

Marketing group secures LPGA tourney

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Twelve Bridges, Longs near three-year deal with Raycom

By Bob Burns
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With a new management team taking charge following two months of uncertainty, the Longs Drugs Challenge can tee off as scheduled next spring at Twelve Bridges Golf Club.

Raycom Sports, a sports marketing group based out of Charlotte, N.C., is in the final stages of signing a three-year contract with the LPGA, Twelve Bridges and Longs Drug Stores. The third annual tournament will be held April 2-5, 1998.

The long-term health and well-being of the Longs Drugs Challenge has been insured by this partnership," said LPGA Commissioner Jim Ritts. "Raycom is going to establish deep roots in the community and take this tournament to an even higher level."

DelWilber & Associates, the Virginia-based company that brought the LPGA event to Twelve Bridges in 1996, abruptly went out of business in August. DelWilber's shutdown came just a few weeks before one of its LPGA tournaments in Charlotte.

Raycom took over tournament operations at the eleventh hour, saving the LPGA from having to make an embarrassing last-minute cancellation. Raycom received options to operate three other tournaments previously run by DelWilber. To date, Raycom has exercised its rights to manage the Longs Drugs Challenge and a season-ending Tournament of Champions in Alabama.

"We obviously view the Sacramento event as an excellent opportunity to expand our efforts in golf," said Ken Haines, executive vice president for Raycom Sports. "We enjoy working with the women on tour. It's very refreshing to work with athletes who are so appreciative of the fans."

Though Raycom hadn't managed any golf events until its recent experience with the Fieldcrest Cannon Classic in Charlotte, the company is a well-established name in sports marketing and television production.

Raycom has owned the TV rights to Atlantic Coast Conference men's basketball games since 1981 and previously had a similar arrangement with the Pacific-10. Raycom also owns the Carquest Bowl football game.

"I'm not concerned about their lack of golf experience because they're willing to accept counsel and do their homework," Ritts said. "The job they did in Charlotte was phenomenal. They understand operationally how to stage events, and they're committed to learning the golf business."

Raycom president Ray Warren said his company will open an office in the Sacramento area. Brian Flajole, Raycom's vice president of golf operations, will serve as tournament director at Twelve Bridges.

"The golf course and Longs Drugs are very supportive of the event," Warren said. "With some tender loving care, the event can grow a lot. The prior owner and operator didn't spend as much time on it as we will."

Longs Drugs spokesman Clay Selland said his company hopes to have a lengthy partnership with Raycom. Twelve Bridges general manager Randy Peters wouldn't comment directly on Raycom's involvement until he meets with Flajole next week to iron out the final aspects of the contract.