



## Match Play: Sunday play sees crowd rise 49%

Ryan Finley Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Tuesday, February 28, 2012 12:00 am

Warm weather, a compelling final day of competition and a unique "Follow the Leaders" promotion made this year's WGC-Accenture Match Play Championship one of the most successful tournaments in recent history.

Though PGA Tour officials don't have final attendance figures yet, tournament director Gerald Goodman said Monday that 19 percent more fans visited The Ritz-Carlton Golf Club, Dove Mountain than in 2011. Sunday's attendance was 49 percent higher than a year ago - though the tournament offered complimentary tickets to those who struggled with parking and traffic issues earlier in the week.

American Hunter Mahan edged Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy 2 and 1 in Sunday afternoon's final; he made \$1.4 million, part of Match Play's \$8 million prize pool.

"That was as good as you could have hoped for," Goodman said. "Our advertising was about international (competition), and the theme of all the different countries that were out there. It was absolutely great."

Judy McDermott, executive director of the Tucson Conquistadores, said the 2012 event "felt like one of our best ever; that's the buzz."

Both the weather and brackets cooperated, a change from past years. Fans were treated to sunshine and mid-70s temperatures throughout the week on Dove Mountain. And while fan-favorite Tiger Woods was eliminated in the second round, there was enough star power the rest of the week to keep the tournament compelling.

Sunday morning's semifinal match between McIlroy and England's Lee Westwood, a fellow top seed, was arguably the most anticipated in the history of the event. McIlroy rallied from 3-down on the front nine to win. Had the Northern Irishman prevailed in the final against Mahan, he would have been named the world's new No. 1 golfer.

Monday's world golf rankings listed McIlroy second and Westwood third, behind 2011 Match Play champion Luke Donald.

Mahan defeated fellow American Mark Wilson in the other semifinal, setting up an American-versus-Northern Irishman final.

McIlroy and Mahan had company. For the first time in tournament history, fans were permitted to walk directly behind the final competitors for the championship match. The "Follow the Leaders" promotion was an unqualified success, Goodman said; Southern Arizona's golf fans stayed just close enough to the golfers to make for good television. None overstepped their bounds.

"The Southern Arizona golf fan is a sophisticated golf fan, and could handle being inside the ropes like that and not doing anything out of the ordinary," Goodman said. "They did a good job of keeping the integrity of the game."

The Sunday promotion "would not have happened," Goodman said, without the participation of the Conquistadores. The volunteers handled crowd control for the final 18 holes.

McIlroy called the promotion "good for the fans."

"They can get a little closer to the action, and I think they enjoy it," he said. "I didn't really notice that anyone got too close. I think it was good."

Of course, this year's tournament was seemingly charmed from the beginning.

Before the first tee shot was hit, PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem told the Star that the tournament would return for 2013 and 2014, and possibly beyond.

Match Play's home course could change, though. The Ritz-Carlton is in its final year of a contract with the PGA, and tour officials are known to be exploring other local courses. The Omni Tucson National is widely considered to be an option for future tournaments, but no decisions have been made.

If 2012 was the last year at The Ritz, it was a good way to go out.

"The first two years at The Gallery (Golf Club) were great, when the event was new, and it was great to go to The Ritz for the first time," McDermott said. "The tournaments, they're all different: This one had a good positive vibe and feeling. Everyone was happy."