

## **The gender politics of sex integrated sport: the case of professional golf**

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### **Abstract**

It has been well documented in the sport of golf that two participation trends exist: participation figures are continuously declining across the globe; and the number of men competing in the sport far outweighs women in most contexts. In response to these issues, the sport has looked to provide innovative solutions to retain and attract new golfers and promote the sport to women. One strategy has been the development of innovative golf tournaments, including at the professional level. One such tournament format involves men and women competing against each other. This mixed-sex competition strategy is interesting in multiple respects. As sport is one of the few social institutions that continues to segregate by sex, it is expected that men and women operate in separate spaces in the sporting world. Throughout history women's participation in golf has not always been welcomed nor taken seriously, and golf cultures have normalised exclusionary and discriminatory practices towards women. However, golf has been identified as a sport with a potential to embody gender equitable practices. This is evidenced at a recreational level, through the use of the handicap system. On the other hand, when women compete in men's professional tournaments, the tee boxes are adjusted for the male and female competitors. This chapter will present a critical discussion on the gender politics at play during sex integrated professional golf tournaments. It will examine the complexities of sex integration in golf by interrogating notions of the 'naturalness' of sex differences, the use of different tee boxes, and the unusualness of men and women competing in the same event, for the same trophy.

## Introduction

On the 13<sup>th</sup> February 2021, the Australian edition of the Daily Telegraph posted an article about two professional golfers, and siblings, Min Woo Lee and his sister Minjee Lee. The clickbait headline, 'The new Aussie golf star who couldn't beat his own sister' (Linden, 2021; see also Porter, 2021), is indicative about the status of women within golf cultures. At the time, Minjee was ranked the 8<sup>th</sup> best in the world on the Women's World Golf Rankings, compared to Min Woo's 198<sup>th</sup> ranking on the men's Official World Golf Ranking. But the implication was that Min Woo should be beating his sister, and that is because she is a woman. Whilst this sentiment about men and women, or boys and girls, in sport is not a new phenomenon, the sport they play makes it an interesting point of discussion. The unusual aspect of this sporting sibling rivalry is that golf is a sport where men and women *can* compete against each other.

As Hargreaves and Anderson (2016) explain, modern, organised sport is a distinctly gendered activity. They recognise gender as a 'very complex and changing social category of analysis in relation to the "opposite" sex and within one's sexual category', thereby understanding gender as a cultural category, and sex as a biological one (Hargreaves and Anderson, 2016, p. 4). However, the two terms are often used interchangeably in common-sense discourse, with the gender binary socially constructed in line with interpretations of biological sex differences. The gendering of men and women produces the gendered social order in which men benefit (Lorber, 2010). In simple terms, boys and girls have expectations placed on them based on the socially constructed perception of their biological sex. These are then played out in the world of sport, and because socially constructed biology-informed beliefs about gender differences in sport appear natural, they become taken for granted (Willis, 1982, cited in Hargreaves and Anderson, 2016). At this juncture, it is important to highlight how the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are going to be used throughout this chapter. The notion of sex is used when considering the parameters placed onto sporting competition determined by biological factors; as such, you will see competitions that feature both men and women defined as 'mixed-sex' competition, an industry accepted term used within golf. The term 'gender' is used when referring to characteristics that refer to socially constructed norms of men and women.

Feminist politics has contributed to the increasing access and opportunity women have in sporting environments. However, sport predominately operates in sex-segregated spaces. The historical development of modern sport, as we know it, is one that has been imbued with gendered ideologies of female frailty and male superiority (Hargreaves, 1994), which has served to position women as the 'weaker sex'. Subsequently, men and women typically operate in separate spaces in the professional sporting world, which Anderson (2008) describes as naturalised through this notion of physical difference between the sexes. Western

cultural sport norms dictate that male and female athletes need distinct spaces to compete (Pieper, 2016), and with that separation comes a hierarchy. Competitive men's sport - often simply termed 'sport' - symbolically validates male privilege, and women's sport – clearly gender-marked as 'women's sport' – is then considered secondary to men's sport.

This distinction is evident in the organisation of professional golf – with professional tours for women carrying the descriptor 'Ladies'. In Europe, the premier tour for men is known as the European Tour, whilst women compete in the Ladies European Tour (LET). The most prestigious professional tours in the world, located primarily in the United States of America, also feature similar gender-marking for the women's version: The Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Tour and the Professional Golf Association (PGA) Tour. We can also see the impact of gender marking in the phrasing of the aforementioned world golf rankings: one is the 'official' ranking, whilst the other is the 'women's' ranking. In considering the gendered nature of sport, this 'purposeful division of the sexes becomes an important topic for scholars interested in the (re)production of inequality' (Channon et al, 2016, p. 1111). In other words, the doing of gender in a sport context can (re)produce difference in the lives of men and women, making sex differences seem persistent and natural.

The history and culture of golf as a sex-segregated sport has resulted in women's position seen as subordinate. Typically, women's participation was not particularly welcomed nor taken seriously, and golf cultures have normalised exclusionary and discriminatory practices towards women to this day (Reis and Correia, 2013). Year-on-year, the growth of male participation in the sport outnumbers women, with world golf's ruling body, the Royal & Ancient (R&A), noting an increasing 'gender gap' (Fry and Hall, 2018). However, in recent years there have been increasing examples of women competing against men in professional golf tournaments at the highest level. There has also been the growth of innovative developmental golf tours, advertised as 'gender-equal' and 'inclusive', providing golf tournaments open to both male and female golfers. These tournaments make adjustments to tee boxes, with women teeing off closer to the hole than men, to equalise any expected biological sex-differences in performance (Bowes and Kitching, 2020b)

For example, in the UK, the Clutch Pro Tour runs 18, 36 and 54 hole tournaments, with male and female professionals playing for the same trophy and same prize fund and same season-long order of merit (Clutch Pro Tour, 2021). Similarly, the 2020 Pro Tour runs 18 hole tournaments for men and women golfers, with competitors playing for the same trophy, prize fund, and season-long order of merit. On the Clutch Pro Tour, women play a minimum of 11% less yardage than the men (Clutch Pro Tour, 2021), and on the 2020 Pro Tour, women play a

course a minimum of 15% shorter than men under 50, whenever possible (2020 Pro Tour, 2021). Given the increasing opportunities for men and women to compete against each other in the sport, especially at a professional level, this chapter will present a critical discussion on the gender politics at play during sex-integrated professional golf tournaments. It will examine the complexities of sex integration in a sporting domain, by interrogating notions of the 'naturalness' of sex differences, the use of 'gendered' tee boxes, and the unusualness of men and women competing in the same event, for the same trophy.

### **Men versus Women in Golf**

Golf has consistently been a site of gender discrimination (Tofilon, 2005) with the history of the sport – even to the current day - rife with exclusionary practices against women. This is despite golf lending itself, more than other male-dominated sports, to equitable practices. The handicap system enables any golfer to compete against better (or even the best) golfers, irrespective of gender. Likewise, the length of the course can be adjusted via the use of different tee boxes, making a course longer or shorter (and thus harder or easier). In this way, the challenge in the sport is about ability, and not sex. Because of this, as McGinnis, Gentry and McQuillan (2008, p. 20) explain, 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'. Different handicaps, staggered tees, as well as variably sized equipment means the sport is set up to enable anyone to play against each other. Despite this, golf is gendered at all levels of the sport.

Despite the structure and organisation of elite-level professional golf tours being sex-segregated, there have been examples of women competing against men throughout history. The LPGA Tour and the PGA Tour played a combined mixed-team event for 30 years, the JCPenney Classic, but this has not featured since 1999 (Romine, 2018). As of 2020, six women have been involved in PGA Tour stroke-play events. The first was Babe Didrickson Zaharias in 1938 and 1945, followed by Shirley Spork in 1952 - both women were founders of the LPGA Tour in 1950. Arguably the most famous involvement was Annika Sorenstam in 2003, at the Bank of America Colonial Professional Golf Association (PGA) Tournament (Billings et al., 2006), as well as Suzy Whaley's involvement in the same year at the Greater Hartford Open (Hundley, 2004). A young Michelle Wie made her name initially competing in men's events between 2004 and 2008, competing 13 times including eight times in the PGA Tour. Brittany Lincicome became the sixth woman when she competed at the Barbasol Championship in 2018. Yet, only Zaharias has played a full PGA tournament – 'making the cut' twice in 1945. Most tournaments feature a half-way cut after two rounds of 18 holes, with the bottom half of the field 'missing the cut', and the top half playing out the remaining 36 holes

of the tournament. Although Wie made the cut in one of her 13 appearances, it was in a minor tour event and not on the premier PGA Tour. There are likely to be more women competing against men as golf tours look to continually innovate their events in the future.

In Europe, there has been an increase in non-traditional tournaments that have seen men and women competing against each other, rather than one-off invites. The European Tour launched the GolfSixes in 2017, inviting women competitors for the first time in the 2018 version (Bowes and Kitching, 2019; 2020a). In 2019, the LET combined with the European Senior Tour (then known as the Staysure Tour, for professional male golfers aged 50 and over) and the Challenge Tour (the European Tour feeder tour) to host the Jordan Mixed Open. This event featured 40 players from each tour competing for the same trophy and prize fund, playing to the same pins but from different tees: over the 18 holes, the Challenge Tour played 7100 yards, the Senior Tour played 6601 yards and the LET played 6139 yards (Cooper, 2019). The event was won by Challenge Tour player Daan Huizing, beating LET player Meghan MacLaren by two strokes, with the leading Senior Tour player – Jose Coceres – finishing tied 4<sup>th</sup>. The announcement of the Scandinavian Mixed Open would be the first time the European Tour was combining with the LET to co-sanction an event. Players would be competing for the same trophy and same prize fund, with the women playing off closer tees. The inaugural 2020 tournament was postponed due to Covid-19, but the competition is scheduled to feature in the 2021 season.

This integration of women into men's professional events has received both general and academic attention, particularly around media coverage (Billings et al., 2006; Billings, Angelini and Eastman, 2008; Bowes and Kitching, 2019; 2020a) and more recently the women players' experiences (Bowes and Kitching, 2020b). When women compete against men, they become the primary focus of the media coverage – emphasising the unusualness of this practice in elite sport settings (Billings et al, 2006, Bowes and Kitching 2019a; 2019b). Women's involvement within men's professional golf has been found to bring increased visibility of women in the sport (Bowes and Kitching, 2019a). However, there are gendered angles to women's involvement. Sorenstam, at the aforementioned PGA Colonial in 2003, was four times more likely to be compared to a male golfer than her male counterparts in the same competition (Billings et al, 2006). In other research into the media coverage of the 2019 Solheim Cup, women competitors were often benchmarked against male players of a similar style or personality (Bowes et al, 2020; Bowes and Kitching, 2021). On the whole, this body of research emphasised the complex, gendered nature of women's involvement in competitive golf against men, in relation to media coverage.

## The Gender Politics of Sex-Integrated Golf

Given that golf is a sport in which men and women *do* compete against each other, it is important to consider the nuances of the competition. In considering the possibility of sex-integrated sport more generally, the examples of both Sorenstam and Wie can be seen to act as fuel for the myth of women’s incapability to compete with men at the highest level (Sailors, 2016); both women failed to make the cut in PGA Tour events, and in fact only Zaharias has made the cut in a men’s strokeplay event (Beall, 2020). Sailors (2016) cautioned that although most elite male athletes can beat most elite female athletes in sports that privilege men (and specifically white, Western men, such as golf), it should not be a presumption that every elite male will outperform every elite female. The GolfSixes events have provided further evidence to this from the world of golf, where four of the female players, playing in two teams of two, beat men’s teams for places in the quarterfinals of the competition (Bowes and Kitching 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Despite this, the belief is that men should, or will, beat women, because it is one of the fundamental cornerstones of the socially constructed binary found in sport, as well as broader Western societies (Kane, 1995). These ideas will need to be unpicked and developed to understand the gender politics of sex-integrated golf.

Often, the gender politics of golf are rooted in basic biological assumptions that women’s physiology makes them less capable of playing the sport. In golf, females are widely perceived as physically inferior to their male counterparts – simply measured by driving distance - which is frequently used to frame women as less able golfers (McGinnis et al., 2005). This contributes to the socially constructed gendering of women golfers, stereotyped as slower, less able, less competitive, and less powerful players (McGinnis and Gentry, 2002; McGinnis et al. 2005). This can be considered via the nuances of the statistics from the 2020 PGA Tour and the 2020 LPGA Tour (PGA Tour, 2020; LPGA Tour, 2020).

Insert Table 1: Performance Indicators

	PGA Tour Leader	PGA Tour Average	LPGA Tour Leader	LPGA Tour Average
Driving Distance (Yards)	322.1	296.4	283.1	N/A
Driving Accuracy (% of tee shots on fairway)	74.5	60.22	83.4	73.08
Greens in regulation (%)	74.22	66.3	77.6	66.02
Putts per round	27.88	29.03	28.69	N/A

Table 1 highlights some key performance indicators from the PGA and LPGA Tours (LPGA Tour average not available<sup>1</sup>). The 2020 PGA Tour driving statistics have the average driving distance as 296.4 yards off the tee, with Bryson DeChambeau, the season leader, at 322.1 yards. The leading player on the LPGA tour in driving distance, Bianca Pagdanganan, finished the 2020 season with an average of 283.1 yards. Of course, though, there are women on the LPGA Tour that will outdrive some of the men on the PGA Tour, and Pagdanganan would be sitting 186<sup>th</sup> on the PGA Tour ranking, above eight players that includes six PGA Tour champions, and multiple winners such as Matt Kuchar and Jim Furyk.

Despite the difference in length, there are driving metrics where women golfers come out on top. Marina Alex of the LPGA Tour led the way in 2020 with 83.4% driving accuracy, compared to Jim Furyk on the PGA Tour with 74.5%, and a tour average of 60.22%. Other common metrics used to distinguish golf performance - greens in regulation and putting averages, are decidedly similar. Greens in regulation is a statistic that tracks the number of greens a golfer reaches within the expected number of strokes in relation to par, which always includes two putts. So, for example, a par four would require reaching the green on the second shot. Sei Young Kim on the LPGA Tour led the way with 77.6%, with Jim Furyk recording a PGA Tour best of 74.22%. The PGA Tour average for putts per round was 29.03, Ian Poulter top of the rankings with a tour average of 27.88, Leona Maguire recording an LPGA Tour best of 28.69. The difference in driving distance is often used as a marker of inferiority, yet women are more accurate off the tee, and there is little difference in other key aspects of the game. However, the superiority of male players is often emphasised when women step into 'their' arena and men prevail – the aforementioned examples are cases in point.

To counter the relative physical dominance of men in terms of power and strength (evidenced via driving distance), there are strategies in place that are seen to 'level the playing field' in golf: specifically, the 'ladies tee' (McGinnis and Gentry, 2006). As Channon et al (2016, p. 114) explain, different rules which seemingly 'handicap' men and provide women an apparently necessary competitive advantage – such as the shortening of the length of the golf course via gendered tee boxes - actually emphasises biological differences. It has been found that women only play approximately 86% of the men's golf course (Arthur et al., 2009). However, this may challenge the notion that women can compete on a 'level playing field' with men as some will question whether the competition was fair in the first place (Bowes and Kitching, 2020b). After all – playing devil's advocate – if women have less distance to play across the

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<sup>1</sup> It is noticeable in the world of women's sport the lack of performance data available. From June 2021, KPMG funded a data tracking and insights programme to provide more data, finally bringing the tour in line with the PGA tour (Levins, 2021).

golf course, this might be problematic should, for example, the longest women off the tee match up against the shortest men. The notion that all women should play off the front tee when competing against men is based on assumptions around both gender and sex, and not golfing ability.

The reality is that tee boxes have become infused with gendered politics. Golf courses typically offer between three and five tee boxes from which male golfers may elect to play their tee shot, whilst women are (culturally) restricted to playing the front tees, on average 46 yards closer to the hole (Hundley et al, 2004; Arthur et al, 2009). The freedom of choice over tee boxes that men have imply that men are always stronger, more skilled and more qualified than women, regardless of their golfing ability. The unintended consequence of differing tee boxes marks and highlights women as different or 'other' (McGinnis, Gentry and McQuillan, 2008). The global ruling body of golf, the R&A (2016), admit in their pace of play manual that the closest tee is often gendered and is referred to as the 'ladies tee', and found that this gendering of tee boxes hinders the ability of players to appropriately select the tee boxes suitable for their ability. In short, men do not want to play off the front 'ladies' tee (R&A, 2016). Channon et al (2016) note that the use of alternative playing conditions, such as forward tees for women, reduces the ability to see women's performances as justifiably equal to men's performances. Furthermore, the legitimacy of adjusting tee length by biological sex (and not by ability, as the alternative tee boxes are designed for) in sex-integrated golf have been questioned (Bowes and Kitching, 2020b). This biological rationale perpetuates the assumption that all men are equal, and all women are equal, and all men are superior to all women, and all men and all women have the same physical characteristics and/or abilities.

Sex-integrated golf competitions are complex in their organisation. There is a recognition that those who cannot drive the ball as far (women) require a closer tee box than those who can (men). Clearly, this practical solution to make the game more equitable is not one that is based purely on ability but based on gender assumptions. Research examining women golfers' experiences of competing against men highlighted the centrality and complexity of gender politics, again in relation to tee boxes and their performance (Bowes and Kitching, 2020b). The women golfers were honest in concluding that the men did not expect to lose to them, demonstrating the significance of gender within understanding success in sport. Despite playing off forward tees, which would in principle nullify any (perceived) biological sex differences and make the competition purely about who could get the ball in the hole in the least amount of shots, it was still a space where men were seen as superior (Bowes and Kitching, 2020).

To add further nuance, when the women were successful, they often used the tee box location to dismiss the significance of their success. Their 'narratives of competing against men centre on, and are restricted by, a strong biological argument' (Bowes and Kitching, 2020b, p. 13). This was used in two ways, to justify a diminished performance (for example, a 'we didn't win because we're women and men are stronger and better' sentiment), or to diminish their performance (for example, 'we won, but we were playing off forward tees so we had an advantage'). In this way, 'the notion is presented that the women obviously were never going to win, simply because (all) men are inherently, biologically, better than them' (Bowes and Kitching, 2020b, p. 13). Perhaps then, women can never win – symbolically at least; they might *actually* win and lift the trophy, but the 'levelled playing field' is something that *could* always be contested. Interestingly, women golfers that compete against men position themselves as empowered agents of change who, by their very involvement, challenge the perceptions of women as second-rate athletes (Bowes and Kitching, 2020b). The notion of women competing against, and beating men, could therefore have transformative potential, challenging sexual hierarchies and gendered assumptions about men and women's sporting capabilities (Channon et al., 2016). Politically, this can be understood as resistance to the gendered social order (Lorber, 2010).

### **Concluding thoughts: Understanding sex-integrated golf**

This chapter aimed to present a discussion on the complexities of sex integration in golf by critically considering the role that tee boxes play in 'gendering' the ability of professional golfers in mixed-sex competition. The R&A (2016) are encouraging a de-gendering of tee boxes, highlighting how men are reluctant to play from the closest tees due to their association with women golfers. In golf, the notion of ability is inextricably tied with gender, which results in the length of the hole being adjusted on gendered terms, and justified with biological arguments (Hundley, 2004, Bowes and Kitching, 2020b). However, golf is a sport where sex-integrated competition is becoming increasingly common. Golf organisations can see the commercial value in the interest of the 'battle of the sexes' (Bowes and Kitching, 2019b). This brings these complex sex/gender/ability questions to the fore. This includes considering the appropriateness of standardised tees for men and women competitors, when the tee box location should be decided on the ability of the golfer. Obviously, there is no simple solution to this for mixed-sex tournament organisers, given the vast differences in length of drive on both the men's and women's professional (and amateur) tours. The aim here is to merely highlight the complex nature of tee box location and its entanglement with gendered ideologies.

The gender politics at play in mixed-sex golf positions women's inclusion as both empowering and problematic. As De Haan et al (2016, p. 1250) note: mixed-sex participation can be viewed as a 'currency of equality', yet can simultaneously 'be seen as a violation of social gender expectations concerning the normative gender behaviour of athletes'. In this way, women can compete against men, but it challenges gendered stereotypes and the everyday assumptions about women's bodies and capabilities. With differing tee boxes, the notion of physical difference, and on the part of the women, inability, is emphasised, in some way negating some of the narratives of equality.

Sailors (2016) questioned: should women compete against men? She responded to this question by challenging the notion that a 'yes' or 'no' will suffice, concluding with four possible answers (whilst also suggesting that none of these are entirely adequate): (1) No, so there's no point in talking about it; (2) No, but they should make the attempt anyway; (3) Yes, so mix all the competition and get on with it; and (4) Yes, but there are good reasons not to allow it. The answer is clearly much more complex and context dependent. The arguments about men and women competing in professional sport versus amateur sport, or contact sport versus non-contact sport, where the stakes are different in all settings, highlights the need for a much more nuanced discussion of sex-integrated sport practices. We can look to the successes of Fallon Sherrock competing against men in darts as another example.

Women competing against men in the sport of golf presents an interesting case study for thinking about the impact of gender on sport. For McLachlan (2016), to this day gender is still a 'complex question' in sport, and this discussion of sex-integrated golf and different tee boxes further confirms that. However, McLachlan (2016) also notes that, related to the complexity of gender, sexism is an 'urgent problem' in sport. Although writing about cycling, McLachlan (2016) highlights how there are layers of institutional and cultural sexism that exist within sport, and whose effects are felt especially hard in the women's professional arena. Arguably, the same can be said about women in golf. Outside of these innovative events where men 'allow', or 'invite' women into their competitions, the inherent sexism in golf at a professional level is evident in relation to the number of events available, and the prize funds received.

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