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**LIV Golf Series the latest in dictators' 'sportswashing' | Opinion**

By Orin Starn

Special to the Sun Sentinel

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Oct 04, 2022 at 10:12 am



Golfers Branden Grace, Charl Schwartzel, Louis Oosthuizen and Hennie Du Plessis pose with the trophy at the end of the third and final day of the LIV Golf Invitational Series event at The Centurion Club in St Albans, north of London, on June 11, 2022. (ADRIAN DENNIS/AFP via Getty Images)

Between the new Saudi-funded LIV golf tour and the upcoming soccer World Cup in Qatar, sportswashing is having itself a global moment.

Repressive regimes have long staged big sports events to launder their images. Adolf Hitler helped invent sportswashing, making the 1936 Berlin Olympics an advertisement

for Nazism's supposed virtues. The stadiums sparkled, and the "No Jews" signs were temporarily removed.

Many visitors left impressed by the Fuhrer's Germany.

Dictators ever since have recognized the payoff of sports sponsorship — whether Mobutu Sese Seko staging the 1974 "Rumble in Jungle" or Vladimir Putin hosting the 2018 World Cup.

It would be nice to imagine that sportswashing no longer works in these ostensibly more enlightened times. Human rights organizations and concerned groups routinely express outrage when it's announced that some unsavory government will host the next Olympics, World Cup or other marquee event.

But the news cycle careens forward, the fuss dying down — and the Putins, the Mohammed bin Salmans, and the Xi Jinpings get to put on their shows.

Who was it who said that, in the social media age, goldfish have a longer attention span than humans?

Consider the LIV Golf Series. At the end of this month, the new league will hold its season-ending tournament at the Trump Doral National course here in Florida — and former president Donald Trump will be there to greet the pros. Financed by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, LIV uses fat oil paychecks to entice players from the PGA tour to jump ship.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is overseeing this spending spree that also includes Formula One races and purchasing the Newcastle United soccer team.

Between the macabre murder of human rights activist and Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi, bombing civilians in Yemen, and beheading dissidents, the crown prince needs all the image laundering he can buy.

And bin Salman can buy plenty. The Public Investment Fund? A mere \$620 billion dollars or so.

At first, outrage about the LIV Golf Series was widespread. Weren't golfers taking blood money? In an unguarded moment, Phil Mickelson, the best-known defector, admitted the Saudi sponsors were "scary motherf-----s." It seemed as if the bad publicity might bring the LIV Golf Series down.

Instead, LIV has ridden out the storm.

As its supporters note, the rival PGA Tour doesn't exactly have a clean moral sheet — holding an annual tournament in China, which has sent more than a million Uyghurs to reeducation camps, among other tyrannical practices.

And, the LIV backers say, many Americans fill up with Saudi gas. Why should golfers be criticized for taking Saudi money?

Somehow the essential creepiness of cashing checks from a murderous dictator has mostly dropped from the picture. More top players have joined LIV in recent weeks.

The upcoming World Cup has followed the same pattern. Early in the stadium building, Qatar faced bad publicity for mistreating migrant workers. Erling Haaland, the young soccer sensation, led a protest of his Norwegian teammates against forced labor and dangerous work conditions.

But once again, the outrage had a short half-life. No other national team has threatened to boycott the World Cup, although some players want to wear rainbow armbands in LGBTQ+ solidarity. Haaland and Norway have no leverage — they didn't make the final round. One suspects that the great global carnival of the World Cup will go on with little unseemly protest.

It's not that hosting big events necessarily changes opinions. Not many people regard China's Xi Jinping as a great democrat, despite him presiding over two glitzy Olympics.

But sports sponsorship does afford shady governments needed legitimacy. The LIV Golf Series and its other sporting ventures have helped the Saudis to regain a place in the international community after the publicity catastrophe of the Khashoggi murder. Even President Joe Biden has now jetted to Riyadh to bump fists to Prince bin Salman.

It's a sportwashing world after all.



*Orin Starn is a Duke University anthropologist and author of “The Passion of Tiger Woods: An Anthropologist Reports on Golf, Race, and Celebrity Scandal.”*