

Norman bets big on golf with 'Shark Experience'

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FROM THE EXECUTIVE EDITOR
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Greg Norman wants to be disruptive, but make a difference. He believes he will be successful doing that in golf with his new "Shark Experience," which he unveiled last week at our Sports Marketing Symposium in New York City. The new technology will allow golfers to stay connected with music, sports, news and entertainment programming with bluetooth

connectivity, and course data through a 10-inch screen that will sit exclusively in Club Car golf carts as the technology rolls out next year. Late last month, Norman sat with me on a golf course in Florida and walked me through it, extolling its virtues, but more importantly, its promise.

The 62-year-old, amazingly fit and good natured, greeted me wearing a familiar black Shark golf shirt and khakis, and walked me out through a clubhouse to a line-up of golf carts, where music — "Spirits" by The Strumbellas — played on the outdoor clubhouse speakers. He smiled wide and pointed, "Music. That's what people want to hear when they are on the course, and that's one of the elements we're going to be giving them," he said. Norman said he grew frustrated by the lack of new technology introduced — outside of Topgolf, which he called one of the best introductions to the sport he has seen — that enhanced the golf experience. "Outside of hardware, where has technology been introduced to the game and on the course?" he asked me. "We are trying to make golf fun and entertaining. Your game, your way."



Norman shows how the system works, with intuitive, touchscreen controls.

Photo by: MONTANA PRITCHARD PHOTOGRAPHY

Norman's made a lot of business deals in his career, but admitted this deal was one of the longest to complete, as it took 50 months from his original idea and almost four years since he and his business partner, **David Chessler**, first visited with Verizon. Norman and Chessler will invest "tens of millions" of dollars through Greg Norman Media, the newest division of the Greg Norman Co., as they partner with Verizon, Club Car and golf technology company GPSi, to provide the high-definition touchscreen displays and built-in speakers with Bluetooth connectivity in golf carts. "These are big companies, and the deals take longer. This one went right up to the top at Verizon," Norman told me as we sat in a cart going through the displays. Golfers can pay for three different packages — the highest being \$9.95 per cart that offers all the programming options — through a frictionless process, while some resorts will clearly add the service on as an amenity and course upgrade. Content ranges from streaming music via Slacker Radio, as well as sports, news and entertainment programming, highlights, course data, golf tips, and food and beverage ordering. Norman touted the evolving nature of "Shark Experience." "This is a platform, not a product," Norman said. The system is currently in a pilot phase at two courses and will preview at the 2018 PGA Merchandise Show, with a full rollout planned for spring.

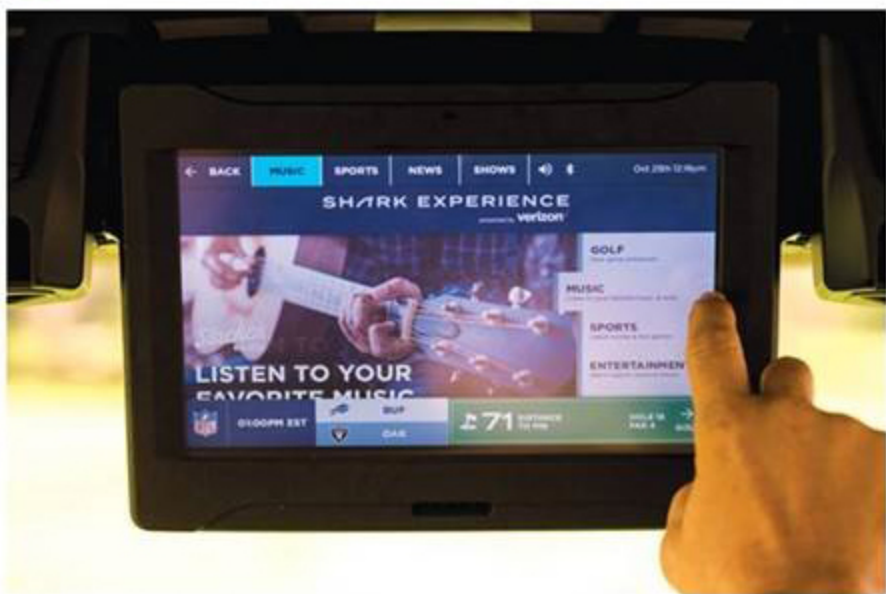


Norman said the early feedback has been good, with the music options and sound quality receiving the most positive response. It also has not slowed the pace of play, which was a concern. I golf less these days, and Norman and I shared more stories about our tennis game than our golf game. I acknowledged one of the reasons I've pared back my golf was the lack of time and the overall experience. His eyes grew wide, as if I was a perfect target to benefit from "Shark Experience." The system is a smart, swift platform, has a wide range of offerings, and provides crisp, clear sound. The offerings from content-heavy Verizon were broad and there were no buffering or speed issues. And, to Norman's point, it's virgin space that is evolving. I could imagine a Saturday where golfers are connected to college football games or Sundays watching the Red Zone while playing 18 holes. All of which would be appealing to the 18- to 34-year-olds the game desperately needs.

First Look podcast, with Greg Norman discussion at the 20:50 mark:

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Features include golf course information, weather, news, sports highlights and music.

Photo by: MONTANA PRITCHARD PHOTOGRAPHY

On the back end, the technology provides courses with greater insight into their fleet management, including pain points around the course and data on how players use the course. In the future, personalized data collection of rounds, shot selection and playing tendencies will be key, and with tech advancing so quickly, the service will need to continuously add content and even the screen size may need to be enhanced. But it's an interesting start, and you can see where Norman wants to take it. "This is something the golf courses and industry has been crying out for, and it's a fit for all generations," Norman said.

Near the end of our visit, we watched a threesome come up the final hole toward the green. Norman pointed out how each player was on his own, going to his ball, hitting it, and continuing toward the green in a solitary experience. He envisioned the behavior changing through "Shark Experience," with the three players becoming more engaged around the entertainment option from the technology. "This system makes the game far more enjoyable and communal. I would have loved this when I was playing," he laughed.

Norman acknowledges he doesn't play much golf these days, and earlier in the day, I asked how much practice he and his son, **Gregory**, were doing as they prepare for the 2017 PNC Father/Son Challenge in December in Florida. Norman elbowed his son, bemoaning how much he was out of practice and feigned relief when learning about the scramble format. "He's going to have to carry me," Norman said, pointing to his son. Later, turning serious, Norman hopes this technology adds to his legacy around the game, disrupting the status quo while boosting participation, especially on local city courses. "The game of golf has given me so much in my life," he said. "This is my way of hopefully giving back to the game and improving the experience for others." □

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