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CDW takes a bogey at U.S. Open

By: Steven R. Strahler June 13, 2008

(Crain's) - [CDW Corp.](#) this week learned an inviolate rule of sports marketing: Things can happen to spokesman-athletes that are beyond your control - and not just in the substance-abuse category.

Last winter, the Vernon Hills-based distributor of computer goods and other tech products became the "official technology partner" of the Professional Golf Assn. tour and signed golfer Sean O'Hair to a two-year endorsement contract.

On Wednesday, a day before the opening round of the biggest U.S. golf tournament of the year, the company underwrote a four-page color advertising supplement in the Wall Street Journal.

Featuring Mr. O'Hair, the tour's 2005 rookie of the year, it recounted a conditioning program that added 20 pounds to the slender golfer's 6-foot-2, 170-pound frame, increasing the odds of his successfully competing with Tiger Woods and other bulked-up big hitters.

But the same day the advertising ran, Mr. O'Hair pulled out of the U.S. Open, being contested at Torrey Pines Golf Club (South Course) in San Diego, with what was described as a pulled chest muscle.

In fact, Mr. O'Hair had been injured in a car accident near Philadelphia, according to Mark Gambill, CDW's chief marketing officer. "It was a bad break, unfortunately," he says.

The accident wasn't serious enough to prevent Mr. O'Hair from traveling to Torrey Pines to practice for the tournament before deciding to withdraw.

"It was affecting his swing plane and his ability to drive down into the ball," Mr. Gambill says. "He felt he wouldn't be able to perform optimally."

Notes Peter Stern, president of Strategic, a sports marketer in New York: "That's really where you need a tight contract in terms of injury and morality clauses."

After being approached by the PGA tour to become a sponsor, CDW says it interviewed young golfers and selected Mr. O'Hair because of his comfort with technical advances as way to improve his game.

"He's a 25-year-old who acts like a 40-year-old," says Mr. Gambill. "He's got a whole room devoted to technology."

Since he was hired by CDW in February, Mr. O'Hair has won a tournament and climbed to No. 35 from 73 in a ranking of golfers worldwide. He is No. 15 on the PGA performance list this year.

Exelon Corp. endorser Jim Furyk, who won the Open five years ago at south suburban Olympia Fields County Club, this week added another logo to his outfit.

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The deal was brokered by a Chicago-based sports marketing firm named rEvolution for YRC Worldwide Inc., a Kansas-based holding company for Yellow Freight and other trucking firms.

"We do believe in golf marketing, particularly for companies like CDW and YRC that have a B-to-B slant to them," says Jeff Gooding, senior vice-president for marketing at rEvolution.

Mr. Stern adds, "Whether or not the athlete performs or not, you can still connect the image of the athlete and draw that parallel back to the brand. Arnold Palmer is a good example: He isn't on the course performing on the level he once did and it doesn't matter."

So far, though, Sean O'Hair is no Arnold Palmer. Or Jim Furyk.

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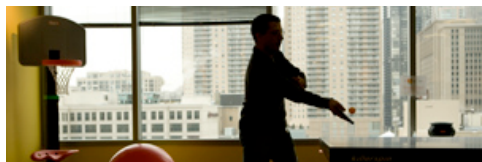
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