

## **Woods sponsors take the long view**

*Roger Blitz in London*

*Many of Tiger Woods's sponsors made clear they intended to stick with the world number one golfer in the wake of his public apology to his family on Wednesday for "transgressions" in his private life.*

Mr Woods is the world's highest earning sportsman and his sponsorship deals are estimated to be worth \$100m a year. His clean-cut reputation has been tarnished since he crashed his Cadillac into a fire hydrant and a tree outside his Florida home in the early hours of last Friday.

Speculation about his private life led Mr Woods to issue a statement on his website on Wednesday. He had "not been true to my values and the behaviour my family deserves", he said.

"I am not without faults and I am far short of perfect. I am dealing with my behaviour and personal failings behind closed doors with my family."

Mr Woods, winner of 14 majors and \$93m in prize money, has 13 official sponsors. Sponsorship experts say his brand value is "irreplaceable" and many of those sponsors appeared willing to forgive his imperfections.

Gillette, the Procter & Gamble personal care business, said it did not comment on the private lives of its "ambassadors", but added: "Like each of us, they are human. And like each of us, they make mistakes.

"By acknowledging and learning from their mistakes, we hope they will become even better, both in the game and beyond."

Nike, the sporting goods manufacturer, said its relationship with the golfer "remains unchanged", the same phrase used by EA Sports, the video games maker. Gatorade, the manufacturer of sports drinks, offered its support to Mr Woods and his family, saying: "Our partnership continues."

NetJets, the business aviation company, repeated a statement made this week by David Sokol, its chief executive, that it was "proud" to be involved with the golfer.

AT&T declined to comment.

Karen Earl, chairman of the European Sponsorship Association, which represents commercial sponsors, said Mr Woods's crown had "slightly slipped" but he was too valuable a property for sponsors to desert.

Nigel Currie of the agency BrandRapport said the stature of Mr Woods, and the fact that he was likely to remain at the pinnacle of golf for some years, would help him weather the storm of media attention.

"He is irreplaceable," Mr Currie said. "This is the sort of thing that time will heal, but it is going to cause a change of direction."

According to Philip Stinson, media and entertainment lawyer at Clintons, US sponsors favour "morality" clauses in contracts, which enable them to terminate agreements if a sportsman's behaviour materially damages the sponsor's reputation.

“The grey area is in defining behaviour which isn’t imprisonable but is arguably morally suspect and whether it can reasonably be said that the behaviour has had any material negative impact on the good name and image of the sponsor,” Mr Stinson said.

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