

# SPONSORSHIP LOYALTY KEEPS AMERICAN CENTURY CHAMPIONSHIP GOING

STATELINE, Nev. – It's a business partnership, but it's also abundantly clear that to the three leaders of the primary cogs of the American Century Championship celebrity golf tournament, it's much more than that.

NBC Sports, the tournament's owner since it debuted in 1990; American Century Investments, its title sponsor since 1999; and the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority were all faced with a difficult decision as the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the country in the months leading up to the 31st annual event, one of the most important and impactful events on the calendar in the Lake Tahoe region. And that was to continue or to shut down.

Soldier on, they decided, without fans and with stringent testing and social-distancing protocol. The reason to do so brought heart-felt pause to Jon Miller, the president of programming for NBC Sports. It's a testament to the strength of the partnership and the relationship that the three key players – ACI President and CEO Jonathan Thomas and LTVA President and CEO Carol Chaplin make up the other two – have built and fostered.

Miller was asked if he believed the tournament could have survived a coronavirus-type pandemic in its early years, before the event captured major attention and after its first title sponsor, Isuzu, discontinued after the 1998 tournament.

"I'll be honest, I don't. I don't," Miller said Friday at Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course during the opening round. "I think it took an enormous amount of vision and leadership, but also guts. "And we've had the benefit of working with American Century for 23 years. We've obviously been here with Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority for 31 years. But we've never had the combination of two leaders like we have with Carol and Jonathan. It wouldn't have happened 25 years ago."

Thomas credited the leadership of Miller and his right-hand man, NBC Sports programming Vice President Gary Quinn, for building long-standing relationships with celebrities that make this such a desirable event for them.

"Jon doesn't say much about it, but he's developed and cultivated relationships with these celebrities that are really amazing," Thomas said. "There's a lot of mutual respect between Jon and Gary and the players. And that bond that they have going in that direction also builds the strength and the resiliency of this tournament as well to persevere in times like this."

That mutual love between the tournament/celebrities and the South Lake Tahoe community has been growing for years, too. The Angora Fire in 2007 – which destroyed 242 residences and 67 commercial buildings and damaged 35 other homes just west of Lake Tahoe – was a key moment in the tournament's history. NBC Sports and ACI both stepped up to help the community, and tournament regular Charles Barkley donated \$190,000 and hosted firefighter meals. It garnered a great deal of attention, and if any celebrity has become a de facto "player host," it's Barkley, who always makes himself available for interviews and appearances.

It's moments like the reaction to the Angora fire – and the partnership and friendship the three leaders have developed – that create such positivity even during these dark, uncertain times.

The tournament set an attendance record (60,530) for the sixth straight year in 2019. The lack of fans, as well as the cancelation of the three celeb-ams during tournament week, are having a major economic impact on the community. But Chaplin never wavered in her thoughts about whether to continue this year.

"We can't deny the impact of it," Chaplin said. "But the promotion of the area has always been priceless. I think there's a commercial about that. But we wanted more than anything to let the world know that we were open for business and that American Century could not be kept down, and that we knew that it had to be done differently."

This pandemic is historical and unprecedented, but it's not going to disrupt this marriage of 30-plus years now.

"For the community, it pulls on our heartstrings to have this event this year," Chaplin said. "You know what the buzz is like – and Jon's right, that's a little bit changed, but it doesn't mean that the American Century Championship isn't part of our lives and part of our summer and really the highlight of what we do here in partnership with NBC and American Century.

"And I speak a lot about the partnership, and that isn't even fair. It's much closer than that. It's much more emotional for us. ... And I think this year the message is we are resilient. We can come back.

"And for all of our partners here in town ... they were committed from long before they started conversations; we went out and asked: Do you want this this year? And there was not a hesitation on anyone's part. It is part of our fabric, and I can't wait until No. 32."