. I know everyone here has seen the release, and I'm going to kick it over to Heather who was brought over here to do just this, launch this program from scratch.

Heather, why don't you just start by kind of sharing with everyone what today means for the USGA.

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Yeah, I mean, we're obviously super excited to officially launch this program. It's been a work in process for the last -- since I've been on since May 1.

We started when I was hired on May 1 pretty much with a blank sheet of paper and worked over the last 10 months, did a lot of benchmarking. We talked to so many different people in the industry, players, coaches, instructors, other national programs, really kind of just reached out to everybody we could in the industry to learn as much as we could about other national programs, what they do in other countries, et cetera, and what we do here in the United States, which obviously there's a ton of golf programming here already in the United States.

There are a lot of great organizations that are doing tremendous work in the game from the grass-roots level, all the way up through the professional game. But what we don't have is a fully coordinated and integrated pipeline or pathway for young boys and girls who are competitive at the junior level in the game to progress through to the highest levels of the game. So the young boys or girls in an LPGA or PGA TOUR event and they're watching and they turn to their mom and dad and they say, hey, I want to be that, inside the ropes, there's really no pathway or pipeline to that that parents can really navigate through and juniors can aspire to.

That's what we're building. We're going to build a very clear and defined pathway for young boys and girls to move through if they have the desire to reach the highest levels of the game, whether that's at an elite amateur level or professional level. We're going to provide development resources for the athletes in our program, not only just from the perspective of helping them be the best golfers that

they can but also to be the best people that they can. We want to ensure that this pathway is very healthy and positive and that we're building the player and we're building the human.

We will have a very robust grant program. We have some lofty goals as it relates to fundraising for that grant program, and at the end of five years our goal is to support 1,000 juniors in some way through that grant program and really trying to identify those young boys and girls, 12, 13 plus years old who are already competitive in the game, their parents are already somewhat invested in the game, finding those who have the talent and the potential, the desire, the work ethic but don't have the means to continue to progress through that pipeline, and particularly from our underrepresented groups in the game.

So we'll be working very closely with our allied golf associations, with the grass-roots programs, with the PGA of America junior sections and the AJGA in identifying talent and particularly, again, for those young boys and girls whose families don't have the financial resources to progress with their children through that pipeline.

We will have national teams. We do envision, as other countries do, to have a junior national -- we'll be supporting some juniors through a team, national amateurs and young professionals. We'll take a staggered approach, but we'll start as early as next year with a good group of junior boys and girls.

We might start taking some juniors overseas this year. One of the areas that we've identified is our players are not -- our American players are not getting the international exposure that other athletes do from other countries, so learning new cultures, learning to play different golf courses in different environments and learning that travel and independence and traveling as a team piece.

A lot to do, but we're excited about it. This is a long-term play for us. This is a forever play. This is not something that we're diving into this week, this year and in a couple years just going to say no, we're not doing those national teams anymore, we're not doing this national program. We are in this for the future to foster future generations of American golf talent, and it's not about this generation or the next generation, it's about all the generations after that.



THE MODERATOR: Heather, we've been getting this one a lot. What does it look like this year? What are we doing over the next six to nine months?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Yeah, so we're looking at 2023 as really a foundation building year. We have a structure to the program. We have a strategy. We've been able to forge partnerships with the leading organizations in the game, and we've got to build the foundation of our program now, right, so we're going to -- we've got to build a team. We've got some staff openings, so we'll start hiring a team around the national team. We've got to build out our player development curriculum and philosophy, what do our training camps look like, what kind of culture do we want to cultivate with our national teams and our national program. We'll be building out our grant program, and we're also going to build out with our allied golf associations in the PGA of America sections a state strategy that will fall underneath the national strategy. So think over time we'll have Team Rhode Island, Team Colorado, Team New York, all of which will give players that aspirational pathway to go from the local level to the state level to the AJGA to our national championships and then to the professional game.

Q. Do you know what kind of the criteria -- I read the release and it said you're going to implement some sort of ranking, but what's the criteria at this point for selecting those first 50 kids? Are we looking at just talented players who don't have the means financially, or is it open to basically anybody even if your dad is the CEO of Microsoft? Or is it just for kids who maybe don't have the means kind of like the Ace Grant for the AJGA?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Yeah, great question, so that's another piece that we're going to be working on and finalizing this year. We are going to look at a variety of factors. It won't be solely based on rankings. Obviously when you're talking about national teams, you're going to want your best players on the national team, but this is also aspirational, and we have a lot of boys and girls that don't play outside of their state.

We want to identify those top players in the states who may not have played AJGA or some of the other bigger junior or national amateur tournaments to get enough points to populate high enough on the rankings. So that grant piece will be primarily for that 12-to-15, 16-year-old age group. Obviously it'll funnel up to, but the bulk of the grants will be to help strengthen and broaden that junior golf pipeline and keep those kids with potential in the game, and then as we move up and we look at more of the elite juniors, there will be some very objective criteria, but there will be some subjective criteria, as well.

We've got a list of probably 25 different points on the paper that we will look at each athlete holistically, so it will be -- yes, we'll look at rankings, we'll look at statistics, we'll look at scoring average, we'll look at technique, but we'll also look at those intangibles, work ethic, grit, determination, desire, do they have a good support system, et cetera.

THE MODERATOR: Heather, correct me if I'm wrong, but specific to the grant program, there is a financial aid/need-based component.

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Yes, thank you.

Q. But that won't necessarily exclude a kid from being on the competitive travel team.

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: No, no, right.

Q. What's the main difference right now between say I'm on the national team -- the national junior team compared to maybe someone else in the program? What would be kind of the big separator between being on the national team and just being in the program?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Yeah, I think as it relates -- a couple of things. I would say one, for those who will be on the national team, they'll have essentially 24/7 access to our national coaches and all of the resources that we have, whether that's strength and conditioning, nutrition, sports psychology, et cetera. We will be bringing that group of athletes to training camps a couple of times a year. They will be -- out of that pool of players will be the ones that we would be choosing to play international tournaments.

We do also envision inter-country matches here in the United States and outside of the U.S. we've had a lot of interest from other national teams who have already asked us, when are you getting your kids; we want to have joint training camps; we want to have some matches; come to our country for two weeks and see what we do and bring your kids and train with us.

The level of enthusiasm from other national teams has been really encouraging.

Q. Just to add, for a number of players on the team, is it 10? Is it 15? What's the ballpark right now?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Yeah, I think we're looking at about a cap of -- we're not going to be held to the number I don't think, but we're looking at around a cap of 30 boys and 30 girls at that junior national team level.

Q. Each or combined?

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HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Each. So a large pool, larger pool than I think most other countries.

Q. Is that 30 boys, 30 girls juniors and then 30 men's amateurs, 30 men's/women's?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Yeah, we're envisioning 30. 30 at the juniors, 30 boys, 30 girls. At the national amateur, looking more around that 15 number for both men and 15 women, and then at the young professional level we're looking at 10 and 10.

Again, it's a five-, six-year plan to get to those numbers and roll out those teams, and I'll admit that is an aggressive plan. But we'll grow as quickly as we can.

That's about the ballpark numbers that we're looking at.

Q. I'm curious, I've heard stuff like this or concepts like this from Inkster for many years, why don't we have a national team like Sweden, like Colombia, whatever. Have you had any conversations with her?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: I have not specifically spoken with Juli, but we have spoken to several players, and we actually have a plan that we're working on where we're going to be doing quite a bit of outreach to our American athletes at all levels, so those like Juli who had an amazing junior career all the way to being a Hall of Famer in the LPGA to players who dropped out of the junior game or started professionally, dropped out after two years and trying to really do a lot of due diligence directly with the athletes who have gone through the experience to get their feedback, to get their insight, to find out what they would have needed, what they would have liked to have seen, what would have helped them, kind of what they had, what they didn't have. We've gained a lot of learnings from the other national teams. We've spent a lot of time with several of the national teams like getting to the heart of the athlete themselves and what they feel like their needs were or are or are currently. We're going to be taking the next couple of months and doing a deep dive both on the men's and women's side.

Q. I would think most of those other national teams, one of the trademarks is they all seem to be government funding. Is any of that available, and is the funding coming strictly through grants, or is the USGA also going to pitch in and to what level?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: We, the USGA, are firmly behind this initiative financially. Right now as it relates to the initiative, we will be bringing on some corporate partners is my guess for the program, as well as some

donors. I think the one beautiful thing about the game of golf is that golfers -- I find golfers very generous, and I think this is going to be a great way for golfers to kind of give their experience back to the next generation and support the program.

I think the financial support will come from the USGA, will come from donors, and it will come from corporate partners.

THE MODERATOR: But right now we are fully funding it for this year.

Q. In your research, where do you find the biggest pipeline right now? It's very disjointed is kind of what I'm hearing, whether it's PGA of America programs, AJGA. Where do you find the steadiest pipeline?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Well, I think that's a challenge -- I'm not sure if I understand the question, but there's so much in golf. It's just not coordinated. If you talk to parents and you talk to juniors, there's so much golf programming out there. Some of them don't even know where to start, and it's very difficult to navigate the competitive landscape in junior golf in the United States because there are so many different tours. There are so many different ways to access different tours, and it's expensive.

One of the resources which is another kind of more broad layer that we're working on is what resources can we deliver to junior golfers across the United States, where all junior golfers would have access to it. One of those resources that we're looking to develop and deliver to juniors and their families is a platform that will help them navigate the competitive landscape.

I'm Heather, I'm 14, I'm from Connecticut, my handicap index is 5, my average score is 81, I don't want to travel more than 120 miles. I enter that into the platform, and Heather, based on where you are and your ability level, here's the competitive events you should be looking to play. Like there are a few platforms out there, but that in itself is a tool that we have identified from our conversations with parents and kids that would be extremely useful.

Q. In your travels around and visiting with other organizations in different countries, what do you envision about the training methods being different in this program under a national governance that could best develop players?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: All of the national programs work a little bit differently, and I think one of the

advantages we have to being late to this game is that we can learn not only what's working well in certain countries but also what they've tried and isn't working. I think we need to recognize that the culture in the United States is different than in other countries, that this is a brand new program for American athletes. They've never been part of a national program, a national system.

I think we envision our program as not being heavy handed, it's collaborative. It's providing the resources from a financial and development perspective from that younger age group, and then when we get to the national teams, Americans have their home instructors, they have their teams, they have their college coaches, and really coordinating with everybody who supports that athlete to ensure that we're making decisions together and what is best for the athlete, not what's best for the USGA, not what's best for the college coach, what's best for their instructor at home, but what's best for that athlete in their development and reaching their dreams in the game.

So we're going to be building out our philosophies, but I hope that answers the question a little bit.

Q. Could you do maybe a case study? Let's just say we have a 12-year-old male golfer. What kind of baseline talent level are you kind of looking at for like a 12-year-old just to get into the program, and what's maybe an example of kind of the steps that that player could take to ultimately being on the junior national team?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Great question, and that also is something that we're building out, the foundation of that this year, so we just hired a director of data strategy, internal, from our IT department, and so we are actually -- a couple of things. We're in the process of data gathering to put those baselines and those benchmarks together. We don't have a ton of data on our juniors other than handicap and scoring average, so another one of our initiatives is going to be how can we get statistical applications in the hands of some of our juniors so we can start developing some baselines and some other metrics.

But the goal would be we establish some baselines and that we would -- kids would know what it is. I think that's part of this is even if a young boy or girl is 9, 10, 11 years old and the program starts at 12, they're going to want to know kind of where they need to be to be able to be considered for the program. So establishing those metrics and those baselines through the pipeline is going to be very important, and again, our goal in 2023 is to set all of this up so when we hit 2024, like ready to go with this junior team.

Q. It would be accurate to maybe describe as of now kind of the progression being before you're old enough to get into the program, it's more like education, like teaching them what tournaments to play, how to get ready for this, and then maybe from 12 to 16 it's more financial, if anything, funding, certain tournaments, things like that, and then once you reach an elite level it's more like elite coaching, nutrition, traveling to play tournaments, things like that?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: I would say that's accurate. I would add in that grant piece that we will be working with players whether they're part of the grant program or not in identifying players at the local and the state level and giving them additional competitive opportunities.

So one of the partnership elements with the AJGA is that we will be -- the national team will have exemptions into AJGA tournaments, so we'll be working with our allied golf associations and PGA of America sections to identify boys, juniors in state who may not have had the opportunity to play in an AJGA event, who are ready to play -- the level that they're ready to play, compete at in an AJGA level and we'll be able to give them some competitive opportunities and some development around those opportunities.

Yes, at that age group a big chunk of the support is going to be the grant program, but there will be development and competitive opportunities attached to that, as well.

So we're really trying to -- if we look in 20 years' time and we look back at this program, we want boys and girls to know the U.S. national development program is when they enter the game, and they know what those steps are, if they so desire to be a professional, where do they start at a local level to play, and then we're working with our allied golf associations on strengthening the in-state play so we can let players develop in state until they're ready to go on a more national stage where they would jump to more of an AJGA level or national competitions and then progress through the pipeline, as you said, when we get to those national teams.

We'll be looking to establish some regional championships, as well, with our AGAs, and that will take us a couple of years, but again, we'll be identifying the best juniors in the States and then bringing them to a regional championship with camps and then identifying those players and then bringing them to national camps.

This is a massive undertaking and a massive project, so it's going to take us time to build out all of these pieces, but we are firmly behind it. We're going to know a lot more this time next year and a lot more two years from now and three years from now, four years from now. It's going to

take us time to build out all of the elements.

Q. What's the end game? Is it to create the greatest country in golf?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Well, we want to add that America remains the leader, the global -- in golf in the world. We want to strengthen and broaden that junior pipeline. It's time that we give our American athletes the same level of resources and support that other countries give their athletes. I mean, I think we feel like that's our duty. That's our job is to ensure that these young boys and girls have the resources that they need to achieve their dreams.

We'll have goals and we'll have metrics and we'll have KPIs attached to the program. I'm approaching it kind of just as I approached my golf career. I'm very process oriented. If we stick to the process and we build out the best programming we can, the very best national team coaches and support system, results will come.

I will say one thing. It's not going to be just about more Americans in the rankings and more Americans hoisting trophies. A big part of this is we want to ensure -- not everybody is going to be a professional. Not everybody is going to go through this program and be a professional, but they're going to have the love for the game and maybe it'll open up other opportunities for them in golf from a business perspective or in sport and create a community of players who have gone through this program who can mentor next generations who can be active in the program who may be future donors. I don't know, but we're going to be very intentional about ensuring that the pathway that we develop is a healthy one, that it's healthy and it's positive, and not just about winning a tournament.

Q. Was there any concern by the USGA or anyone else that America was slipping because of a disjointed junior program?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: I think particularly in the women's side of the game, you can see the change and the shift in the rankings over a period of the last 20, 25 years. The rest of the world -- the game has become so global, particularly on the women's side of the game with strong tours in Korea and Japan and in Europe. It's a strong global game, and the rest of the world has caught up.

But if you look at the rankings on the women's side, there has been a shift over the last 20 years, and it's going to take us some time to unravel that and have the momentum going the other way.

I think even though the rankings are very strong for Americans on the men's side, the men's game is becoming more international every day. We don't want to take our eyes off of the men's game, either.

Q. When you say ranking, are you talking OWGR?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: OWGR and Rolex Women's World Golf Rankings.

Q. Just professional rankings?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Professional rankings.

THE MODERATOR: But I'd say the same probably applies for WAGR.

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: WAGR hasn't been a longstanding ranking yet, so we can only go back so many years on WAGR. But the rankings for WAGR, if you look at the number of men in WAGR, it pretty much equates to the number of men on the OWGR from an American perspective at the top. On the women's side, there are more American women on WAGR, ranked highly on WAGR, that's not equating necessarily to the same level of ranking on Rolex.

Q. On selecting coaches for the various national teams, maybe some of the qualifications you'd be looking for in identifying these candidates?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Yeah, so we have an open position right now for a director of player development who I kind of see as the architect of the project to build out our player development philosophy, our curriculum, how we're going to approach talent identification. We will be looking for a national coach probably later, later this year. We're not quite ready for the national coach yet because we have so many elements that we still need to build out.

But I think we'll be looking -- I think one of the key attributes that we're going to be looking for in a national coach is somebody who's extremely collaborative. Again, these kids that are going to be in the national program are going to have their college coaches. They're going to have their home instructors. They're going to have agents now with name, image and likeness. Like there's going to be a lot to manage beyond the player, and we need to ensure that our national coach is working collaboratively with the rest of the team.

Obviously we're going to look for somebody who's experienced, somebody who wants to do this for the right reasons, who really believes in the mission, who understands the challenges and is up for it. This is going

to take us some time to build this program, and we really are looking for very committed, passionate coaches to help drive this forward.

the road as we build this out. Thanks for your support.

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Q. What effect will this have on the AJGA?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: I hope a positive one. We're in full partnership mode with the AJGA for the future on this. We're going to be working together on competitive opportunities. We're going to be working together on talent identification. We are going to bring player development and our resources and parent education to the AJGA members, so we will have a whole player development curriculum for the AJGA members, and we want them to grow.

They've got a lot of juniors that are aspiring to be professionals, but they don't have all the juniors, which is why it's a coordinated effort with the AJGA and with our allied golf associations at the state level to coordinate on competitive opportunities and talent identification and our grant programs, so we are super excited about our partnership with the AJGA. They're going to make us and this program better and provide a lot of opportunities for boys and girls who haven't necessarily had the opportunity to play in the AJGA yet.

Q. Could there be a case where an aspiring young junior golfer chooses between this program, the national team, and the AJGA circuit?

HEATHER DALY-DONOFRIO: Well, the AJGA is going to be part of -- well, the AJGA is going to be part of the pipeline. It's not as if our program is going to be a circuit necessarily. We're going to provide development and resources, and we'll provide -- for those athletes who are in our program, we'll provide guidance on scheduling and competition.

I don't think it's an either-or. I think it's a joint effort. That's why this partnership with the AJGA is so important just as our partnership with our allied golf associations, PGA of America and LPGA professionals. They're the ones teaching our young boys and girls, and we're going to be working collaboratively with them on our player development on any future endorsement of coaches potentially for the players in our program.

We really look at this as a unified coordinated -- we are leading, but it's a unified coordinated effort across the leading organizations in the golf ecosystem.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, guys, and thank you, Heather. This won't be the last time we'll be talking about this, and we'll have some additional announcements down

