

GOLF

LIV Golf ends quest for OWGR points, keeping many players out of majors

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LIV Golf has given up its quest for Official World Golf Ranking accreditation, which will limit its players' opportunities to play in golf's major championships.

In a letter to LIV's players obtained by The Washington Post, LIV CEO and Commissioner Greg Norman said the league was withdrawing its application to the OWGR because "it is now clear that the best way forward for LIV as a league and you as LIV golfers is not through the current ranking system. A resolution which protects the accuracy, credibility, and integrity of the OWGR rankings no longer exists."

In October, the OWGR board denied LIV's application to receive the ranking points most golfers need to qualify for golf's most high-profile events, saying the league's guarantees of inclusion and relative lack of annual turnover are "not consistent with the underlying principles of fairness and meritocracy on which the OWGR system is based." OWGR also took issue with LIV's tournament format, in which individual and team competitions are played at the same time. It did not, however, see a problem with the other ways LIV tournaments differ from those on the PGA Tour, such as its smaller field sizes, shorter tournaments and absence of a cut line, saying it could adjust its mathematical formula to account for those differences.

But in his letter, Norman said "the OWGR has shown little willingness to productively work with us."

Participation in golf's four majors — the Masters, PGA Championship, U.S. Open and British Open — is generally limited to previous major champions, winners of recent events on the PGA and European tours or golfers who have been performing well on those tours, and players who rank in the top 50 in the OWGR. The world rankings thus are the only way into the majors for a good portion of LIV's golfers.

Some LIV golfers have supplemented their OWGR resumes by competing in events on the European-based DP World Tour, which allows LIV golfers to participate and accrue OWGR points. Among them is world No. 76 Joaquin Niemann, who last month received a special invitation to play in this year's Masters after winning the Australian Open — which is co-sanctioned by the DP World Tour — in December and finishing fourth at a DP World Tour event in Dubai in January (he's also won two LIV tournaments, including last weekend's event in Saudi Arabia). Niemann's win in Australia also earned him entry into this year's British Open, and on Monday, the PGA of America extended him a special invitation to play in the PGA Championship.

But other golfers who have found success on the LIV tour, such as three-time winner Talor Gooch, have not received such invitations as they have fallen down the OWGR list because their league does not accrue ranking points. Last week, Gooch told Australian Golf Digest that “if Rory McIlroy goes and completes his Grand Slam [at this year's Masters] without some of the best players in the world, there's just going to be an asterisk. It's just the reality. I think everybody wins whenever the majors figure out a way to get the best players in the world there.”

Gooch was No. 35 in the world after his final PGA Tour event in May 2022 but has plummeted to No. 476 on the OWGR. Gooch has played only once on the DP World Tour since joining LIV, withdrawing from the Alfred Dunhill Links Championship in October. He also tied for 42nd at a November tournament on the Asian Tour, which is another route to OWGR points for LIV golfers, though that circuit's comparatively weak fields put a ceiling on any OWGR gains.

Norman noted in his letter that it might be impossible for many LIV golfers to recover sufficiently from their tumbles down the OWGR board.

“Even if LIV Golf events were immediately awarded points, the OWGR system is designed such that it would be functionally impossible for you to regain positions close to the summit of the ranking, where so many of you belong,” he wrote, noting that only four LIV Golfers — Jon Rahm (No. 3), Tyrrell Hatton (No. 17), Brooks Koepka (No. 30) and Cameron Smith (No. 45) rank in the OWGR top 50. Rahm, Koepka and Smith are recent major champions and thus have open invitations to play in majors.

Niemann will join 12 other LIV golfers at next month's Masters, down from 18 in 2023. Seven of them (Rahm, Sergio Garcia, Phil Mickelson, Dustin Johnson, Bubba Watson, Patrick Reed and Charl Schwartzel) are former Masters champions and receive lifetime invitations to play in the tournament. Three more (Smith, Koepka and Bryson DeChambeau) got in because of recent wins at other major championships. Two others (Hatton and Adrian Meronk) were ranked in the OWGR top 50 at the end of last year.

In essence, the decision to bar LIV golfers from the OWGR was decided by the major championships themselves. The OWGR board comprises seven members, and three of them — PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan, DP World Tour CEO Keith Pelley and Keith Waters, a DP World Tour executive who oversees the Federation of PGA Tours — recused themselves from consideration of LIV's application. The remaining four OWGR board members are representatives from golf's four major events.

“We continue to seek meaningful communication and relationship with each of the Majors to ensure that LIV Golfers are fairly represented and golf fans around the world have opportunities to see the best competition possible,” Norman wrote.