

# **‘The golf course doesn’t know what gender you are’: feminist perspectives in the online blog of a female professional golfer**

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## **Abstract**

Many female athletes are using online platforms to control their own portrayals, and such representations have been examined mostly through neoliberal and postfeminist perspectives, which position female athletes as responsible for their own self-promotion, visibility, success and failure. This paper seeks to employ these and other feminist frameworks in exploring how professional golfer Meghan MacLaren uses her online blog to respond to gender inequality in her profession. Using a myriad of feminist perspectives, the authors discuss the cultural/media conditions through which MacLaren writes her blog, the individual or collective nature of MacLaren’s activism, and the significance of binary outlooks in her blog. Along with shedding light on the contemporary gender politics operating in professional women’s sport, this paper illustrates the synthesis of perspectives that exist when closely examining the voices and choices of one female professional athlete.

**Keywords:** athlete activism, feminism, gender, online blogging, professional golf

## **Introduction**

Available evidence suggests that many female athletes are increasingly media savvy where they use digital platforms for their own self-promotion, brand building and visibility. Though many professional female athletes are constrained financially and contractually in paid sport, some claim that women athletes' use of digital media contributes to patriarchal practices in sport, where their image building and self-promotion is tied to discourses of individualism and does little to advance equality. This paper highlights the blog writing of female professional golfer and athlete advocate Meghan MacLaren, who, among other themes, writes online about the inequalities associated with professional women's golf. In previous work, the authors used MacLaren's blog to examine her assumption as a self-appointed athlete advocate (Kitching et al. 2021), along with her dichotomous identities as a simultaneously trusting and doubting golfer on the course (Kitching et al, 2020), all the while publicly journaling and working within a sport that is largely regarded as heteronormative, exclusive and male dominated (Kitching 2017). In this paper, the authors use overlapping feminist perspectives to examine the voices and choices of one female professional athlete in her online blogging. Bearing in mind the focus from Jackson et al. (2020) on new currents in communication, social justice and social change, this paper highlights the case of a female professional athlete and gender equality advocate, a rarity in academic discourse. In so doing, it should help to inform us about how professional athletes are using online media to engage with structural conditions, power dynamics and gender relations in sporting cultures.

Though female athlete advocates are relatively absent from academic literature, much has been documented on the ways in which sportswomen negotiate multiple demands to self-present in online spaces. A number of authors have examined female professional athletes from individual sports and their interactions with sports media, including the UFC (Ultimate

Fighting Championship) branding and representation of Ronda Rousey (McClearen, 2018), the WTA (Women's Tennis Association) acceptance of Serena Williams (Tredway, 2018), and print media representations of professional golfer Leona Maguire (Kitching and Bowes 2020) and of Ibtihaj (fencer) and Dalilah Muhammad (track and field) (Samie & Toffoletti, 2018). In terms of athlete self-representations Thorpe et al. (2017) have made an excellent contribution to the understanding of three intersecting feminist approaches in their paper examining surfer Alana Blanchard who, they comment, is not a politically involved athlete. While we leaned on and learned from the Thorpe et al., (2017) paper, our work offers something different, where with MacLaren as both the subject and co-author, and with the written word her representation strategy, we have before us a politically motivated athlete and change agent. Utilising second and third wave feminist frameworks will highlight the contradiction of an athlete writing progressively in postfeminist/neoliberal conditions but competing in a heteronormative sport where strict binary conditions prevail.

Previous work by the primary authors in golf environments has utilised both second and third wave feminisms in highlighting the marginalisation, trivialisation, underrepresentation and exclusion of females and the simultaneous privileging of men and men's activities under patriarchy (Bowes and Kitching 2019; Bowes and Kitching 2020; Kitching et al. 2020, Kitching et al. 2021). Through our work on digital media athlete representations, we have also utilised Toffoletti's work around postfeminism as a sensibility (Francombe-Webb & Toffoletti, 2018). Toffoletti et al., (2018) advocate for "critical engagements with postfeminism that explore how postfeminist sentiments manifest, are made sense of and expressed in particular ways that are attuned to local contexts and the cultures and practices of different sports" (p.10). Where our previous work had limited opportunity for deep theoretical reflection (and while we can't claim to cover every tenet of feminism) our motivation here is to give sufficient space to

a combination of neo-liberal/postfeminist perspectives, and thereafter liberal, critical and radical feminisms, in the hope that a collection of frameworks can help us to shed light on existing gender relations in professional women's sport. Paradoxically, in conducting this research, the authors are highly conscious that the athlete under study is a white, western, educated professional, and in having this focus, recognise that there are many absent voices, thereby potentially doing an injustice to narratives of gender empowerment and equality in professional sport. Nonetheless, situated in a patriarchal and heteronormative culture of golf, we believe that an examination of the gendered discourses and conditions affecting MacLaren's professional sports career and the fore fronting of her distinctive voice is of significance.

### **Digital media, online spaces and women athletes**

While our key interest in this paper is an appraisal of MacLaren's written word responses to gender inequality in her profession, the social conditions surrounding women athletes' choices in self-representing online are to the fore. Several commentators have pointed to the potential for digital media, such as social networking sites and online blogs, to redress the lack of coverage and challenge prevailing hegemonic media representations of female athletes (Antunovic & Hardin 2012; Bruce & Hardin 2014; Toffoletti & Thorpe 2018b). Antunovic and Hardin (2012) contend that social media harbours feminist potential to challenge dominant representational regimes by providing avenues for sporting women to enhance their visibility and self-represent on their own terms. The increased visibility of female athletes, and the opportunity for them to adopt new – perhaps postfeminist – strategies of identity construction, prompted Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) to highlight the role social media can play in reworking normative gender and sexual identities in sport. In particular, blogging has received some attention for the way that the medium can provide a space for sportswomen, fans and commentators to share, debate and enhance the visibility of women's sport (Antunovic &

Hardin, 2012, 2015; Bruce & Hardin, 2014; La Voi & Calhoun, 2014). Antunovic and Hardin (2013) attest that as blogging gains popularity, women's ubiquity in the blogosphere increases, thereby assisting 'women's efforts toward social change and provide visibility to their endeavours' (p. 1374). Skateboarding blogs have offered alternatives to other online representations, where participants embraced more fluid definitions of sporting femininities, rejected male/female binaries and challenged male dominated institutions (MacKay & Dallaire, 2012, 2013). Overall, sportswomen-driven fora can provide a space for sportswomen to challenge rigid gender hierarchies, thereby contesting the discourses that devalue sportswomen, and prompting both individualised and collective transformation in the representation of female athletes.

While many have noted that female athletes are starting to carve out spaces through self-defined empowerment, Toffoletti (2016) cautions that these self-representations are sometimes sexualised and superficial and ignore the broader, more powerful structural conditions at play. Pocock and Skey (2022) discuss the strategies used by sportswomen in managing their distance to protect themselves online, while at the same time striving to build connections with young girl followers. Gendered performances are evident in the production of images and construction of identities among elite female athletes, with evidence suggesting that some female athletes self-represent in problematic ways, where they do little to advance women's sport or the broader gender arrangements influencing their sporting femininities (Barnett, 2017; Devonport et al., 2019; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a). Similarly, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) query the transformative capacity of user-generated digital communication to invoke alternative narratives of femininity. Given that, like its traditional form, digital media are still dominated by male athletes and men's sport, and commentary that can sometimes polarise or entrench rather than challenge gender ideologies, Sanderson (2013) suggests that social media provide

a further platform for sexist commentary. And, in asking whether digital media could ‘free female athletes from the tyranny of traditional media’, La Voi and Calhoun (2014, p. 327) conclude that it does not provide a space to fully contest the status quo of gender narratives in sport. In relation to blogging, Antunovic and Hardin (2013) caution that some women’s sports blogs reproduce hegemonic norms around gendered sporting bodies and their engagement with social issues varies. So, whilst research points to the benefits of online spaces for female athletes, there is caution about the transformative potential of female athlete engagement in online spaces.

### **Professional women’s golf**

There has been an increasing amount of academic attention paid to the world of women’s professional golf. Jamieson (2015, p.502) highlights how women’s professional golf is worth investigating, as a ‘promising, complicated, cultural space for an interrogation of economic, political, social, and cultural forms of sporting globalisations’. Ethnographic research on the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) tour in America has highlighted women’s status as outsiders within the world of professional golf (Crosset, 1995), something that is pertinent today where gender disparities exist in terms of visibility, endorsements and prize money.

In America, women competing on the 2022 LPGA tour have a 33-event schedule, with a total prize purse of \$87million (LPGA 2022). By comparison, the season-ending PGA Tour Championship in 2022 had a total purse of \$75million (PGA Tour 2022). In Europe, the Ladies European Tour has increased its prize money to over €24 million for 2022, compared to a purse of over €200million for the men’s DP World Tour (formerly the men’s European Tour) (Ladies European Tour 2022; Golf Channel 2021). While these figures illustrate the stark contrast in potential earnings between women and men in professional golf, the women’s game has gained

ground in recent years, while a series of mixed professional events have taken place in Australia, Jordan, Sweden and Northern Ireland, where men and women compete at the same venue for equal prize money. As one of the first of its kind, the Jordan event received a lot of negative attention, as noted by MacLaren when she tweeted a sample of replies to a BBC Sport article about the event. In a subsequent post she commented “the point so many people seem to miss is that you don’t have to compare women’s golf to men’s golf. One can exist alongside the other and be equally as entertaining, as demanding, as dramatic as the other (April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019). MacLaren ended up finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> behind a man at that event.

Douglas and Carless have published a wealth of qualitative evidence around the performances and lifestyles of female golf professionals particularly using poetry and narratives, much of which takes a psychological perspective, e.g., Douglas and Carless (2009). Our research has examined both print and online media depictions of female professional golfers, with findings showing how athletes are still presented in gendered ways (Bowes and Kitching 2019a;2019b; Bowes and Kitching 2021; Kitching and Bowes 2020). Professional golfers generally speaking, do not get involved in activism or culturally sensitive issues; for example, although Tiger Woods instigated the elevation of professional golf into the public consciousness, he steers clear of politically sensitive issues such as race, ethnicity or politics (Starn, 2011). A fan of both Woods – and Billy Jean King – Meghan MacLaren is no such athlete.

### **Meghan MacLaren**

Meghan MacLaren is a professional golfer from England, and a two-time winner on the Ladies’ European Tour (LET). As of September 2022, she ranked 9<sup>th</sup> on the LET order of merit and 353<sup>rd</sup> in the official world golf rankings (Ladies European Tour, 2022; Rolex Rankings, 2022). MacLaren plays most of her golf on the LET, and also in America on the LPGA Access tour

in an attempt to win that so far elusive LPGA tour card. She has become as well known for her honest and insightful engagement on social media – through twitter and her blog ([www.megmaclaren.com](http://www.megmaclaren.com)) – as she has for her golf. MacLaren has established herself as an advocate for increased pay, terms and opportunities for women players and has received many plaudits for her posts. In 2019 MacLaren was identified by Golf Monthly as one of the top 10 professional golfers to follow on Twitter, the only female to appear on the list (Heath, 2019). Originally hosted on WordPress, MacLaren posts a blog (all text) on average once a month, with the posts averaging at 794 words (69 blogs in total) and all posts linked to her Twitter profile. As of September 2020, her blog had 45,146 hits. In January 2021 MacLaren upgraded her blog site from a mainly textual written platform to a more visual website, accompanied by images of her in golfing action. The new site allows for monetary contributions, and while viewing numbers cannot be seen, blog popularity can be.

While MacLaren has been writing her blog since February 2015, we chose to focus on the period of her career as a professional golfer (since November 2016), a time when conversations around gender equality in professional sports were becoming mainstream (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). From her first post after turning professional (22<sup>nd</sup> December 2016) to the most recent one (June 2022), MacLaren has written 60 blogs. The large majority of her blogs centre around her own golf performance (32), including her addiction to golf (e.g. 18<sup>th</sup> July 2020), the process of getting better (e.g. 12<sup>th</sup> January 2017), getting in the zone to perform (e.g. 12<sup>th</sup> March 2018) and trusting herself (e.g. 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2016). While she shows some insight on “the way the world views women’s sport” (3<sup>rd</sup> May 2018), of the total blogs she has penned, MacLaren has written blog posts around men’s sport and professional golf (9), where she critiques the golf games of Rory McIlroy (3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019), Byrson DeChambeau (18<sup>th</sup> July 2020) and the superiority of Tiger Woods (20<sup>th</sup> April 2019, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2017) and writes about key



events in men's professional golf, (e.g. Matsuyama's Masters win 12<sup>th</sup> April 2021). She also devotes an entire post to cricketer Ben Stokes (26<sup>th</sup> August 2019). Her other posts include perspectives on thinking and writing (10), gender equality issues in professional golf (6) and general news events (3). Our interest here is the 6 blogs she wrote in which she spoke directly to gender politics in professional golf, which, when posted on Twitter generated significant interactions (704 retweets and 274 replies in total), for example, instances of MacLaren advocating for women's professional golf or choosing to confront or challenge a particular scenario around gender equality (May 2018, June and July 2019, February and May 2020 and March 2021). These blogs form the basis of our discussion. While it could be argued that these posts comprise a small data set, we argue for the wider significance of this case, particularly as a woman professional athlete speaking against the grain for little if any reward. Many professional women athletes are under pressure to feel grateful for the opportunity to compete as professionals, perhaps inhibiting them from speaking critically about their profession (Pavlidis, 2020). In our other work, MacLaren has spoken about the balance to be achieved between contributing to incremental progress in the sport and her personal wellbeing, admitting that negative interactions on social media have left her "angry or upset" (Kitching et al. 2021).

In collaborating with MacLaren – and as discussed in more depth in our recent collaboration (Kitching et al. 2021) – ethical considerations are salient. Presenting data from her personalised (though public) athlete blog and subjecting it to research analysis may create obvious fears, discomforts and tensions for MacLaren. Further, it is possible that her awareness of academic researchers analysing her blogposts could have affected or altered the content of her blog. Because of the use of her blog throughout this paper MacLaren has been included as an author. While our previous paper and chapter with MacLaren included a written response from Meghan, for this paper we sought her review of the paper prior to submission and her consent

to be included as an author. On her approval (a brief response is mentioned in the closing section), we submitted the paper with MacLaren as co-author. Finally, while she has read and approved the paper, references to ‘we’ and ‘our’ in the workings of the paper can be attributed to the first and second authors.

### **Feminist Theory in (Digital) Sports Media Research**

Contemporary perspectives on feminism have much to offer in terms of the traditional tenets of female athlete power and agency, along with the intersections of athlete subjectivities and representational politics. Scholars such as Holly Thorpe, Kim Toffoletti and Dunja Antunovic have made an enormous contribution to this thinking in feminist sports media research, and further call for more theoretically rigorous engagements with feminisms in order to understand how sportswomen engage with online media. Antunovic and Whiteside (2018) comment that feminist sports media scholarship that is grounded in theoretical frameworks can help “better detect gaps, question taken-for-granted assumptions, and develop more efficient strategies for change” (p.125). Rather than delineating versions and waves of competing feminisms (Caudwell, 2011), there have been calls for discussion on the intersections and overlaps between different strands of feminism, which can help to further understanding of the strategies sportswomen use to engage with social media (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018; Thorpe et al., 2017). Thorpe et al. (2017) conclude their paper by suggesting that synthesising feminist perspectives is beneficial to understanding female athlete subjectivities, but also the personal, political and professional purposes for which female athletes use online media, as situated within global neoliberalism.

Our key interest in this paper is a consideration of feminist frameworks that may influence the choices and inform the writing of a professional female athlete. Both neo-liberal feminism and

postfeminism are to the fore in explaining the social conditions that influence the choices that a professional female athlete such as MacLaren makes to self-represent her written blogs so openly and publicly in the modern online era. However, in order to make sense of MacLaren's written word response to gender inequality, and her position as an athlete in a heteronormative sport, an array of feminisms will be required, including earlier strands of liberal, radical, critical and third wave feminism, and here we rely on the work of Birrell (2000) and Scraton and Flintoff (2013). The ensuing sections detail our theoretical discussion around MacLaren's written word responses to gender inequality issues in professional golf. Initially, the discussion centres on the neoliberal/postfeminist conditions that influence MacLaren's choices around publicly challenging the discourse on gender inequality. Thereafter the authors use liberal, radical and critical feminisms to analyse her direct confrontations with gender inequality, including individual versus collective activism, and the binary outlooks used in her.

### **Conditions and choices – the online era**

Neoliberal feminism situates women in the economic space, whereby female athletes have freedom of choice, can empower themselves, and use the market to find solutions to gender inequality. This neoliberal approach assumes that any success the female athlete is likely to achieve must be done through self-motivation and persistence, where they must demonstrate entrepreneurial nous thereby becoming personally responsible for their own success and failure. While gender inequality is critiqued under this lens, Banet-Weiser (2015a) suggests that in 'economies of visibility', women are compelled to assume responsibility for finding innovative solutions to gender discrimination. From the outset, it could be said that MacLaren's choice of self-representation through her blogging is a by-product of neoliberal feminism. While her blog was initially a reflective exercise on her performances, it has become central to building her profile as a professional athlete. Arising from her blog she has featured in

numerous print news articles in the UK and the US, she has commentated on BBC 5 Live radio, written a script for an LET launch, is a regular columnist for golf outlet Today's Golfer, and has gained three new sponsors in 2021. On the other hand, as noted in our previous article (Kitching et al. 2020), MacLaren's online blog presence perhaps highlights the economic reality of being an underpaid professional athlete where her writing is both a result of and response to her precarious profession.

Under neo-liberal feminism, the burden of responsibility to address gender inequalities tends to fall to the individual women themselves who are expected not only to "self-manage and self-regulate but be sufficiently empowered through the market to find their own solutions to wider gender injustices" alongside producing their brand to garner greater visibility (Thorpe et al., 2017). Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) also challenge us to consider the labour of digital visibility for sportswomen, explaining that the realities of cultivating an online presence are difficult, whereby athletes must balance concerns about their representations in seeking solutions to problems that were not of their making. MacLaren's assumption of responsibility around female golfer advocacy (Kitching et al. 2021), which though clearly unplanned, can illustrate neoliberal feminism at play, whereby she holds herself publicly accountable ('I like to think I'm a good representative for our tour', 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019). Further, the time and energy she devotes to openly appraising and rationalising her successes and failures could be indicative of neoliberal discourses around personal determination and individual drive. Though she communicates a 'warts and all' version of her career, in the way MacLaren has gained notoriety as a writer and become a self-appointed athlete advocate, one could argue that MacLaren has internalised discourses of self-entrepreneurialism in relation to her blogging and has used this to her advantage.

Contemporary athlete representation online has often been centred around image based self-representation. While MacLaren's written word is the focus here, it's important to note that up until the change in her blog appearance in January 2021, MacLaren's body and image was comparatively absent from the blog platform. Her new website incorporates photos from golf environments, the majority of which are action shots and positioned in golf environments. Here, one could say that until recently MacLaren resisted the prevailing female athlete identity discourses in her online representation, much of which are driven by neo-liberal perspectives. While the responsibility may be on the individual athlete to generate media interest and notoriety, under neoliberal frameworks there is also an assumption that women athletes will broadcast their best self. Douglas and Carless (2015) discuss how female golfers' behaviours are different behind the scenes than when performing 'on show in the public gaze', where they often present a powerful or indefatigable athlete self, the best (as opposed to the most honest) version of themselves. In spite of the public scrutiny of her blog, and as discussed elsewhere (Kitching et al. 2020) this is far from the case with MacLaren. Instead, she chooses to rely on textual written word for her self-representation, and not always highlighting sporting success stories.

While postfeminism has been considered as signalling the end of feminism in some quarters, in line with neoliberalism, this paper uses Gill's (2007) definition of postfeminism as a cultural sentiment, where femininity is marked by discipline, intensified self-surveillance and individualised empowerment. Different to neo-liberal feminism, under postfeminism there is recognition of underlying social and historical relations, and the patriarchal and capitalist conditions that sustain gender inequality. In this way Gill (2016) and Fullagar et al. (2018) suggest that postfeminism must be understood as a critical object of inquiry or a category of analysis. Toffoletti advocates for a postfeminist sensibility, which 'alerts us to the emergence

and prevalence of neoliberalism in shaping the operations of sexism in sport media by constructing the female athlete as somehow complicit in her own marginalisation' (Toffoletti, 2016, p.205). While the blog has supported her profile as a writer, and though she has only recently added an option for voluntary contributions, MacLaren communicates no commercial association or interests through the platform, perhaps illustrating her desire to maintain control over her online identity and her freedom of choice. These elements of self-presentation, whereby she is freely choosing and has no obligation to sponsors or other third parties, demonstrates how individualism might have the potential to critically challenge broader social and cultural relations, as promised under postfeminist frameworks. The following sections employ more traditional feminist frameworks in appraising MacLaren's explicit confrontations with gender inequality in her profession.

### **Individualism V Collectivism**

Through her blogging it is clear that MacLaren identifies 'bigger picture' structural inequalities for female professional golfers, and she writes about change, on both smaller and grander scales. In referring to women's football as "exhilarating and inspiring", she comments that this "couldn't have happened without individuals not scared of tearing down conventions and stereotypes and privilege" (3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019). This post also shows MacLaren's action-oriented agenda:

I'm tired of having to point out this issue, tired of the disparaging treatment, tired of the everyday instances that show how far apart these worlds are and tired of people that don't care anyway. I'm tired of probably coming across as a whiny woman who will never be satisfied with what I get. But I'm simultaneously desperate to never stop pushing this issue until it's no longer an issue. Things are changing, and I'm

excited to be a part of this world that is making them change...Just don't rest on it. (3<sup>rd</sup> June 2019)

In the same post she acknowledges that she is exhausted from the critical stance she takes and criticises others ('too many people only care when it's personal', 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2019). In spite of the change agenda mentioned above, in what is an awareness of deeper structural and patriarchal practices at play, MacLaren acknowledges in her post the following month that her and her fellow players' efforts for activism and change might be futile:

Players are limited, or think they are limited, in what they can do to support the genuine growth of this tour. We think it is beyond us, above us, a waste of our time anyway. We've got golf to focus on. That might be right...I'm tired of making a case for why we deserve more respect than we get when I have no idea if the people with the power to make that happen – within this organisation and well beyond it – really get it. Really understand it. ...I've been exposed to enough of the world of sport, in a multitude of avenues, to know how important this is. And maybe I'm just a player who really can't change very much...(3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019)

Culture change was previously explored in female professional golf environments, where the authors found that younger female professionals were much more likely to envisage change than female professionals nearing the end of their careers (Kitching et al., 2017). MacLaren recognises that her individual voice alone may never overcome these obstacles. In an earlier post, she claims that change will never happen: "But fact check this to death; the numbers might change a little. The bigger picture...it won't change at all" (3<sup>rd</sup> May 2018). In this same post she concedes that change is not easy:

There are attempts to bridge the inequality gap. I have a lot of respect for the people in charge of most of the major professional golf tours in the world right now; from what I can see they are genuinely trying...Without wanting to piss off the PGA of Australia...I feel slightly guilty for criticising one of the best attempts at golfing gender equality. (3<sup>rd</sup> May 2018)

Similarly:

I know competing in this market, as a tour, is beyond difficult. I know the commercial, political, geographical realities of who we are and where we exist means things can't just happen because we all care and we all want them to. I know finding sponsors and partners and tournaments is quite often nothing to do with who we are as players or what our abilities are. I'm not naive. That side of growing our tour is something that I don't envy for anyone...There will always be limits to what organisations are capable of, whether financial or logistical or otherwise, and the outside world is not always aware of those. It is easy to criticise, to place blame. But everyone is capable of more. (3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019).

These posts illustrate the ebb and flow of an individual change agent operating in the face of historically reproduced inequalities. Under neo-liberal feminism, it could be said that MacLaren shows sensitivity to market forces, the financial climate, the inevitability of economics holding women's golf back. She is also careful not to upset those who work in and for women's golf. On the other hand, one could say that these posts reject neo-liberal feminism, whereby MacLaren recognises that as flexible and entrepreneurial as she has been, neither the market, nor one individual will change oppressive relations in professional golf. In what is more akin to a critical postfeminist acknowledgement of the patriarchal and cultural conditions



at play (Francombe-Webb & Toffoletti, 2018), MacLaren suggests that those in power and authority in golf (and beyond) have a job to do in reforming and re-energising women's professional golf in Europe. While MacLaren's individual-oriented change agenda exhibits awareness of wider systemic issues at play, her outlook could also be informed by critical or socialist feminist frameworks that are derived from capitalism and economic exploitation and are somewhat concerned with the potential for resistance and change (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

While MacLaren is an individual athlete and apparently alone in pursuing gender equality in her profession, there are times where collectivism is visible. In the July 2019 post (see earlier), she uses collective terms, e.g. "we think it's beyond us" and she calls on others too, where she mentions "everyone is capable of more". Further, she accepts her role as an athlete advocate in women's golf, even if it is to the detriment of her own game:

I haven't yet moved past the stage of caring. I hope I never do. I like to think I'm a good representative for our tour...I spend half my time worrying that I'm sucking life out of my own golfing potential by concerning myself with the life of the LET (3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019)

Part of this advocacy is the recognition of women in golf. In one post she speaks of 'the incredible Se Ri Pak', who has been appraised in previous research (Crouse, 2013):

A woman who inspired other women. An athlete who inspired other athletes. A champion who inspired other champions. A woman who showed that it is possible to smash ceilings that others with a certain mindset will put in your way. Se Ri Pak is responsible for far more major champions than Hank Haney ever will be.

In a more recent post she similarly spoke in support of others:

For the ones in power, breaking through glass ceiling after glass ceiling while protecting others from the shards of glass as they shatter. Becca Hembrough and Alex Armas and Lisa Cornwell, leading the way loudly and unapologetically because they have no reason not to. Because they understand what leadership sounds like – and it isn't silence. (March 8<sup>th</sup> 2021)

There is evidence that women in golf have in the past been complicit in the marginalisation of other women in golf, thereby ensuring that gender disparities prevail in the sport (Kitching, 2017). In supporting other women in the game, MacLaren takes a different stance, and while this evidence may not stretch to the collective activism often associated with online blogging and third wave feminism (e.g., MacKay & Dallaire, 2014) MacLaren operates in the same way that Stewart (2018) finds cyclist Nicola Cooke as self-sacrificing and other-directed. In summary then, while the individualism associated with both neoliberal feminism is to the fore as recounted in the previous section in MacLaren's choices around textual self-representation, here we see how MacLaren sometimes rejects this individualism to pursue more critical outlooks, a change agenda and support for other women golfers.

### **Confronting gender inequality – binary outlooks?**

MacLaren's wrote her first critically positioned post on gender politics in golf in May 2018, in which she elaborates on multiple issues, from sponsorship and product support, "golfing inequality in possibly its most black and white form", to media coverage in relation to two events occurring simultaneously in Morocco, where the men's tournament was televised live, but the women's event wasn't (3<sup>rd</sup> May 2018):

...the camera crews were already there... would moving a few of them 100 yards, from the men's course to the women's course, really be that

difficult? I know it's far from that simple. Contracts, money, logistics, companies, rights etc. But for all the talk of supporting women's golf, of wanting to help it grow... taking advantage of the opportunities that are staring you in the face seems like a pretty good place to start.

In the same post, she discusses the lack of tournaments for female professional golfers, particularly in Europe, and in many of the examples given, she makes a direct comparison between men's and women's professional golf, and links the lack of tournaments for women to the pay gap in men's and women's golf:

A third of the LET schedule this year is already over...For those players their season may have started in Morocco in April. With the lack of full field events, those same players may not have the opportunity to play on the main tour again until France... in September... five months later. In that five month period, there are 15 events (again excluding majors and WGCs) on the men's European Tour. Two players with roughly the same categories on the two tours would get in a similar proportion of the overall schedule... yet the male player has potentially 15 more opportunities in the same time frame to play; to develop; to learn and to improve (and to make money).

Money... the average purse on the LET for 2018, excluding majors, is €350,000. Take out the Scottish Open, which is elevated because of the LPGA, and that average drops to roughly €285,000. The average purse on the men's European Tour, discounting majors and WGCs, is just over €2,500,000...Just writing it makes me feel a bit sick.

Less sponsorship, less product and equipment support, less hospitality, more barriers... for doing exactly the same thing...A birdie on the last to

make the cut is still a birdie on the last to make the cut. The golf course doesn't know what gender you are. Why does gender, or the country that you play golf in, entitle you to more or less?

Maclaren's direct comparison between women's and men's professional golf in her May 2018 post is understandable given the events she talks about are mixed gender events, and particularly so given gender segregated nature of golf, where male/female binaries are evident in scorecards, tee boxes and the language around golf (Arthur et al., 2011; Hundley, 2004). However, these types of comparisons are mostly used by liberal feminists, who write in relation to equality of access and opportunity (e.g. women's access to private golf club membership) perhaps without critiquing the structures that cause inequality (Birrell, 2000; Scraton & Flintoff, 2002; 2013). In 2019, MacLaren shifted her arguments towards directly challenging male commentators, fans and players. In June 2019, when commentator and golf coach Hank Haney made disparaging comments about Korean female professionals, MacLaren was damning in her criticism and, more pointedly, the dangerous wider message it promoted. Here she shows her willingness to critique the normalisation of these casual comments:

...to him, women's golf is irrelevant. It is not worth his research. Not worth his knowledge. Not worth his understanding, or his curiosity, or his intellect. As if the skills required to make it to the top, to win major championships, are not worthy. Not in comparison to the men's game. And that is the mindset, the conception, that is too prevalent in this world where women are desperately and powerfully trying to prove that disparity goes deeper.

...to let him, and a whole culture of golf 'fans', get away with thinking those comments were acceptable or justified would be monumentally disillusioned. They may well have sounded worse than he meant them to.

But it's the influence he exerts. It's the normalisation of casual yet concrete discrimination. Comments that are representative of a line of thinking that is more disrespectful than I can begin to explain. (3<sup>rd</sup> June 2019)

This post shows MacLaren directly challenging a male coach and “a whole culture of golf fans” and the normalisation of their comments. The following month, MacLaren mentions how her perspective on gender equality in professional golf is ignored or criticised and she dedicates some space to challenging naysayers; in this open letter blog she refers specifically to male professionals and their opposition to her equality arguments:

We deserve respect. I'll say that in every interview I ever do and defend myself as rationally as possible on social media despite being told by a mixture of nobodies, golf fans, and male tour professionals, in both casual ignorance and blind contempt, that I am wrong. That we are not worth it. (3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019)

Taken with the previous month's blog, this quote shows how MacLaren appears fearless in tackling detractors, including directly challenging male golf professionals and especially where this oppressive online discourse could become normalised or acceptable. From a neo-liberal viewpoint, MacLaren's approach here is almost unexpected, where it would be expected that female athletes would be less concerned with confrontations and more concerned with their appearances or the possible backlash from detractors (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018a). From another perspective, combined with the change agenda mentioned previously, this could be symbolic of radical feminist outlooks which can often focus on the systemic maintenance of male power, men's oppression of women and through which binary gender differences can become overemphasised (Scruton & Flintoff, 2013). It also further emphasises the binary or oppositional account of gender politics as male versus female. While her 2020 posts show a progression in her argument beyond direct comparisons and critique of male commentators,

along with a deeper appreciation for structural inequalities, MacLaren continues to use traditional gender affiliations:

My 'argument' for so long has not been that women simply deserve equal pay as golfers, the end. My argument is simply that in a supply and demand marketplace, if the supplies were given equal treatment, the demand would be much closer together than some people are willing to accept. Equal treatment is where all the questions lie, where all those with stakes in this game must look at themselves and ask if they can do better. Ask themselves what they would say when their daughter asks why playing golf may not be a viable career path when her brother didn't have to wonder. Ask why it is ok to report on a male losing in the final of a tournament but not a woman winning in the final of the corresponding tournament on the same course at the same time. Ask why it is ok to have 190 pictures of golfers in a magazine and not one of them be of a woman. Ask if you're really ok with why the winner of a men's tournament receives a cheque 57 times the amount of the female winner of the corresponding tournament (yes, 57).

In May 2020, MacLaren used another strategy of removing gender in order to highlight the absurdity of the comparisons between male and female players:

If I told you the number one player in the world broke a nearly 20-year-old record held by Tiger Woods when she went 114 consecutive holes without a bogey, would you be impressed? If I told you a rookie had a win, more top 10s and more runner up finishes than Robert McIntyre last year, would you be able to name her? ... If I told you the 2019 leading PGA Tour player in GIR averaged 73.06%... and 27 LPGA players averaged

higher than that, what would you say? Would you tell me the courses are shorter so it's irrelevant? Would you tell me they probably falsified their data, as one male tour pro insinuated the last time I tweeted about GIR stats? (21<sup>st</sup> May 2020)

In some ways, removing gender can be linked to the 'undoing' of gender as written about by Channon (2014), who supposes that by recognising gender as a flexible and changeable construct, people can act in ways that challenge the assumptions around appropriate ways for men and women to behave. This stance also ties in somewhat with our previous work on sex integration in professional golf (Bowes and Kitching 2020). However, in MacLaren's writing, there is little or no mention of the non-binary, fluid or messy multiplicity of gender identities.

In summary, while MacLaren's arguments became more nuanced over time, her response to equality issues is influenced by both liberal and radical feminist outlooks whilst simultaneously situated in a neoliberal or postfeminist culture. In the way that she pitted men's and women's pay, access and opportunity in direct opposition, alongside directly confronting male commentators, fans and coaches, MacLaren is writing within the confines of traditional gender segregation associated with golf. Further, as alluded to by Fullagar et al. (2018), MacLaren's blogs show little room for intersectional moments and non-binary identities that open up the category of 'woman' as more than a homogenous group. In contrast to the messy multiplicity and fluid identities that are often associated with action-oriented feminist online blogging (aside from the critique of Hank Haney's comments on Asian golfers), MacLaren's arguments largely ignore overt discussions of class, sexuality, disability, nationality and religion. From a neoliberal feminist position, maintaining the male versus female argument could be linked to the individualism associated with her building her profile as a golf writer, and as noted by

(Heinecken, 2016) this may be part of a strategy used by the likes of female athletes to be viewed as 'gender-acceptable'.

### **The end game**

From the outset, the choices MacLaren makes around challenging gender inequality so publicly reflect the individualism, personal responsibility and athlete agency associated with neo-liberal feminist conditions. As a result of using her voice MacLaren has gained sponsors and one could say that she has personally benefitted in some way. Going beyond this perspective, through her blogging, MacLaren dedicates some space to challenging gender inequality in a deeper sense and for a broader purpose where she critiques the underlying (patriarchal and systemic) cultural conditions of female golf. From a postfeminist perspective, one could say that MacLaren was left with no choice but to go out on her own to challenge the structures influencing professional women's golf. This is also evident in the way that she individually assumes the role and responsibility of athlete advocate, using her online platform to speak out on behalf of others. While the public choices MacLaren makes around confronting gender politics are situated in a postfeminist era, the strategies and positions in her written word around gender inequality are closely aligned with more traditional feminist discourses, whereby she perpetuates binaries related to gender that prevail in the world of golf. In summary, the approaches used by MacLaren to confront gender inequality in her profession, in firstly choosing to speak out, advocating on behalf of others, directly comparing men's and women's professional golf, publicly challenging male commentators, fans and players, and using fixed gender binaries convey the myriad of feminist perspectives offered by MacLaren in her blog.

By focusing on one female athlete's responses to gender inequality, this paper highlights the representation and production of diverse gendered sporting subjectivities through online media.



By highlighting this myriad of feminist perspectives, the authors have attempted to show the contradictory ways that a female professional golfer embodies and enacts on her subjectivities in the context of a global golf economy and marketplace. These lenses allow us to see the personal and political choices made by female professional athletes as they self-represent using online media. Further, MacLaren's online response to gender inequality informs us how contemporary gender relations are operating, particularly in a historically and culturally significant environment such as golf. This study is one of few examining the perspective of an individual female professional athlete activist who has not yet reached the pinnacle of the world stage in their sport.

We know that golf – one of the safest and most popular leisure activities in the Covid era (Sports Marketing Surveys, 2021) – has a long history in maintaining cultural ideologies around binary gender differences and valorising privilege, able-bodiedness, heterosexuality and whiteness (Jamieson, 2001, 2015). While she may be unsettling and disrupting the status quo in women's golf, in contrast to the skateboarding blogs which have been shown to provide a platform for awareness and recognition of intersectionality, cultural difference, alternative femininities and rejection of binaries (MacKay & Dallaire, 2012), MacLaren writes within very particular boundaries, hardly challenging normative assumptions of patriarchal culture and revealing much about the way the sport may have shaped her. It is difficult for MacLaren to be radical – in order to be heard in the golf community she must display acceptable and conventional femininity (not be a 'whiny woman', 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2019) and debate acceptable subjects (e.g. 'Don't worry this is not a blog about periods', 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2020). Further, while she writes much about the performance of the mind, she writes nothing about her body, and unlike many other female athletes in the digital era, her blog posts have no accompanying images, instead foregrounding the power of her written word. She holds a unique position in the

patriarchal environment of golf where she operates within the confines of her gender, doing justice to it, while she simultaneously critiques and challenges gender inequality, even ‘undoing’ gender. Further, like Toffoletti et al. (2018) suggest, we must acknowledge that the theoretical concepts used here predominantly serve Western culture and that this may be yet another study on narratives of female athlete empowerment that overlooks the invisibility and marginalisation of nonnormative groups and the intersections of class, race, religion, age, disability, sexuality. However, while it may be argued that golf is perhaps not a sport of the oppressed nor the marginalised, this should not depreciate the lived experience for one athlete and her hope for change.

Upon reviewing this paper prior to submission, MacLaren wrote in an email to the primary authors, referring to a mixed gender professional tournament:

When people either read (through my writing) or see on TV through these events – the display of what golf is when stripped back of gender differences it starts to change people’s perspective on why inequality exists. I have found over time that trying to explain or give reason for the many structural inequalities that exist does not do much to start conversations or change perspectives – instead, giving them examples of similar skill levels...opens their eyes to a perspective they may not have thought about (June 2021)

Here we see MacLaren suggesting that undoing gender is a useful strategy “to start conversations or change perspectives”, and also more evidence of her again taking the mantle to pursue change. In this vein, and in this search for progress in professional women’s sport, Baer (2016) suggests that the focus on the individual under neoliberalism might make change more difficult. Similarly, Antunovic & Whiteside (2018) suggest that combining feminist

approaches to sports media research reminds us that structural transformation requires much more than individual achievement. In the way that we have both new and older feminisms, it may be that female athlete activists such as MacLaren will require a similar blend of cross-generational, cross-community collective activism in order to see beyond immediate assumptions, find the nuance, challenge power and confront the risks and uncertainties. This may guide political action and advance the change process towards gender equity in professional women's golf.

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