

# **‘Wow these girls can play’: Sex integration in professional golf**

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### **Abstract**

Men and women typically operate in separate spaces in the sporting world, with sport being one of the few social institutions that continues to segregate the two sexes. The culture of golf, like sport more broadly, is widely regarded as male-dominated, despite women’s involvement in playing the sport throughout history. Typically, women’s participation has not been welcomed nor taken seriously, and golf cultures have normalised exclusionary and discriminatory practices towards women. However, golf is one sport space where sex integrated practices can and do take place, with distinctions between tee boxes catering for men and women competing together. There have been instances in the professional game of women competing in men’s tournaments; in 2018, the Men’s European Tour invited 5 professional female players to compete at the GolfSixes. This paper draws upon interview data with those 5 players on their experiences of competing against men. Adopting a postmodern feminist stance, and particularly drawing on Lorber’s ‘Biology as Ideology’ argument, this paper sheds light on the complexities of sex integration in a sporting domain, highlighting a balancing act between the subversion of gendered norms and a reinforcement of them. This is exacerbated using forward tees in golf settings, and there was evidence of the sportswomen themselves negating the potential for the subversion of gendered hierarchies by perpetuating understandings on the ‘naturalness’ of sex differences. As such, challenging dominant gender norms in sex-integrated competition requires a ‘buy in’ from both sexes as to the capabilities of women’s bodies in a sporting sense.

**Key Words:** sex integration, gender, golf, professional sport, women’s sport

## **Introduction: Positioning Women in Golf Culture**

The culture of golf - like sport overall - is widely regarded as male-dominated and exclusionary, and these ideas date back to the origins of the sport in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For George (2009), the historical acceptance of women in golf is characterised by conflict and controversy. Reis and Correia (2013: 324) highlight that the sport has a ‘cultural tradition of for-gentlemen-only-clubs that has excluded women from clubhouses and from practising golf’, even though women’s history in the sport is extensive, with Mary Queen of Scots playing the game in 1567 (Concannon, 1995). Female golfers were not well received in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; while male members were given full membership and playing rights in clubs, women were forced to form their own sections (George, 2010). Kitching (2017) notes that golf participation figures in the period 2010-2016 indicated low visibility of females in the game worldwide, with female golfers typically comprising less than a fifth of all participants in the United Kingdom.

The cultural history of golf is mirrored in the development of the professional game; while competitive professional golf for men started as early as 1860 in the United Kingdom through the Professional Golf Association (PGA), the professionalisation of the women’s game occurred much later and separate to the male game. Based in the United States of America (USA), the Ladies Professional Golfers’ Association (LPGA) was formed in 1950, followed by the Ladies European Tour (LET) in 1978, becoming two of the earliest examples of women playing sport professionally. However, the deep rooted male dominated culture of the game, and the segregation of men and women, has led to a persistent struggle for women in terms of equality of access, participation, employment and decision-making (Kitching 2017), as well as disparities between the men’s and women’s professional games in terms of visibility, endorsements and prize money.

There is a growing body of research into professional women's golf. A drive for understanding female golfers narratives of performance has been led by Douglas and Carless. Their expansive research has highlighted the importance of elite sport culture on shaping their identities, and the problems of performance narratives (Douglas, 2009), especially when that ceases to exist (Douglas and Carless, 2009). However, this body of research is mainly situated in the field of sport psychology, so arguably does not deal with the significance of the positioning of women in professional golf against a wider backdrop of gender relations, or when competing against men. In the sociology of sport, Crosset's (1995) ethnographic research on the LPGA tour highlighted women's status as outsiders within the world of professional golf, as well as in society more broadly. Today, this can be evidenced by the differences in prize money allocations; In April 2019, the European Tour and the LET played concurrent tournaments on different courses in Morocco, hosted at the Royal Golf Dar Es Salam, in Rabat. These tournaments, held at the same time, highlighted stark differences: the winner of the men's tournament, Jorge Campillo, earned €416,660 in comparison to the €450,000 total prize fund for the women's event, where winner Nuria Iturrios earned €67,500 (Cooper, 2019). In 2018, when Francesco Molinari earned £3,652,504 as the leader on the European Tour, the top earner on the LET (Georgia Hall) accumulated £456,110 (Golf World, 2019). This was only marginally more than the 75th ranked European Tour player, Ashley Chesters (£450,231), whereas finishing 75th on the LET earned Kelsey MacDonald £14,508 (Golf World, 2019). Unsurprisingly, women's golf is often considered to be in the shadow of the men's game.

Given the supposed recent 'boom' of women's sport (McLachlan, 2019) in an era of increasing professionalisation, there is a space to critically examine the experiences of women in golf against a backdrop of equal pay debates (Corrigan, 2018; Mann, 2019) and increasing integration (Sky Sports, 2018). The aims of this research are two fold: firstly to document the lived experience of female professional golfers and secondly to critically examine the

phenomenon of women competing against men in a professional golf setting. To achieve these aims, this paper presents a sociological discussion on the concepts of gender segregation and integration in sport, ideologies of biological difference, and the practice of women competing against men in professional golf settings. The paper then sheds light on women's experiences of playing against men in a professional golf tournament – the GolfSixes event on the men's European Tour schedule in May 2018 – and the implications of that for sex integration in sport.

### *A Feminist Approach to Understanding Sex Segregation and Integration in Sport*

The point of departure for a feminist approach in the sociology of sport is one that places women as inherently inferior in the male domain of sport. Early feminist research (see Hargreaves, 1994) concentrated on making women's sport visible, whereas more current research has shifted to a gender focus, positioning power relations between men and women at the forefront (Scruton and Flintoff, 2013). Scruton and Flintoff (2013) indicate that feminist researchers have been interested in the role of sport in the social construction of gender differences. As such, central to our research on the role of gender in sex integrated professional golf tournaments is a rejection of purely biological explanations for women's subordination in sport, and an emphasis on the impact of socially constructed gendered ideologies.

With a feminist approach in mind, it is a common consideration to position sport as a preserve of men (Theberge, 1985). Whilst the business of women's sport, and especially golf, is one that often involves the influence of men (especially in terms of sponsorship), in a practical sense men and women typically operate in separate spaces in the professional sporting world. This separation is one that Anderson (2008) describes as naturalised through the notion of physical difference, notably men's elevated aggression and athletic advantage over women. Pieper (2016: 1139) elaborates, highlighting that cultural norms dictated that, due to men's

supposed natural capability – and women’s supposed natural incapability – male and female athletes needed separate spaces to compete in sport. In most sports then, such as golf, the men’s and women’s versions operate in different spaces, with men’s sport termed ‘sport’ and women’s sport gender-marked as ‘women’s sport’. This ‘purposeful division of the sexes’ becomes an important topic for scholars interested in the (re)production of inequality’ (Channon et al, 2016: 1111), specifically, the way in which women’s athletic participation is minimised through asymmetrical gender marking with women marked as ‘other’ (Halbert and Latimer, 1994).

Due to the gendered structure of elite sport, there are often comparisons of performances made across gender categories to justify continued segregation. This process ultimately serves to justify a hierarchy that places men as faster, higher and stronger, and thus more important, than women. Emphasis on performance differences between men and women further reinforces a strict gender binary (Pfister and Bandy, 2015). Channon et al (2016) note that modern sport forms are consistently shown to carry meanings relative to the structures of gender prevailing in the wider social settings within which they take place. Significant is the way in which ‘doing sports and other activities in gender-differentiated ways has long been a means of producing and maintaining difference in the lives of men and women, boys and girls’ (Channon et al, 2016: 1111).

Channon et al (2016) further highlight that one of the most problematic aspects of sex segregation is the reinforcement of the notion that, in sport and athletic performance, *all* men and women are categorically different from each other. This has often been used as a justification to keep men and women separate in the sporting sphere, although this has not stopped men and women from competing against each other. The most prominent example of

this is the infamous ‘battle of the sexes’ tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs in 1973, when King defeated Riggs in straight sets to secure a victory for the women (Halbert and Latimer, 1994). There have also been notable examples of women competing against men in professional golf: Babe Didrickson Zaharias and Shirley Spork were the first women to compete against the men on the PGA tour in 1938 and 1952 respectively. It was then 2003 before we see another woman in a PGA tour event, notably, Annika Sorenstam at the Bank of America Colonial Tournament, followed in the same year by Suzy Whaley. Michelle Wie has since competed in eight men’s PGA events since 2004, and is the only woman to make a cut in a men’s stroke play event (the Hawaii Pearl Open) since Zaharias did so in 1945 (Billings, Angelini and Eastman, 2008). More recently, Brittany Lincicome became the sixth woman to play in a men’s PGA event, in the Barbasol Championship in July 2018 (Strege, 2018).

McGinnis, Gentry and McQuillan (2008: 20) note that golf would seem an ideal sport for the embodiment of gender equity: ‘nothing is inherent in the sport, except for the rituals, that should advantage men or require segregated play’. The integration of women into men’s professional events has received both popular and academic attention (Billings et al., 2006; Billings, Angelini and Eastman, 2008; Bowes and Kitching, 2019a). Sailors (2016) drew upon the example of both Sorenstam and Wie failing to make the cut in PGA tournaments as perhaps indicative of women’s incapability to compete with men. However, she notes that:

Of course, there are women who have tried unsuccessfully to compete against men, but there are also women who have had a different outcome. The fact that some women have successfully defeated men is unlikely to convince a proponent of this argument that all women will do so. By the same token, we should refuse

to accept the fact some women have failed as demonstrated that all women will share that outcome (Sailors, 2016, p. 1127).

Sailors (2016), building on Kane's (1995) argument, cautions that although most elite male athletes can beat most elite female athletes in sports that privilege men (such as golf), we should not presume that every elite male will outperform every elite female. Despite this we are led believe that this is the case because it is one of the fundamental cornerstones of the socially constructed binary found in sport which, not biology, results in females that are truly at a disadvantage in sports (Kane 1995). Indeed, Theberge (2000) found that female hockey players emphasize the significance of natural differences, whilst simultaneously understanding that this gender gap is variable and conditioned by social experiences.

### ***Biology as Ideology***

This paper utilises the work of Judith Lorber's (1997), who adopts a social constructionist and postmodernist view of gender. This is one that challenges the binary, oppositional nature of gender (Lorber, 1997). Starting from a feminist position, the way in which the gender gap becomes exaggerated by social conditions (and emphasised in sport) has been explored by Lorber (1993) in her work on what she terms 'biology as ideology'. Lorber (1994), in discussing the paradoxes of gender, views gender as an institution, a product of socialisation, and organised to maintain inequality. Lorber (1993) drew attention to the place of scientific discourse within the social construction of men and women as innately different – when men's and women's bodies are very similar. Society is then built on 'two discrete sexes and two distinguishable genders' (Lorber, 1993: 569). She describes the way these binary, discrete sex categories of man and woman become imbued with social conditions which construct what it means to be a man or a woman: 'myriad physiological differences are transformed into similar-appearing, gendered social bodies' (Lorber, 1993: 569). Lorber (1993: 569) argues that 'bodies



differ in many ways physiologically, but they are completely transformed by social practices to fit into salient categories of a society, the most pervasive of which are “female” and “male” and “women” and “men”. She proposes that there is an unconscious adherence to socially sanctioned behaviours as they get built into a ‘natural’ sense of identity for men and women.

In a sporting context, categories of competitors are rigidly divided into women and men (these categories determined, in women’s sport, by chromosomes). For Lorber (1997), the segregation of the sexes in sport is one that re-emphasises socially constructed gendered differences. Furthermore, Lorber (1993) highlights the way this restrictive yet pervasive process of sex categorisation assumes that all men are different from all women. Whilst all men are not similar in size and/or strength, the assumption remains that the ‘best’ men will beat the ‘best’ women in most sporting contexts. However, this process ignores the principles behind the practice of classifying men by weight in certain sports (boxing, for example), which highlights the differences within sexes as well as the well-documented differences between sexes. Further to this, in sport ‘physiological differences are then invoked to justify women’s secondary status, despite the clear evidence that gender status overrides the physiological capabilities’ (Lorber, 1993: 571). This leads to an acceptance of first unequal access to sport, and then secondly the differences in the distribution of rewards (as seen earlier in golf).

### ***Biological Sex Differences in Golf: Driving distances and tee boxes***

In golf, females are widely perceived as inferior to their male counterparts, not only in terms of prize money, but in physical capabilities – measured by driving distance - which is frequently used to frame women as less able golfers (McGinnis et al., 2005). In golf settings, women are considered to be slower, less able, less competitive, and less powerful (in terms of ball striking) players (McGinnis and Gentry 2002; McGinnis et al. 2005). For example, in July 2019 the

leader in average driving distance on the PGA tour was Cameron Champ with 316.6 yards. This is compared to Anne Van Dam, the leader in average driving distance on the LPGA tour at 285.98 yards, which would have placed her 166<sup>th</sup> on the PGA tour driving distance ranking.

To counter the ‘superiority’ of men in terms of power and strength, in golf there are strategies in place that are seen to ‘level the playing field’, such as different tee boxes. As Channon et al (2016 : 114) note:

Continuing logic of male superiority in integrated spaces, which otherwise manifests in different rules for men and women within matches – typically those which ‘handicap’ men and provide women an apparently necessary competitive advantage...thus many aspects of how integrated sports are organized refuse the possibility that women might ever compete on a ‘level playing field’ with men.

A signifier of the biological power differentials between the men and women’s games is the allocation of tee boxes, which alter the length of the hole. Arthur et al (2009) found that because of this, women only play approximately 86% of the men’s golf course. Hundley (2004) highlights how golf courses typically offer three, four or five sets of tee boxes from which male golfers may elect to play their tee shot: ‘in the golfing community...tee boxes are not merely related to skill level, they are also imbued with gender codes’ (Hundley, 2004: 43). This means regular or ‘champions’ tees are the furthest back, and the ‘ladies’ tee closer to the hole, on average by 46 yards (Arthur et al, 2009). Whilst the Royal and Ancient (2016), world golf’s ruling body, encourage the use of gender-neutral tees, they admit the closest, or ‘red’, tee is often considered a ladies tee<sup>1</sup>. The fact that men greater perceived freedom of choice can imply

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<sup>1</sup> In Section 3 of the Pace of Play manual, the R&A (2016, p. 30-31) state: ‘Many clubs that have pursued a programme of encouraging players to play from tees appropriate to their ability have found considerable success by avoiding having designated “men’s” and “women’s” tees. In many parts of the world, red tees are associated with ladies golf, and men can be reluctant to play from these tees. By simply changing the colour of the “forward” tees and referring to tees as, for example, “forward, middle and back”, evidence suggests that men are more likely to choose to play from the forward tees’.

that men are always stronger, more skilled and more qualified than women, regardless of their golfing ability, and the unintended consequence of differing tee boxes marks and highlights women as different or ‘other’ (McGinnis et al., 2009). Furthermore, as Channon et al (2016) allude to, the distinction with alternative playing conditions (such as forward tees for women) reduces the ability to see women’s performances as legitimately equal to men’s. Arthur et al (2011) also note that sex differentiated tee boxes contribute to a reduced opportunity for women to network in golf.

### ***The GolfSixes Men’s European Tour Event***

The GolfSixes has been defined a unique and innovative event, featuring on the Professional Golf Association (PGA) European Tour, a global men’s professional golf tour. The event was launched in 2017 and hailed as a ‘revolutionary and novel short form of the game’ (European Tour, 2017). Unlike a traditional seventy-two-hole stroke play event, the event featured two-player teams from sixteen different nations, playing over six holes in a greensomes match play format. The sixteen teams were split into four groups of four – mirrored on tournament association football – where each team in a group would play each other once and the scores were kept as per number of holes won (with three points for a win, one for a draw), again reflecting standards seen in association football. The top two teams from each group progressed to the knockout stages, where quarter-finals, the semi-finals, a 3rd/4th place play-off match and the final were all contested on the second day’s play.

Data from the inaugural GolfSixes tournament in 2017 showed 4,800 spectators attending, including a 42% increase in new golf fans at the event compared to regular European Tour events (European Tour, 2018a). Following the success of the 2017 version, the European Tour Chief Executive Keith Pelley sought to continue to innovate, inviting five professional female

players from the Ladies European Tour (LET): Carlota Ciganda and Mel Reid (European Women), Georgia Hall and Charley Hull (England Women), and Catriona Matthew (the 2019 European Solheim Cup captain who combined with 2018 European Ryder Cup captain Thomas Bjorn in a mixed-sex European Captains team). This move was significant, not only as it is the first time the European Tour have included women in a team golf event, but because the European Captains team became the first male and female professionals to play together in a competitive match play format event worldwide (European Tour, 2018b).

The event perceived by the organisers to be a success, where the number of spectators reported to be more than double the 2017 version, with over 10,000 in attendance (GolfSixes, 2018). Significant in the event was the inclusion of female players, who played off forward tees between 0 and 50 yards across the six-hole course. The performance of the all women teams received a lot of media attention (Bowes and Kitching, 2019a): on the first day's play England women drew 1-1 with the English men, before beating South Africa 4-1 and losing to Sweden 2-1. The European women lost 2-1 to the USA, drew 1-1 with Denmark, the tournament's reigning champions, and beat Thailand 3-1. Following the European Women's victory in a play-off against Denmark, both all women's teams advanced to the second days play, losing in the quarter finals - the European women to the Australian men, and the English women to the Irish men, who went on to win the tournament.

## **Methodology**

As already noted, the epistemological stance of this research was explicitly feminist, given the focus on women's experiences of their lives. More accurately, we adopted what has been termed postmodern feminism, allowing an understanding that there are multiple truths and realities located in a particular time, space and place (Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019).

Following institutional ethical approval, purposive sampling was used to identify possible participants, so that participants sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed. The participants in this research were identified as the five female players that were invited to play in the GolfSixes event. The players were all hugely successful professionals who between them, at the time of the tournament, had won 7 professional tournaments on the LPGA tour, 15 professional tournaments on the LET tour, and had appeared in a total of 19 Solheim Cups as representatives of Team Europe. Three of the players were in the top 50 of the Rolex World Rankings (Hull at 24, Ciganda at 29 and Hall at 35), and the other 2 were inside the top 200 (Reid at 151 and Matthew at 184). Their average world ranking for the tournament was 84, versus an average for the male players at 204.

Accessing elite populations, such as professional athletes, to conduct academic research is notoriously difficult. Bryman (2012) highlights that access to participants such as this is usually mediated by ‘gatekeepers’. The lead author had a close relationship with one of the participants and through spending time travelling on tour and attending various tournaments since 2015, she subsequently developed friendships with the other four participants. It has been highlighted that researching using friends within the research process often produces the richest data (Brewis, 2014), because the researcher and participant already have an established relationship. Furthermore, in researching elite sportspeople, gatekeepers that allow a researcher to have ‘insider’ status is important in recruiting participants (Law, 2019). This approach has been utilised in the body of research on female professional golfers conducted by Douglas, given her position as an insider in professional golf (see, for example, Carless and Douglas, 2009; Douglas, 2009).

In describing the researching of social ‘elites’ – of which we can define, in a sport setting, some of the best known female golfers in Europe - Harvey (2011) notes that they often receive extensive media training, which develops techniques to help them avoid answering questions. Furthermore, sporting elites will have experiences of interviews with journalists that can feel intrusive and scrutinising, and thus elites can feel threatened by an interview, especially in the often unknown context of academia (Harvey, 2011). This was something that we expand upon in the conclusion of this paper. Harvey (2011) further notes that gaining the trust of respondents is central to collecting high quality data; given each participant agreed to be interviewed more than once, and all knew the lead researcher personally, it was felt that this signified some level of trust.

### *Anonymity*

Anonymising qualitative data can be challenging. As Saunders et al (2015) state, an idealised view of anonymity is that a person will never be traceable from the data presented about them. However, guaranteeing this can be an ‘unachievable goal’ (Van den Hoonaard, 2003: 141) in qualitative research. Specifically, Flick (2006: 50) explains that ‘the issue of confidentiality or anonymity may become problematic when you do research with several members of a specific setting’. It is much easier to identify the ‘real’ person from the context information included in quotations, particularly in a setting such as professional sport. As this research centres on a specific (and unusual) event on the Men’s European Tour calendar, the research participants become identifiable by nature of their involvement. As such, it was decided that the researchers would not be able to guarantee the participants’ anonymity, given the very public and obvious nature of the event described in this research, which was approved by institutional ethics.

Following an initial approach about the research, participants were informed of the research project in full via a participant information sheet. The participants were then able to ask any questions about the research to either of the researchers. Through the participant information sheet and prior to any interview, the participants were given a clear explanation of the limits of anonymity to this research, and subsequently consented to waiving their right to anonymity. In line with McGee and Bairner (2011) and Bowes and Bairner (2018; 2019), the participants in this research provided consent to feature in the research as themselves. In practice, this means that the participants agreed to be named, allowing their personal stories about their professional golfing lives and their experiences can be retold in full. As Bryman (2012) explains, feminist qualitative research allows women's voices to be heard; whilst anonymity can protect the participants, it can also deny them "the very voice in the research that must originally have been claimed as its aim" (Parker, 2004: 17).

### ***Data Collection***

The interviews took a semi-structured approach, with a set interview schedule that allowed scope for further exploration of topics based on participant responses and promoted a conversational feel. Participants were interviewed by one of the two named researchers either in person or video call up to three times; once or twice during the tournament and once at a later time. The multiple interviews were utilised for numerous reasons. Initially, interviews during the tournament were hard to organise due to the participants' multiple commitments with media, event sponsors, rules meetings, practice rounds and playing on the tournament days; this was more particular for Golf Sixes given the shortened 2 day event, and the added media and sponsor commitments given the higher tournament profile. Because of this, some interviews were organised before the event commenced and these participants were then interviewed again on the final day to add to their discussion of their experiences of the event.

In the initial interview, participants were asked questions centring on the nature of their invitation, their opinions and experiences of competing against men, and their thoughts on the initial impact of the GolfSixes event. The follow up interview was arranged for approximately 3 months post event and was designed to allow participants some time to reflect on the event, the reaction to the event and the possible impact of the event. This reflective approach could not have occurred during or immediately post the event. In this interview, the participants were asked about their reflections on the event, their perceptions on the reactions to the event, and if they thought the event had any lasting impact on them as players or on the world of golf more broadly.

In total, 128.5 minutes of interview data was collected from the five participants, over 11 interviews. In places this felt admittedly short, perhaps in light of the aforementioned media training the participants have all undergone. All interviews were audio recorded using a dictaphone. Using these recordings, the interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The interviewees were then able to complete an interview transcript review (ITR), a common member checking protocol employed in qualitative research (Smith and McGannon, 2018), and deemed important by the authors given the public nature of the participants' professions and the removal of anonymity in the research process. ITR allows interviewees the opportunity to identify and correct transcription errors or omissions, remove any data they no longer feel is appropriate or provide additional information (Hagens, Dobrow and Chafe, 2009). Given the purpose of this research paper is to represent participants' experiences and perspectives, this approach proposes that 'findings based on interviews would be expected to convey key features of participants' realities' (Thomas, 2017: 30). This was felt to be an important addition to the data collection, given the participants waiving of their right to anonymity, although no



participants removed or edited any information provided during the ITR process. Like Kornbluh (2015) the authors felt that the use of the ITR process was an ethical necessity.

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis phase utilised a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2019). Both researchers implemented theoretical thematic analysis, an organic, flexible and reflexive approach which acknowledges the researchers' role in knowledge production (Braun and Clarke, 2019). As individuals, the primary authors went through the series of steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013), from familiarisation, reading and re-reading, to coding, and then generating, developing and reviewing themes. Throughout the analysis process, the authors adopted an explicitly feminist lens, where they acknowledged the inherent gendered power relations that privilege men and highlight the marginalisation, underrepresentation and exclusion of women in sport. Following an initial, independent coding and theming of data, the authors shared their themes and subthemes and began the process of finalising the analysis, focusing explicitly on the nuances of sex-integrated competition. Some key themes that were identified were as follows:

- Inclusion and difference
- Sex integration and gendered comparisons
- A level playing field? Biology and tee length

The final methodological stage was member checking, which again was deemed an ethical necessity. Participants were sent final draft versions of this paper, alongside a brief summary outlining their specific data that was used alongside the key research themes, to allow them to make any edits or changes in how they were represented, should they wish. As Smith and McGannon (2018) and Braun and Clarke (2013) caution, member checking in this way was not

adopted as a process to find an objectifiable ‘truth’ in the participants responses, nor to increase the perceived ‘rigor’ of our work. Instead, it was utilised as a strategy to ensure the participants were comfortable with their representation and the authors’ feminist interpretations. When researching with personal contacts (Brewis, 2014), or identifiable participants (Thomas, 2017), this is an important part of the research process to ensure that the participants are comfortable with how their comments and experiences have been represented. The researchers did not get a response from two participants, and the other three participants were happy with how they had been represented. The lack of participant responses was unsurprising; the paper was sent to the participants over a year after the initial tournament, and they had on the whole seemed uninterested in the research process beyond their interviews, with some unable to (or perhaps unwilling to) find the time to review detailed academic writing. Despite this, it felt like an important stage to enable the participants to feel comfortable with how their opinions and experiences had been represented by the researchers.

## **Results and Discussion**

The following section now explores the identified themes from the interviews with the participants on their involvement in the GolfSixes event.

### ***Inclusion and difference***

One of the first themes evident in the interviews was an acknowledgement of the unusualness of their involvement, characterised by the concept of difference. Given that sport as an institution is strongly characterised by a purposeful division of the sexes (Anderson, 2008; Channon et al, 2016), instances where men and women compete against each other at the highest level is rare, even in a sport such as golf. The participants recognised this:

**Hull:** I thought they just thought because this is a fun event this would be a good opportunity to do something different...Because you're the four girls and it's like, what are they doing in this event?

The notion that the inclusion of women in a men's event is unusual was also evident in an examination of the print media coverage of the event (Bowes and Kitching, 2019a), and in the social media strategies of both the European Tour and the Ladies European Tour (Bowes and Kitching, 2019b).

This difference was often described in a binary way, in opposition to male players, which is unsurprising given the gendered structure of professional golf:

**Ciganda:** I said golf is always men, women, stroke play so I think this is just a little different, only two days, only six holes, we play three matches in one day and maybe they thought it was a good idea to ask women and see how we can compete against them.

Carlota also indicates that it is women who need to be invited into the male realm of golf – highlighting their broader, subordinate positioning within sports cultures, and golf more specifically (Kitching, 2017).

With this in mind, in some cases there was an acceptance that their inclusion was perhaps tokenistic:

**Matthew:** I think with Keith Pelley the European Tour guy is definitely trying different events and I think just women in general, it's all more in the media with all the #metoo campaign, and you know women are trying to get more equal rights and that was just the natural thing for them to make it, you know, appear more inclusive. I think for golf

it's good, it's more inclusive, it gets men and women together and it just shows that, especially over here in Britain, that golf's not so male dominated.

There was a sentiment then that the notion of their introduction into the event was to allow the men's game to portray a more inclusive environment, which Matthew indicated was important against a shifting political backdrop of gender equality. Reid also noted that the tokenistic inclusion may have been recognised by the male players, too:

**Reid:** I kind of thought that the guys would be a bit like oh, oh "we'll just let the ladies in", and I kind of feel that that was the vibe to start with.

When asked about the event, it seems that the participants were acutely aware that they were different, or other, in this context, again pointing towards the subordinate position women occupy in golf cultures more broadly. The hierarchical relationship within professional golf, which positions men as superior and women as outsiders (Crosset, 1995) was noted by all 5 of the participants:

**Matthew:** I thought obviously the main story was the two women's teams doing really well. I mean I think going there, I suppose if you are being honest, no one knew what could happen, or what would happen. I think that, for the media, that was the main story because they probably didn't think the ladies would do as well as they did.

When considering sex integrated sports participation, notions of inclusion and difference underpin the narrative. What was evident from the participants was their self-awareness in their role in the event; they understood their 'outsider' position, as women invited in to the male sphere of a professional golf event. This was articulated by all 5 participants and was in some cases evidenced as a tokenistic inclusion, with a nod to an understanding that it is beneficial for men's sport (in this case, the European Tour) to be seen to be equitable and inclusive in their approaches. In this regard, the inclusion of women in the event can be seen

as a challenge to hegemonic norms in sport, whilst the tokenism of their invitation can be seen to reinforce those same gendered discourses.

### ***Sex Integration and Gendered Comparisons***

Given the rarity of sex integrated sport (Channon et al, 2016), the involvement of female players was a significant ‘selling point’ of this specific event, and the nature of the women’s inclusion in the event led to gendered comparisons being made between the players. The participants’ narrative around their involvement in the event was strongly centred on the gendered nature of the event, with the men versus women discourse underpinning much of how they articulated their experiences. When describing the perceptions of the male players, there was a feeling amongst the women that they were not seen as legitimate competitors, even if they then went on to prove themselves:

***Reid:*** I mean the thing is what are they gonna do, they’re not gonna watch LPGA golf...so they don’t actually see us play so, whether they will never ever admit it they probably think we’re pretty shit. Like they think that we like knock it about and have a bit of a laugh and play in our skirts kind of thing...so for us to kind of go up there and especially with Carlota and myself who are relatively you know, long hitters and you know, strike it a bit more like, men, than like some of the girls, I think for them it was a bit of a shock...like when would they ever, like we watch the Masters, you know, we watch PGA Tour golf, whereas they’re never gonna watch British, Women’s British Open and they would never choose to do that so...they’ve just never had the opportunity to watch us really.

***Ciganda:*** I think it was a great week for women’s golf, especially both women’s teams going through to the Sunday. I mean that proved that we can play with them, that we

are great players. I think that some of the men they think that we cannot really play as good as them. So I think that was really good for that.

These statements highlight again the gendered hierarchy of golf, indicating the participants' perceptions of their subordinate positioning, both in this event and within the wider professional golf community. Furthermore, there is the perception that they are often not taken seriously as professional athletes, and that they subsequently must prove themselves to be seen as legitimate in this realm. There is also an emphasis on outdated stereotypically feminine assumptions of female's involvement in golf, and what that looks like – demonstrating the gendered nature of women's participation.

Further indications of the gendered hierarchy evidenced in the GolfSixes (and as a mirror of mainstream golf cultures) was apparent when the participants talked about their own success, which, by the nature of the event, was centred on playing (and in some cases, beating) the men's teams. This was often framed in terms of the male players surprise at their performances:

*Ciganda:* I think they may be a little surprised but I mean at the same time...Mel and I just knew we could do it, we just go out there and go and play, and play our best. But I think some of the guys they were joking and I think they were a little surprised.

Similarly, the participants all spoke about the reception of their performances by the male players. Hall noted the expectation that the men would beat the women:

*Hall:* They were just like 'oh, you played great, congratulations!'. I think some of them were a bit nervous playing woman because obviously they don't want to lose to women, which kind of goes in our favour as well. So, you know, I think, I don't know, I think maybe deep down they were like 'wow these girls can play golf!'.

Lorber (1993) drew attention to the way that physical competence is a marker of masculinity in sport in Western society, and as such we see here the women articulate an inherent fear on behalf of the male players that they women could beat (and subsequently emasculate) them.

Reid indicated again the perceived tokenistic nature of their inclusion, and like Hall, highlighted the expectation by the male players that they should comfortably beat the female teams:

**Reid:** I kind of feel like the guys were a bit like “oh the girls are here like, aw cute” like, and then when we actually started beating them they were like “oh shit”. Like when Charley and Georgia beat the South African boys, like the South African boys came back on the range and all the boys like turned round at them and they were like “aw don’t fucking start boys, don’t even start me”...Like “oh you got beaten by the girls!”. And then the American guys were like, “well yeah, like we played against the other two girls like, they were actually really good”. But they just don’t know, like I’ve done golf days with guys who have openly said to me, and I mean these are high profile guys...who are like “I would never go to a women’s golf event, like never support a golf women’s event”, and then they play in this and are acting like “oh it’s great to have women here”.

Here, the participants’ perceptions of the male players opinions around their involvement is one that is framed heavily by gendered discourses on sport participation. It is articulated that the men should not be losing to the women (regardless of the supposed ‘levelling of the playing field’ with different tee boxes). Women’s secondary status in sport is seemingly justified, as Lorber (1993) explains. Here then, the result is not merely about biological differences (because in principle the tee boxes nullify that) but about cultural assumptions within golf as to who is superior in this environment.

Despite an awareness that the male players were surprised at the female players' performances, some of the participants', **potentially with their media training in mind**, spoke of a level of professional respect between the players, despite any preconceived perceptions:

**Ciganda:** If they lose to against us they don't feel very good, they are like what are these girls doing beating us? But like I said, they were very polite, very nice and very respectful.

**Matthew:** From my experience in it, the guys have all been very nice. You know, I think the ones who have been around women golfers. I mean I think to be honest they respect us more than perhaps the general public, because they know what we do and they know how good we are.

What is apparent is that gendered stereotypes around women's involvement remain in the perceptions of the participants when discussing their involvement. Central to these stereotypes is a belief in the innate nature of men's sporting ability, which concurrently leaves women needing to prove that they belong, threatening the male hegemony in golf.

### ***A Level Playing Field? Biology and Tee Length***

As already seen, a strong feature in the interviews with the female professionals was an emphasis on apparent biological differences between the male and female players. In golf, the length of the hole is often adjusted on gendered terms, and then justified with biological arguments, with the shortest tee position commonly known as the 'ladies' tee' (Hundley, 2004). The GolfSixes tournament organisers attempted to mitigate the differences in average driving distance (see table 1) (and thus the assumed biological differences in strength) by adjusting tee locations on 5 of the 6 holes. However, this strategy was only implemented for the female



players, making each hole between 10 and 50 yards shorter. Regarding tee location, Ciganda was clear in her opinion that females playing off forward tees is essential:

*Ciganda:* I think it's important that we play from the forward tees otherwise we just can't compete because of the bodies ...I think it's good because, I mean, mainly because men's and women's bodies are just different. So we can't hit it as far as they hit it because of the way the body is built.'

Whilst the longest male player in the tournament in terms of average driving distance was George Coetzee (314.2 yards, European Tour, 2018c), the shortest male player was Daniel Im (276.3 average, European Tour, 2018c), 10 yards longer than Ciganda's average driving distance (266.2 yards, LPGA 2018), a statistic which positioned her as the longest female. The field average driving distance is 287.5 yards; The men's average 292.6, compared to the females of 260.9. There were nine male players in the event who drive the ball, on average, below the field average. Furthermore, there is greater disparity between the longest and shortest male players (37.9 yards) than there is between the averages of the male and female players (31.7 yards). This warrants a consideration of why the forward tees are considered essential for the female players only?

Despite their successful performances, where the two all-female teams came second in their groups to secure a place in knockout matches, the women were almost apologetic in their interviews because of the implementation of forward tees. This was evident in the extent to which they downplayed their success on the basis of a biological argument, despite the fact the forward tee locations were positioned as a 'field leveller' so success should be seen as success in its own right. In some ways then, the female players can be seen to be dismissive about their own performances, balancing the success of their performances with the notion that they had an easier challenge in terms of course length:

Question: So you've obviously beat some of the guys yesterday. What do you think they thought of it, did you surprise them?

Hull: Erm, yeh, I think so a little bit. Even though we're on the forward tees and stuff, but, it's still good.

This serves again to justify the men's superior position. Ciganda expressed a similar sentiment, highlighting that the women are 'good' in their own right, but restricted by biology, when compared to men:

*Ciganda:* I mean it's not that we played better or worse, it's just the human body. I mean they hit the ball so much further. And nowadays, I mean if you go to the States they like to see all these long hitting and everything, and obviously the men are going to hit it further than the women because of the body we have. But I think as women we can also play pretty good, we can hit the ball pretty far and we can compete in similar conditions.

Asked whether there was any feature the players would like to change regarding the tournament, again the tee location was a strong feature of the discussion, with the players feeling that the course set up favoured the men in terms of the length of the hole:

*Hall:* I'd move our tees forward! They were so far back...we had harder tees in my opinion. I think it was quite short for the men. And like, we were on the same, on par threes, from the same tee.

What is apparent is the way in which the participants' narratives of competing against men centre on, and are restricted by, a strong biological argument (Lorber, 1993). The women use it to justify a potentially diminished performance compared to the male players – for example, the women did not win, but this is justified in some way because they were competing against men with their biological advantages. Subsequently, the notion is presented that the women obviously were never going to win, simply because (all) men are inherently, biologically, better

than them (Lorber, 1993; Channon et al, 2016). This is despite the adjustments made to the tee boxes (and then length of the hole) to counter the biological advantage (some) men have in terms of how far they can hit the ball. This narrative around differences in biology subsequently acts as a buffer in case of a poor performance on behalf of the women.

The participants, in their discussions around tee boxes and gender, also perpetuate understandings of an inherent difference between the sexes (and that all men, and all women, are the same). Again, it was a narrative that Ciganda drew from:

*Ciganda:* But obviously playing against women I think they maybe see us as maybe a little weaker or they are like, they can't beat us. But I mean at the end, I mean, we are also good golfers, we play on the LPGA, it's golf. They know how to compete and it's only six holes so anything can happen. I think they have more pressure than we do because we don't have much to lose...And of course you want to win but it's not like it's gonna be easy. I mean I think most of the people...want us to win because maybe they see us as maybe weaker than men... I think everyone knows that we have gone through and are so happy that we are playing today again. I think it's just good for women's golf, for other things.

Ciganda later stated:

I think that people they were happy that we made it [to the quarter final], because obviously you see that the men are stronger than us maybe, but I think they give us some credit that weekend.

Similarly, when asked 'So where do you see female golfers playing in men's events in the future?', Matthew noted:

To be honest I've never been a great proponent of that. You just can't compete off the same tees and why try, really, I mean we're not as strong and we are never going to be, so you can't hit it as far. Erm, if they had tees staggered in some way, but then, it perhaps doesn't, so. I mean, the same golf course, the same tees, I just don't see the point.

Here, the women are seen to legitimise their subordinate position within golf by drawing on biological arguments. They further perpetuate understandings of the naturalness of sex differences, where physiological differences are invoked to justify women's secondary status (Lorber, 1993: 571).

## **Conclusion**

The paper presents insightful evidence from professional female golfers as to the lived realities of competing in a sex integrated sports event. In the first instance, what is clear is there is a contradictory dualism to the way the women narrate their experiences: on the one hand they perpetuate the gendered hierarchy seen in golf (and sport) by using biology as a justifier for their performances (in both rationalising victory and with the expectation that their involvement would end in defeat); on the other, they are empowered, vocal agents of change who were happy to prove themselves and let their golf do their talking. These are women who showcased themselves on a global stage yet drew on biological arguments and highlighted the significance of forward tees, which in some ways served to reduce their success and legitimise their ultimate failings.

The discussions around the women's involvement in the men's GolfSixes event sheds light on the nuances of sex integrated competition in elite level sport. This is significant in a time where there is an increase in sex integrated golf tournaments, and in light of an increasing push for

equality in opportunity and pay in golf<sup>2</sup>. Channon et al (2016: 1111) highlight that the process of sex integration in sport opens a ‘possibility for challenging or subverting male privilege within these exact same sites where it is otherwise seen to be produced and maintained’. The authors propose, though, that central to the subversion of male privilege is a ‘buy in’ from both the male and female competitors as to the possibility of that – something which was not always evident in the discussions with the female athletes here. Furthermore, strategies such as differentiating tee boxes by sex can be seen as problematic. The use of gendered tee boxes as at the GolfSixes reinforced ideas that all men are the same – at least in terms of strength - and all women are the same, and thus weaker than men (Channon et al, 2016). However, the differences in length off the tee between the longest and shortest male players (which was 37.9 yards) questions the legitimacy of adjusting tee boxes by gender and not by length. Given that there were only 10.1 yards between the longest female player and the shortest male player, and 21 yards between that player and the shortest female player, is biological sex the most appropriate way to determine course length in golf? Tee boxes are designed to alter course length by ability yet retain a gendered organisation. However, the participants were vocal in the necessity of playing from forward tees, and when they were successful in some ways used this to reduce their success in an apologetic way.

What was obvious in the tournament - through the performances of the female players - was the possibility of the *potential* for a wider cultural change, ‘as the symbolic value of iconic

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<sup>2</sup> In April 2019, the Challenge Tour (the men’s European Tour feeder tour), the Staysure Tour (the men’s European Tour senior tour) and the LET co-sanctioned the Jordan Mixed Open. The tournament featured 40 players from each tour playing to the same pins from different tees, with 25 Challenge Tour players, 21 Staysure players and 19 LET players making the midway cut. The tournament was won by Daan Huizing of the Challenge Tour, beating Meghan Maclaren of the LET by 2 strokes. In June 2020, the LET and European Tour will launch the Scandinavian Mixed, hosted by Annika Sorenstam and Henrik Stenson and featuring 78 players from each tour competing for one prize fund and one trophy.

female athletes challenges ideological beliefs about inherent male superiority’ (Channon et al, 2016: 1111). The success of the women, which was documented in the media (Bowes and Kitching, 2019a) as well as in the testimonies of the participants here, can act as a challenge to the inherent belief that men are superior to women in sporting contexts – resisting and possibly subverting gendered norms and expectations in sports competition. However, this discourse was often juxtaposed with an often uncritical acceptance on behalf of the female players of their subordinate position, notably framed by biological discourses (Lorber, 1993). It is worth noting that in places the participants in this research may have presented expected responses or were overly cautious in their replies. Unfortunately, this seemed inevitable, given the research involved participants who have been media-trained to respond to interview questions appropriately (Harvey, 2011; Law, 2019), and who were also aware that they would have no anonymity in this research. Despite this, the ‘insider’ position of the researchers aimed to provide a safe place for the women to speak about their experiences, although it is fair to say that despite this, that the participants have the media skills to be able to avoid answering a question.

The participants spoke about their involvement in a sex-integrated event as one that potentially carried great significance. Given the narrative around their subordinate status in golf, the female players were in a position where they had to prove themselves as legitimate participants. Hull said the event contributed to putting women’s golf on the map, noting ‘You are, aren’t you? It’s something new, and definitely people will be talking about it’.

*Question:* What do you think they [the spectators] got out of it?

*Hall:* That men and women can play against each other and it can be an actual competition. You know, that men don’t absolutely thrash the women. I think that’s what they realised. And that there are a lot of good women out there that can play golf.

However, Channon et al (2016: 1114) argue that:

The potential for transformative experiences in sex-integrated sports is thwarted or at least slowed by the persistence of deep, historically rooted and often taken-for-granted practices which marginalize women, rationalize the ascendancy of men into positions of authority and normalize the unspoken behavioural etiquette associated with the wider societal expectation.

Despite a recognition by the participants that their involvement was significant for women in sport, there is evidence that the participants can perpetuate those deep-rooted, gendered power imbalances within the game of golf, subtly highlighting their subordinate position in multiple ways (through reference to female biology and tee box location most frequently). However, the event also provided an opportunity for the female players to showcase their ability, with increased visibility and an opportunity to challenge the gendered hierarchy of sport. The women demonstrated a careful balancing act of challenging yet simultaneously reinforcing their subordinate position in golf cultures through embodying and narrating biological narratives (Lorber, 1993).

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**Table 1:** 2018 season average driving distance of the players competing at GolfSixes 2018  
(European Tour 2018c, LPGA 2018)

Player	Av. Driving Distance
George Coetzee (South Africa)	314.2
Haydn Porteous (South Africa)	308.2
Lucas Bjerregaard (Denmark)	307.5
Matt Wallace (England Men)	305.4
Paul Dunne (Ireland)	303.6
Joakim Lagergren (Sweden)	299.9
Renato Paratore (Italy)	298.4
Mike Lorenzo-Vera (France)	298.1
Scott Jamieson (Scotland)	297.9
Thorbjorn Olesen (Denmark)	297.4
Kiradech Aphibarnrat (Thailand)	295.7
David Lipsky (USA)	295
Pablo Larrazabal (Spain)	291.7
Adrian Otaegui (Spain)	289.7
Edoardo Molinari (Italy)	288.6
Soomin Lee (South Korea)	288.2
Jeunghun Wang (South Korea)	288.2
Sam Brazel (Australia)	287.5
Richie Ramsey (Scotland)	286.4
Wade Ormsby (Australia)	283.8
Alexander Bjork (Sweden)	283.4

Eddie Pepperell (England Men)	281.6
Thongchai Jaidee (Thailand)	281.3
Romain Wattel (France)	281.1
Thomas Bjorn (European Captains)	279.4
Daniel Im (USA)	276.3
Carlota Ciganda (European Women)	266.2
Charley Hull (England Women)	264.9
Mel Reid (European Women)	260.8
Georgia Hall (England Women)	257.2
Catriona Matthew (European Captains)	255.3
Gavin Moynihan (Ireland)	ND