

Tiger Woods Can't Keep Golf Out of the Bunker

The 600-year-old sport is suffering from an age problem Tiger Woods not only will struggle to fix; he embodies it.



Newly finished golf balls are inspected at a Massachusetts facility of Titleist owner Acushnet Holdings. PHOTO: SCOTT EISEN/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By

Lauren Silva Laughlin

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Golf great Tiger Woods's fifth Masters championship was met with hopes his stardom would [revive the sport](#), as is often the case with epic athletic comebacks. For the nearly 600-year-old pastime, though, its attempts to lure the younger crowd will continue to suffer from challenges that even the greatest of athletes can't help overcome.

Companies closely tied to the game, including [Callaway Golf](#) ELY -1.22% and Titleist owner [Acushnet Holdings](#) , GOLF -0.55% have had to find new ways to get people interested in their products. Like other sports, the millennial and younger generations are causing big problems for both the viewership and popularity of sports.

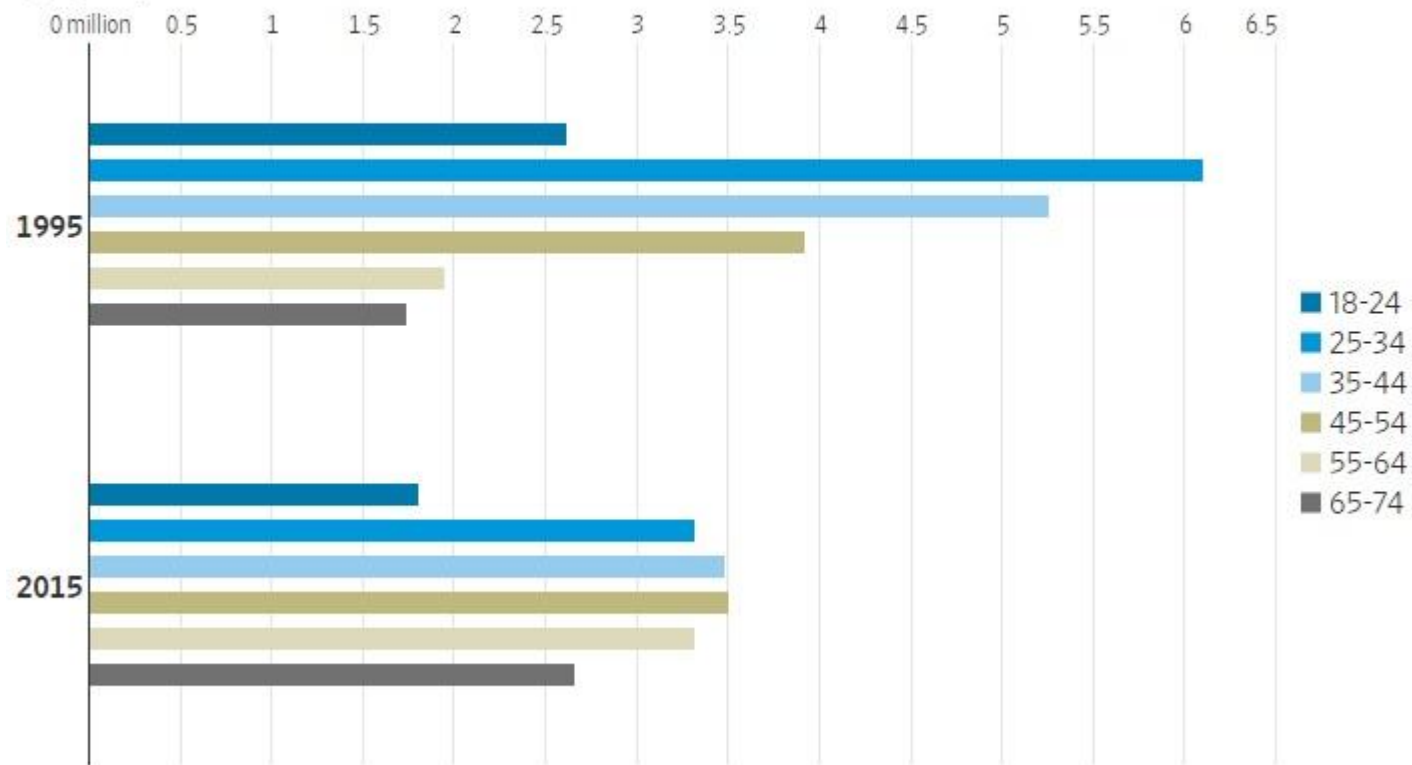
The trouble isn't that fewer people are watching, but the attention span of the younger viewer is changing how they consume events, according to data from McKinsey. A 2017 study from the consulting group showed a decline in minutes watched, year over year. One unfixable problem is that young viewers rely on social media for moments they miss. Around 60% of millennial sports fans check scores and news on platforms like Twitter, versus only 40% for the preceding group, Generation X.

Golf's problems are magnified. Not only does the sport lack the contact and action that lures viewers, but the average PGA Tour watcher in 2016 was 65 years old—2½ decades older than those watching Major League Soccer. That figure represented a five-year jump since 2006, according to Magna Global.

Sunk in the drink

The number of younger golfers playing at least one round per year

Age group



Source: Pellucid/Edgehill Golf Advisors

Another problem is that [younger generations aren't playing](#), so fewer people are interested. The number of people aged 18 to 44 playing golf fell by around one-third in the 10 years to 2015, according to consulting group Pellucid/Edgehill Golf Advisors. And courses are closing: almost 1,800 courses in the 10 years leading up to 2016, a big acceleration in the past several decades.

Sports' star power is changing, too. The latest sports hero is a 27-year-old, blue-haired electronic gamer named Ninja, a player of the popular videogame "Fortnite." He recently received his own figurine line and was named in Time's 2019 list of 100 most influential people.

Even compared with athletes that move their heart rate beyond a resting state, golfers are old, relatively. The average player of baseball, another sport known as a less spry bunch, is 14 years Mr. Woods's junior.

Looked at another way, the last millennial was born a year before Mr. Woods won his first Masters tournament in 1997, if Pew Research's age benchmarks are used. When his extramarital scandal hit tabloids, they were rounding out junior high. Mr. Woods could be golf's savior. More likely, though, in the eyes of a millennial, he's just another aging putter.

Write to Lauren Silva Laughlin at Lauren.SilvaLaughlin@wsj.com