

The Harlot's Score: Blood Money and the LIV Golf Tournament

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Theme: [History](#)

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It has been a hobbyhorse of Greg Norman for years: a threatening, alternative golf tournament to draw the stars and undermine the musty establishment. Realising a most dubious project, the LIV Tournament has become blood money’s greatest symbol. Funded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it is a most noisy statement of sportswashing.

Some aspects of this are also a touch sinister. Last month, the *Wall Street Journal* [revealed](#) the details of a draft LIV contract that has been offered to players. Provisions of the contract include requirements for the players to don LIV apparel when playing both LIV and non-LIV events. Non-LIV logos, at least for the most part, need to be cleared with management. This also covers logos used on branded products that might be used at the events. The contract provisions stipulate one exception: players can wear “the brand of a third-party supplier of golf equipment on the side of their hat.”

The claws of management also go deeper than logo approvals. Tight rein is maintained over player interviews relating to an “event or league activity”. Participation in the tournament also comes with the proselytising proviso: recruited golfers will, in turn, recruit other golfers for the tournament. Players must agree to “where requested, assist the League Operator in seeking to persuade players to enter into multiyear player participation agreements with the League Operator.”

The first three LIV Invitational events have seen rich splashings of \$25 million in individual

and team prize money. No participant has earned less than \$120,000. It has also [been reported](#) that a number of golfers with profiles – Phil Mickelson, Bryson DeChambeau, Dustin Johnson and Brooks Koepka – have signed contracts of the eight- and nine-figure sort. In one of the tournaments under the LIV umbrella, the eventual winner, Henrik Stenson, left \$4 million richer.

The success of such operations is based less on intelligence and integrity than gain and bulging bank balances. If PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan was hoping for something more than that, he was seriously misreading the mood. Hank Haney, Tiger Woods' former coach, [sees](#) LIV Golf as “great for the players that left and for the players that stayed.” He has suggested that the tournament format co-exist with the PGA Tour. Norman, for his part, has filed an antitrust lawsuit against the PGA Tour, claiming that its actions in banning participants from participating in its competition are unlawful.

Woods has himself [raised a number of suspicions](#) for his opposition to LIV, having turned down a \$700-800 million offer from the Saudis. Hardly a moralist, though very much a student of the game, he is being tasked by the PGA Tour establishment to come up with some countering format. As Alan Shipnuck, [writing](#) in *Golf Digest* asks, “what is the payoff for Woods to go all-in with the PGA Tour?” Best not ask.

This is the sort of amoral mindset that conveniently ignores how an ensemble of murderous skyscraper building oil-rich kleptocrats have globalised their footprint across a number of sports as part of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's “Vision 2030”.

This year, the London-based human rights organisation Grant Liberty released a [report](#) noting that the Kingdom had spent something in the order of \$2.1 billion on a number of international sporting events and the acquisition of sporting assets, such as the Newcastle United football team. Regarding the latter, the exiled UK-based Abdullah al Ghamdi [made a plea](#) “to all football supporters and players at St James Park to put pressure on the Saudi Government to release all those victims of its relentless crackdown.”

This sportswashing project gathers pace even as the theocrats pursue internal repressive policies against their citizenry, despite the reformist pretensions of the Crown Prince. The House of Saud has also shown itself to be a keen pursuer of dissenting citizens in other jurisdictions, evidenced by the [savage carving up](#) of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

The link between this gruesome assassination and the Crown Prince [was confirmed](#) by US intelligence officials in an unclassified report released in February last year. The report found that bin Salman was in “control of decision making in the Kingdom” and supported “violent measures to silence dissidents abroad, including Khashoggi”.

In terms of foreign policy, Riyadh continues its sponsorship of humanitarian misery in its vicious war in Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthis. The Yemen conflict, one [that has seen](#) the displacement of a million people, the threat of famine, medicine shortages and cholera outbreaks, has been just about forgotten by those in Washington, Canberra and various European capitals, transfixed by all things Russian. With the war in Ukraine, Russia's Vladimir Putin has been anointed the omnipresent bogeyman and oppressor, while the thuggish antics of the petulant bin Salman slip gently under radar and consciousness.

Sports figures the world over should be soul wary about a regime that uses cash to conceal

the bodies of protesters thrown into prison, activists tormented and disappeared, and murdered journalists. But Riyadh have their number, cunningly seductive, and aware of perennial weakness. With its vast sovereign wealth fund, the Kingdom is willing to splash out, and sports figures are willing to be bought. They know the harlot's score.

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