



Courting Serendipity

Shubhankar Sharma is a 21-year-old professional golfer from Chandigarh, India and on March 3rd he held a two-shot lead going into the final round at the PGA Tour event in Mexico City. Thirty days later I boarded a plane to host a meeting at Augusta National between a delegation of Indian golfers and senior members of the PGA Tour to discuss growing the game of golf in India. It was my first trip to The Masters Tournament and in review I am going to apply a social science lens to the events of the trip. Our aim is to give you an enjoyable read and that you may gain some key insights to use when you are courting serendipity in your own endeavors.

The Back Story

Sara and I have been active in both competitive golf and helping deliver the benefits of golf to at risk youth for several decades. The relationships built in these efforts tend to last a long time, you make friends and keep them. Two people are central to the story of our meeting. Ty Votaw was the LPGA Tour Commissioner when Sara played, and he always took the time to listen and engage with players and their spouses. Ty is now the executive vice president of international business for the PGA Tour. Pradeep Bakshi earned a Masters degree from Stanford and he and I played each other in a Big Game Cup match 15 years ago. Pradeep lives in Palo Alto but grew up in Chandigarh and has been very active in helping professional golfers from India come to America. He set up a small tour in the U.S. for the players to meet and play with Indian business owners. The goal was to familiarize the players with the American courses to enable their future success on the PGA Tour.

The chance that Pradeep Bakshi and Ty Votaw should ever meet until March 3rd was extremely low. That is until Shubhankar won two tournaments in four months on the European Tour and qualified to play in the World Golf Championship event in Mexico City. His stellar play continued through 54 holes where he maintained a 2-shot lead going into the final round. I wasn't following the event in Mexico closely but upon seeing the name of the leader I shot Pradeep an email.

"Do you know this kid Shubhankar?"

"Know him?", came the reply, "he is from my home town and I have known him for years!" Pradeep followed up that statement with, "I just sent an email to the golf channel with more background about Shubhankar, I will forward it to you."

The idea

It was in the reviewing of the email from Pradeep that my connective brain started working and I recalled a conversation I had just had with Ty Votaw about growing the game internationally and the challenge of putting public golf courses in communities at the right moment from an economic standpoint. The concern was that if you put the course in too early it wouldn't be relevant. The hope is to incorporate the benefits of golf into communities in a similar fashion to Scotland. India was certainly an interesting country that came up in our dialogue.

I suggested to Pradeep that we share his email with Ty and his team and see if they had any thoughts. The response was swift and positive.

"Yes, we are very interested in growing the game in India and let's set up a phone call to discuss."

The Masters Effect

Shubhankar had faded a bit in the last round of the WGC in Mexico City, but his 9th place finish moved his world golf ranking up to 60th and this got the attention of the tournament committee in Augusta. On Monday March 5th Shubhankar accepted his invitation to compete in the 2018 Masters Tournament.

The Conference Call

Two weeks later we had a successful discussion with Ty and Pradeep to discuss how to further develop the connection between India and the PGA Tour. Three talking points emerged. Could an event be hosted in India? How to help the young touring professionals get more assimilated to the U.S. courses, and how to grow the game of golf in India. Follow up plans were created, but something was missing. To get the parties to trust each other more and to keep this high enough on everyone's priority list I wanted everyone to meet in person.

As we were finishing up the call, I offered that a meeting at The Masters might be serendipitous as I knew Ty and his team would be there and that Pradeep should be able to get a ticket from Shubhankar. It was a long shot, but intuitively all parties knew that to meet in person was important. It was agreed to in concept and the follow up commenced.

We Are Going to The Masters

When we got off the phone, I booked a flight and a car immediately, then placed a call to a friend of mind, retired General Jeff Foley, who lives in Augusta and asked him if I could sleep in his garage for a couple of nights. He replied he could do better than that as his guest bedroom would be free.

We Will Meet You at The Oak Tree

The Masters Tournament committee hosts a sporting and cultural event that is highly curated. It is such a unique experience that the legends and myths do most of the marketing through word of mouth. One of the facts is that no phones are allowed on the property. Period. This made the logistics of our meeting feel a little like 1985 when you would tell people you would meet them "at the corner at 10:30" and that was that.

In our case it was 11:00 am under the Oak Tree in front of the clubhouse. Pradeep and I met at 10:00 am to catch up and then we were joined by several members of Shubhankar's team and the CEO of the Indian Golf Tour. 11:00 came and we stood amidst a sea of people and straining our necks to make sure we weren't just at different points under the same tree. 11:10 arrived and a member of Ty's team appeared and said he was coming out of a meeting and would arrive shortly.

The Power of Meeting in Person

By 11:15 we had our circle of seven people shaking hands, sharing business cards, and coming together around the keys actions that would need to happen to hit our common goals. As the coordinating leader, I set the table and then listened. Every person there contributed ideas and talked about opportunities and challenges. All three speaking points were discussed. I took notes and wrote down the follow up responsibilities.

Within 30 minutes the meeting was over, yet the bonds of connection that were established were significant. As each member of the circle spoke, the others were processing some type of trust building experience. The commitment to meet and to have open dialogue and to agree on an action plan in person mattered.

The Follow Up

Each person left the circle with a follow up item and I had it all written down in my notebook. Our committee to grow the game of golf in India, to facilitate the growth of Indian professional golfers, and to bring a Tour property to India had been formed. The steps forward may be small and will take years, but without meetings like our circle on Wednesday at The Masters it might take decades or never happen.

In late 2017 Shubhankar Sharma was ranked as the 462nd best golfer in the world and had yet to win outside of the developmental tour in India. Four months later his play had vastly improved the chances that a future generation of Indian children will grow up with the life benefits of golf. It is inspiring to follow stories like his and to court serendipity and its unintended and wondrous outcomes.