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In Uncertain Times for New Orleans, the Business of Golf Is Thriving

By LARRY DORMAN

NEW ORLEANS — On the surface, this week's \$6.3 million Zurich Classic of New Orleans could be viewed as just another nicely packaged PGA Tour event, with familiar pros doing civilized battle on T.P.C. Louisiana's manicured grass.

Even with its Louisiana flourishes — daily ticket holders can munch on fresh oysters or alligator-on-a-stick, and well-heeled patrons can graze on haute cuisine from Emeril's and other French Quarter eateries — it all may seem unremarkable to those who have not sampled the smells, tastes and textures of this resilient city.

But [the Zurich Classic](#) is remarkable for those and other reasons, not the least of which are the strength of its title sponsor and the tournament's financial health. The event is flourishing, thanks to the continuing support of New Orleans businesses and the community ties forged by Zurich's chief executive, Jim Schiro, early in the sponsorship and strengthened during Zurich's swift settlement of its customers' insurance claims after [Hurricane Katrina](#) in 2005.

Tommy Fonseca, in his third year as the tournament's director, said ticket sales this year were up more than 5 percent year over last year; that all 63 corporate skyboxes sold out at prices ranging from \$16,000 to \$23,000; and that the tournament's purse was increased by \$100,000.

"No other tournament can offer what we offer," said Fonseca, a New Orleans native who spent 15 years in the banking industry before switching to golf. "We have the best food in the world, great entertainment and great music.

"And most importantly, we have the people of New Orleans, who are known for our hospitality. Not only have we recovered, but we're open for business."

Fonseca said the business of tournament golf, and notably the brand-building benefits that accrue to the companies of tournament sponsors, has been unfairly criticized by politicians unfamiliar with the impact a PGA Tour event has on charitable giving in its community.

“This tournament equates to a more than \$30 million annual impact to this region,” Fonseca said, “but more importantly, it helps us serve the local children’s charities. This is our 51st year of producing a PGA Tour event in New Orleans and with Zurich’s help we’re not only able to showcase New Orleans to the world, but we’ve been able to give back more than \$1 million a year to local children’s charities.”

[St. Michael Special School](#) is among the 41 charities the tournament assists through its foundation, Fore!Kids. The school has received tournament proceeds for more than a decade, and its children have done a presentation for the employees and guests of Zurich the past five years.

Jane Silva, the principal at St. Michael, has the same concern for special-needs children she had when she arrived 17 years ago. When talking about how Schiro sent her an e-mail message checking on her and telling her the school was O.K. after he inspected hurricane damage from a helicopter, she choked up and lengthened her stride to prevent a visitor from seeing her watery eyes.

“All I know about that man,” she said of Schiro, “is that he will get down on the floor, with the kids, just as if he were a teacher.”

Schiro, born and raised in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn and educated at [St. John’s University](#), is considered one of the most influential chief executives in America. He has a reputation as a visionary with traditional views about the importance of things like customer service.

Months after Zurich’s first experience as a tournament sponsor, Katrina hit and the company had more than 20,000 claims from businesses and homeowners. Schiro called [Kenneth Feinberg](#), who had overseen the resolution of 5,300 claims for the 9/11 Victim Compensation Fund, with only 94 going to litigation. He told Feinberg he wanted him to set up the same type of operation for Zurich’s claims in New Orleans.

“I told Ken that we could distinguish ourselves with the way we handled the claims,” Schiro said. “People buy an insurance policy expecting to never use it. But when they want to use it, we ought to be there, not making life difficult for them.”

Within 18 months, all but 100 claims were settled.

This year, the Fore!Kids foundation will look into financing [the St. Bernard Project](#), a volunteer house-refurbishing operation founded in March 2006 that has rebuilt 204 homes and has 30 more such projects under way in Chalmette, one of the most devastated areas of New Orleans. The work there is overseen by two people with Washington roots: Zack Rosenberg, a former criminal defense lawyer; and Liz McCartney, the executive director of a community-based nonprofit there.

“Zurich and their guests will pitch in and work on their houses for two days during our tournament,” Fonseca said. “Zack will also give a presentation to the players wife’s association during the Emeril luncheon, and a donation will be made to the St. Bernard Project from the players wife’s association at the event.

“This is a great story about the kind of things that can happen because of golf when great partners come together.”