

Bowes, A. and Kitching, N. (Forthcoming 2019). 'Battle of the sixes': Investigating print media representations of female professional golfers competing in a men's tour event. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. Available online.

## **'Battle of the Sixes': Investigating Print Media Representations of Female Professional Golfers Competing in a Men's Tour Event**

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### **Abstract:**

In May 2018, the men's European Tour invited five female professional golfers to compete in its GolfSixes event in England, against 27 professional male players. This was significant, particularly given the female struggle for equality of access, participation, employment and decision making in golf settings. This research investigates the print media representation of these five female professional golfers competing in this male domain. Using the Nexis database, data was collected from print newspapers in the United Kingdom and Ireland over six days before, during and after the event. Following thematic analysis, findings highlight a double-edged sword to media coverage of female athletes competing against men; women received greater media coverage when in the male sport spotlight, but the coverage was framed by gendered discourses. The results document a slow shift towards more equal and equitable print media coverage of female athletes, whilst drawing attention to the problematic ways in which sportswomen are represented.

**Key words: women, women's sport, women's golf, media analysis, feminism, gender**

Sport is overwhelmingly constructed as a male domain in the mass media. Professional male sport is often presented in the media as the pinnacle of sporting value and achievement (Wensing and Bruce, 2003), with Kane (2013) highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the sports media and hegemonic masculinity. Women's inclusion within the sports media is thus problematic; approximately seven percent of total media coverage in the UK is dedicated to female sport (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, 2014). Mediated discourses of sport can reproduce, naturalise and construct attitudes and prejudices to wider society (Boyle, 2009), and these discourses are evident in the long-standing body of research on the representation of sportswomen in the media, a phenomenon which has generated widespread interest. Indeed, Antunovic and Whiteside (2018: 112) highlight how feminist analyses of the sports media 'have been at the forefront of interrogating gendered hierarchies and gendered expressions of power'.

Feminist scholarship on the sports media has long examined the ways that female athletes are trivialised, sexualised and underrepresented (McClearen, 2018). In recent years, Biscomb and Griggs (2013) found that there has been a shift towards a greater awareness of reporting female athletes, although often there still exists contradictory messages. When women do find themselves on the sports pages of the popular press, they are represented in different ways to men, and in ways that restrict our imagination about women's sport and retain the hegemonic position of men in sport (Bruce, 2015). Wensing and Bruce (2003) posits that when women receive media coverage, specific representation techniques have been used that are in line with cultural ideas about femininity, i.e. gender marking, compulsory heterosexuality, appropriate femininity, infantilization and the downplaying of sport, and ambivalence. More recent research on media representation of sportswomen paints an ambiguous but progressive picture (Jakubowska, Channon and Matthews, 2016; Petty and Pope, 2018), with more positive coverage of women's sport, sometimes in de-

gendered ways, countered with a persistent dominance of male sport. Whilst McClearen (2018) draws attention to the ways in which the sports media can be used as a source of empowerment, she notes that the media still adopts traditional approaches in their presentation of women, and others suggest that media coverage still privileges men's sport (Black and Fielding-Lloyd, 2017).

This study examines of the portrayal of five female professional golfers in Great Britain and Ireland print media coverage before, during and following their involvement in a professional men's golf event, the Golf Sixes. Initially, we discuss the ways in which men and women have competed with, and against, each other in sport, and specifically golf, before drawing upon women's involvement in golf and the ways female golfers have been represented in the sports media. Although women have long since competed alongside men, most notably since women's first involvement at 1900 Olympic Games, this specific event provides us with a rare opportunity to examine how a group of female athletes are portrayed when competing (together) in direct opposition to men. This study adopts a critical feminist perspective, drawing upon a body of work from the sociology of sport that investigates the representation of female athletes in the sports media, and which has specifically identified the differing ways in which male and female athletes are portrayed in newspapers and other media. Similarly, critical feminist research has demonstrated the subordinate positioning of women within golf (Kitching, 2017), a sport widely regarded as male-dominated and exclusionary.

### **The GolfSixes Event**

Golf Sixes was launched in 2017 by the Professional Golf Association (PGA) European Tour as a 'revolutionary and novel short form of the game' (European Tour, 2017). Unlike a traditional seventy-two-hole 4-day stroke play event, the event featured two-person teams from sixteen different nations, competing six hole match play. Following the success of the 2017 version, the European Tour invited four wildcard teams for the 2018 event, including five professional female players from the Ladies European Tour (LET) and Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA): Carlota Ciganda and Mel Reid (European women), Georgia Hall and Charley Hull (England women), and Catriona Matthew (2019 European Solheim Cup captain) combined with Thomas Bjorn (2018 European Ryder Cup captain) in a 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, 2018). During the event, the men and women played off different tees on five of the six holes, with the differences in hole length varying from ten to fifty yards. The 2018 event was hailed a success by the organisers, with the number of spectators doubling to over 10000 from the previous year (GolfSixes, 2018). On the first day's play the England women opened their tournament with a 1-1 draw with the England men and then beat the South African men 4-1, securing them enough points to advance to the following day. Following a loss (USA men) and a draw (Denmark men), the European women defeated Thailand men 3-1 and won a playoff against Denmark men to advance to Sunday's play. On the Sunday, both women's teams lost their quarter final matches 2-0, the European women to Australia men, and the England women to the Ireland men, who were the eventual winners.

### **Gender Segregation and Integration in Sport**

The introduction of female professionals into a men's professional golf event is significant because in most sports men and women compete in different categories, with men's sport often termed 'sport' and women's sport gender-marked as 'women's sport'. In this way, women's athletic participation is minimised through asymmetrical gender marking, with women marked as the 'other' (Halbert and Latimer, 1994). For Pfister and Bandy (2015), elite sport often involves comparisons of performances

across gender categories, which identifies hierarchical performance differences between men and women thus reinforcing a strict gender binary. As Anderson (2008) highlights, men and women typically operate in separate spaces in the sporting world, a separation that is naturalised through the notion of physical difference, notably men's elevated aggression and athletic advantage over women. However, like the Golf Sixes in 2018, this has not stopped men and women from competing against each other. The most prominent example of this is the famous 'battle of the sexes' tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs in 1973, when King defeated Riggs in straight sets (Halbert and Latimer, 1994). More recently, the 'battle of the champions', a tennis match between Martina Navratilova and Jimmy Connors in 1993 brought similar discussions of men versus women in the sporting world to the fore.

The integration of women into men's PGA events has received both popular and academic attention (Billings et al., 2006; Billings, Angelini and Eastman, 2008), the latter highlighting the rising interest in the women's game going hand in hand with 'challenges to masculine hegemonic entrenchment in golf' (2008: 65). Babe Didrikson Zaharias and Shirley Spork were the first women to play against men on the PGA tour in 1938 and 1952 respectively. In 2003 Annika Sorenstam was invited to compete at the Bank of America Colonial Tournament, followed in the same year by Suzy Whaley, the first women in 58 years to qualify to play in a PGA tour event. Vijay Singh, a former world number 1, was quoted discussing Sorenstam's 2003 inclusion:

'What is she going to prove by playing...She's the best woman golfer in the world and I want to emphasise 'woman'. We have our tour for men, and they have their tour...I hope she misses the cut...because she doesn't belong out here' (espn.com, 2003).

Michelle Wie has 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 2003 Hawaii Pearl Open) since Zaharias did so in 1945 (Billing, Angelini and Eastman, 2008). More recently, in July 2018 Brittany Lincicome became the sixth woman to play in a men's PGA event (Strege, 2018).

### **Women's Golf and the Sports Media**

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 basis of the sport as not consistent with typical notions of hegemonic masculinity. Despite this, historically, female golfers have struggled for equality in a golf culture that is 'widely regarded as male dominated and exclusionary' (Kitching, 2017: 404). 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'. Despite women's involvement in the sport dating back to Mary Queen of Scots playing in 1567 (Concannon, 1995), women were not always welcomed on the fairways or in the clubhouses (George, 2010). Where they were excluded from full membership and playing rights, women were forced to form ladies' sections, initiated by the St. Andrews Ladies' Golf Club in 1867 (George, 2009), and subsequently women's golf developed independently from the men's game, with the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golfers' Association) forming in 1950 and the LET (Ladies European Tour) in 1978. Nevertheless, scholars have highlighted several women that learned and played the sport, and subsequently excelled as golfers, challenging the male hegemony of the game (George, 2009; Reis and Correia, 2013), with Zaharias notable in the early twentieth century.

As noted in the GolfSixes event, a signifier of the differences between the men and women's games is the allocation of tee boxes. 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', with the most forward tee often referred to as the 'ladies' tee' (Hundley, 2004: 43). The fact that men have this freedom of choice can imply 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., 2008)

Exclusionary practices continue to impact the modern game, where women still struggle for equality of access, participation, employment and decision making in golf. Crosset (1995), in his ethnographic research on the LPGA tour, highlighted women's status as outsiders within the world of golf. The latest golf participation figures indicate the low visibility of females in the game worldwide, with females typically comprising less than a fifth of all participants in Great Britain and Ireland (Kitching, 2017). Kitching et al (2017) found that trainee and qualified female PGA professionals have experienced discrimination both on and off the golf course; in the same study the low expectations of male members, employers and club committees compromised female professionals' career progression opportunities. Female golfers are widely perceived as inferior to their male counterparts, not only in terms of prize money, but in driving distance, which is frequently used to frame women as less able golfers (McGinnis et al., 2005). For example, the leader in average driving distance for 2018 on the LPGA tour was Yani Tseng (275 yards), compared to Rory McIlroy (319 yards) on the PGA tour.

Whilst golf provides an avenue by which women can play professionally, more men have the opportunity to do so and when they do, they make more money than women: in 2018, the prize money available at the men's British Open was \$10.5 million, compared to \$3.25 million for the women's British Open. In 2018, whilst Francisco Molinari earned £3,652,504 on the European Tour, the top earner on the LET (Georgia Hall) accumulated £456,110. This was only marginally more than the 75<sup>th</sup> ranked European Tour player, Ashley Chesters (£450,231), whilst finishing 75<sup>th</sup> on the LET earned Kelsey Macdonald £14,508.

Golf media has been shown to replicate the same exclusionary practices that are evidenced within the game. Although Billings, Angelini and Eastman (2008: 65) highlight that rising audience interest in women's golf brought about challenges to golf's 'masculine hegemonic entrenchment', both televised and print media coverage of golf have continued to offer representations that reinforce divisions of gender, class, disability and race (Billings et al, 2006; Billings, Angelini and Eastman, 2008). In examining over 200 hours of nationally televised PGA and LPGA golf across eight US television networks, Billings, Angelini and Eastman (2005) found a multitude of gender differences in on-air golf announcing, although they did conclude that golf commentary was distinctively different from other forms of sports commentary. They described how women golfers were more likely to be described in terms of why they succeeded or failed (with luck as a major factor), whereas men were more likely to be described in terms of their physicality or personality. Despite this, there was also evidence of females being characterised in some instances as winning because of strength, representing a challenge to the traditional depictions of women in the sports media.

An examination of hidden media biases surrounding Annika Sorenstam's involvement in the 2003 PGA Colonial Tournament showed that commentators were likely to highlight Sorenstam's emotions and outside pressures, but there were examples of non-gendered explanations of her successes too (such as failing due to a lack of finesse) (Billings et al., 2006). In both of these studies, despite moments of resistance to media norms, women golfers were still more likely to be depicted as succeeding because

of their intelligence, composure, and luck, and failing because they lacked athletic ability, highlighting the gendered nature of their portrayal.

Two studies of golf magazines revealed how women were underrepresented and deemed inferior athletes and spectators of golf who lived conventionally feminine, hetero-normative lifestyles (Maas and Hasbrook, 2001; Apostolis and Giles, 2011). An examination of the portrayal of LPGA player Nancy Lopez during her final professional tournaments outlined how magazines represented her as a heterosexual, married mother, thereby perpetuating a model of family life and divisions of labour that benefits white men and subordinates' women (Douglas and Jamieson, 2006). These examples highlight how television and print media maintain and reproduce images which continues to 'other' women within golf cultures.

### **Theoretical Perspective: Critical Feminism and Sport**

Taken together, the literature above highlights male dominance in sports/golf media, where the underrepresentation of females, particularly in golf settings can imply that their presence presents a challenge to the status quo. In Australia, Haig-Muir (1998; 2004) suggests that golf has been marked as a male preserve, where the social construction of golf is normatively male and the widespread gender marking of the sport is a strong force in maintaining and legitimating existing patriarchal practices and hierarchies. This privileging of men and men's activities can result in the homologous reproduction of traditional gender roles and institutionalised practices where women are excluded, marginalised and perceived as less important. Taking into account this broad socio-historical and political context, a critical perspective is adopted in this study.

Often associated with interpretivism, critical perspectives are concerned with underlying social relations and historical problems of domination and inequality in the attempt to locate the thoughts and actions of individuals and groups in everyday life (Creswell, 2007). McDonald and Birrell (1999) recommend a 'critical sport analysis' perspective as a form of agency that opens up possibilities for the emergence of new actions and through which the oppression of minority participants and the normalisation of patriarchal power relations can be realised. Derived from critical theory, (critical) feminist perspectives begin with the assumption that gender is socially constructed and culturally defined to serve the needs and interests of powerful groups of society. Birrell (2000: 61) highlights that critical feminist analyses have focused on the reproduction of gender relations, valorization of male characteristics and evidence of male privilege through sport and sports media. In practice, feminists have drawn attention to the ways in which sport was made by men for men, with women's history in sport fractured and fragmented: 'women were accepted into the various sports cultures only slowly and reluctantly' (Pfister and Bandy, 2015: 224).

While there are examples of resistance and progressive change for women in sport (e.g. Cooky and Messner, 2018), Scraton and Flintoff (2013: 106) comment that 'questions of inequality remain on the agenda for gender and sport'. Equality of opportunity between the genders has been a central argument by feminists in their quest to gain resources for girls and women in sport, a perspective which has been accused of oversimplifying females' multiple and diversified femininities and dispositions (Scraton and Flintoff, 2002). While recent work on feminism and sports media has drawn attention to the multiple, complex and fragmented nature of feminisms (e.g. Caudwell, 2011; Bruce, 2015; Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce, 2017), this paper is framed by a critical feminism which considers the influence of power relations in sports/golf media, acknowledges the dominant (male) hegemonic discourse that is prevalent in golf and highlights how such a discourse sets the parameters of what is and what is not possible/acceptable for females. In the context of a male golf professional event then, this perspective acknowledges the event as a male activity, where women are positioned from the outset as the 'other'.

## **Methodology**

As mentioned earlier, online and print media analyses have featured significantly in qualitative research into women's golf (e.g. Haig-Muir, 1998; Mass and Hasbrook, 2001; Apostolis and Giles, 2011). Biscomb and Matheson (2017) describe how media analysis is an established area of sport sociology, with a large body of research centring on print media analysis of female athletes. This research represents an extension of this work, where the GolfSixes event provides a unique place to investigate how women golfers are represented in the media, and to also examine how, in this instance, women are framed when in opposition to men in professional sport.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data for this study was collected as part of a broader research project that encompassed other media forms connected to the Golf Sixes event (i.e. images, online and new media and television broadcasting). As the event ran over the weekend of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of May, the data collection timeframe was from Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> May to Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018 inclusive. The online electronic news database Nexis was used to obtain full text reprints of newspaper articles. The data was collection using the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland Publications Group file (including local, regional and national newspapers), and the keyword "GolfSixes". In total, 66 newspaper articles from twenty-nine news outlets were collected, including articles published in the top ten circulated newspapers in the UK. Following an initial examination for duplicates and other anomalies these were reduced to 57 from 29 different news outlets including the Daily Mirror (Ireland and National editions), the Scotsman, the Press Association, the Sunday Times (London) and the Sunday Telegraph (London).

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six phases of thematic analysis, including immersion, searching for and identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. Similar to Vincent et al (2010) and Black and Fielding-Lloyd (2017), the thematic analysis of each text was carefully managed by both researchers through a process of open and axial coding, over multiple stages. Stage one involved both researchers open coding the data set in isolation, following Cooky, Messner and Hextrum (2013). The researchers then immersed themselves in the data sets, reading the newspaper articles, online articles and watching the television coverage before the data set was initially analysed. In this stage, early themes were identified, framed by concepts from the initial research question, the literature and by thoughts stimulated from the data. Following this, the researchers independently reviewed the themes identified during open coding, searching for any patterns in the data set.

The next stage of the analysis involved a form of axial coding: the researchers combined to jointly analyse the identified open codes and early themes, again searching for significant patterns in the data set across both researcher's initial analyses. The final stage of the analysis involved the two researchers jointly analysing the key themes identified from the data set and initial analysis process. As Vincent et al (2010: 204) states constructing a methodology that draws upon multiple levels of coding and interpreting data according to well-developed theoretical frameworks results in a 'reliable research design with validated analyses'. Subsequently, themes were developed in light of the unique position of women competing with and against men in a professional sporting event. The major themes were identified as: women making headlines, a battle of the sexes, men under pressure/women with no expectation, successful women athletes, and women as advocates.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Women the Headline of the Event*

The most obvious theme in the data was the emphasis on women's involvement in the tournament. Of the fifty-seven (two did not have a headline) newspaper headlines that were analysed, twenty-seven contained explicit references to the female players. These were evident across the entirety of the coverage, from pre-tournament coverage, during the event and after the conclusion of the tournament. In the pre-tournament coverage, the story of the inclusion of the female players dominated the headlines of the press coverage:

Women compete in PGA European Tour team event for first time at GolfSixes (Future News, 4 May)

Following the women's teams' success on the Saturday, finishing second in their groups and advancing to the quarter finals, the women again featured strongly in the headlines of the print media:

Women's pairs prove point in GolfSixes (The Sunday Times, 6 May)

Two female pairings qualify for GolfSixes knockout phase against men (The Telegraph, 6 May)

Even following the conclusion of the event, in which both female teams were knocked out of the tournament at the quarter final stage, the women still featured in some media headlines:

Inclusion of women in GolfSixes a masterstroke (The Scotsman, 7 May)

Although it is clear women were the headline story of the event, what is evident here in the headline coverage was a 'women against men' sentiment. Although marking a shift away from the invisibility of women in the sports media, the headlines also centred specifically on the intrusion of women into the male space of the men's professional golf tournament, as evidenced most explicitly here:

Women aim to beat men at own game in GolfSixes (The Times, 5 May)

The terming of the sport as the 'men's own game' highlights women's historical subordinate position within golf, while the female players' involvement is strictly gender marked. Comparable to Biscomb and Matheson's (2017) findings, the strategy of using women as a prefix is evident here and indicative of the wider presentation of women in sport in the media. Subsequently, we can see here the importance of gender in the framing and reporting of the athletes, and their inclusion in the headlines as perhaps indicative of the uniqueness of their inclusion in a men's tour event, rather than an explicit acceptance of female athletes in the male golf sphere.

### *A Battle of the Sexes*

Whilst it appeared that the women were the significant story of the event, as noted, this was often framed as a 'women versus men/battle of the sexes'. This resonates with the coverage of the infamous tennis match between King and Riggs, which was presented in the same way (Halbert and Latimer, 1994). This juxtaposition of men and women was a strong feature of the presentation of the event, as seen in some of the headlines already presented. However, the explicit phrasing of the 'battle of the sexes' featured strongly in the media coverage. Indeed, the use of the term the 'battle of the sexes' or 'battle of the sixes', a play on words using the title of the event, was evident in twenty two percent, or thirteen of fifty-nine, articles analysed.

In the pre-event newspaper coverage, the term battle of the sexes was used, and in this instance, gender as a framing device again became very important in the coverage of the event. This was

evident in pre-tournament coverage, which was presented as a shift away from the norm with golf 'ripping up convention':

Golf has a reputation for Victorian thinking and arcane rules but it will rip up convention today when a battle of the sexes takes place at a club in Hertfordshire (The Times, 5 May).

Again, this demonstrates women's historical yet perpetuating subordinate position within the golf sphere. This unusual occurrence was also presented as a much bigger event than a golf tournament, with the players were framed as 'playing for their gender' and not for themselves (or their teams) as professional golfers, signifying the importance of gender in the framing of, and reporting of, the event.

England's men up against it in battle of sexes...Matt Wallace and Eddie Pepperrell will be playing for their gender as well as their country tomorrow when the top women's golfers gatecrash the European Tour (The Express, 4 May).

One news outlet even referred to the inclusion of women in the event, and the competition's women versus men sentiment, as the most significant event in golf at that time. This was deemed as more important than the PGA event featuring world's highest ranked male players:

While Rory and Tiger lead a parade of the world's top golfers at the Wells Fargo Championship in the United States, a contest of greater importance if not stature unfolds on the European Tour at St. Albans, where women line up against men (i-Independent, 5 May).

Godoy-Pressland (2014) drew attention to the way that women can only succeed in sport if they achieve a male standard, a standard that was explicitly obvious in this event. In the above extracts, we see the positioning of men's golf as golf, and women's golf as the other. This is explicit with the identification of the 'world's top golfers' playing in the men's PGA tour event, whilst we see the female players identified as the 'top women's golfers'. This is also evident with the proposition that the women need help to compete. The Glasgow Herald suggested that the women would be a 'stern test' for the men, although the women would be playing off different tees, thereby diminishing and downplaying their abilities:

'on a course set up with different tees to provide a level-playing field' (The Glasgow Herald, 5 May)

During the event, following the women's progression into the quarter-finals, much was made of the women in some way winning golf's version of the 'battle of the sexes', despite them finishing second in their groups:

If the second edition of GolfSixes was intended as a light-hearted 'Battle of the Sexes', there was only one winner (The Press Association, 5 May).

While the prominence of the female players in the coverage is significant, and following from the first theme where women were presented in the headlines, it's important to draw attention to the nature of their inclusion. Despite only winning one match out of three, and finishing second in their groups, the women dominated the coverage of the event after the first day's play. This indicates that their inclusion is perhaps tokenistic, born out of the uniqueness of their involvement. Furthermore, the presentation of a binary classification of sex and gender serves to reinforce the socially constructed binary of men's sport and women's sport – which has proven unhelpful in realising the value of women's athletic achievements.

### *Men under pressure and women with no expectation*

While women were the headline story, much of this was reported from the position of the men's reactions to the event. A strong theme in the analysis was that the male players appeared under pressure in the build up to the event, threatened in the heat of the battle and, when defeated, humiliated after the matches (represented in seventeen of the fifty nine articles). Prior to the event, much was made of the press conference with Eddie Pepperell, who set the tone for the battle of the sexes with his comments, something for which he was quoted in eight of the fifty nine reports:

Eddie Pepperell claimed he would rather miss every cut this year than lose to the women in the weekend's GolfSixes tournament in St Albans...And Pepperell is concerned, even if he was smiling as he spoke yesterday. "I'm worried about the ladies, to be honest," he said (The Scottish Express, 5 May).

His playing partner, Matt Wallace, had similar views, highlighting that defeat against female players would damage his career:

'Wallace said: "I'm massively excited to be involved but not massively excited to get smashed by the girls. I'm not sure how good it would be for my career and for Eddie's." (Daily Mirror, 5 May).

"I'm not excited at the thought of getting beaten by the girls, which could definitely happen...If we lose, it's not going to be great for men's golf" (The Express, 4 May).

Although the comments have been seen to be jovial in nature: 'Pepperell may have been joking about his male pride taking a dunt' (The Glasgow Herald, 5 May), the underpinning narrative is one that clearly centres the men as superior who should not be losing to women. It was not just the male players that highlighted the hegemonic positioning of men prior to the event:

Georgia Hall claimed the heat will be "100 per cent on the men" when the England women's team tee up in the GolfSixes today (Daily Mirror, 5 May).

The reporting around the narrative of men being under pressure was also evident during the event, with the reporting of the Danish team's defeat to the European Women framed as the men 'cracking under pressure' (Scottish Mail on Sunday, 6 May):

That earned Reid and Ciganda a play-off against the holders, Denmark's Lucas Bjerregaard and Thorbjorn Olesen, and it was the Danes who buckled (Scottish Express, 6 May).

Similarly, when the England women beat the South African men, the result was framed as a humbling defeat for the male players:

England won by four points to one and South Africa, who had won their opening match, were chastened (The Sunday Times Ireland, 6 May).

Given that the men were under pressure to perform and prove their dominant positioning in the world of golf, when the England men's team secured a draw against the England women, they were relieved not to lose. The media reported comments from Pepperell and Wallace after the match, who by avoiding defeat had also avoided the chance of humiliation and derision over social media:

"He said: "I knew we would get terrible stick if we lost to the girls. So that could prove the best shot of my career!" (The Sun, 6 May)

Pepperell was also content. "We had a good tough match with the girls and were just relieved not to lose," he said (The Sunday Telegraph, 6 May)

The male players repeatedly referred to the female players as 'girls', infantilising them (Bruce, 2008) and highlighting their hegemonic position (as male European Tour players playing in a men's European

Tour competition) in the event, and in golf more broadly. Furthermore, with the men under pressure to perform, the women were designated as 'rank outsiders from the start' (The Press Association, 5 May), with no expectations, which aligns with their subordinate, othered position in golf culture. Some media outlets reported on the betting odds for the female teams, which were the longest odds of all the teams competing:

The two all-female teams, England Women and European, were being quoted at 50/1 before the event (Scottish Express, 6 May)

Following the all-female team's progression to the knock out stages, some reporters explained that this was a surprise. Referring to the inclusion of women's teams, it was reported:

It was a novelty, certainly, and perhaps an encouragement, but few among the European men's tour regulars involved would have imagined that both women's teams would progress through their groups to today's knockout stages (The Sunday Times, 6 May)

A similar sentiment was expressed regarding the defeat of Thailand by the European Women's team:

Their defeat of the crack Thailand pairing was perhaps the surprise of the event held at Centurion Club after Tour winners Kiradech Aphibarnrat and Thongchai Jaidee had eased through their first two matches (The Sunday Telegraph, 6 May).

Likewise, Charley Hull was quoted as saying:

'It's really cool to go through, I don't think a lot of people thought that we would do that well,' said Hull (The Press Association, 5 May).

Groves and Griggs (2016) draw attention to the media technique of the constant comparison method, whereby athletes are compared to others (in this case, women to men), in order to demonstrate a hierarchy. Clearly, framing the men's need for success against the lower expectation of the women re-emphasises the hierarchical relationship of men over women within golf cultures.

Following the women's success, this was highlighted by some as perhaps a shift away from expectation of female golfers:

The female players proved a great addition to the innovative event and will have opened up a lot of people's eyes to how good they are (City AM, 8 May).

Furthermore, again their success was downplayed by highlighting the use of forward tees. This move was seen to 'level the playing field' between sexes in golf, but its reporting also served to remind the readers of the binary of men's and women's golf, and of the presumed inferiority of the female players:

'The women were playing off forward tees, but this was still an impressive performance' (The Sunday Telegraph, 6 May).

### *Women as Golfers: Successful, Skilful and Supported*

Following the female competitor's performances against the men, which were considered successful in the sports media, the press coverage presented the women as being capable and winning their matches. This positive portrayal was evident in over half of the print coverage. Once the tournament began (although certainly not before it) the female players were portrayed as competitive, well capable of competing with, and subsequently beating, the male players. Prior to the tournament, Eddie Pepperell was quoted in the Times as saying:

“I played with Charley once at Queenwood and she beat me off the long tees. She’s a beast really when it comes to golf” (The Times, 5 May).

Aside from this, much of the coverage surrounding how skilful and able the women were centred on their success during Saturday’s play, where both teams secured a victory over a male team and advanced to the knock-out final day on Sunday. Many of these narratives around the women’s Saturday success focused on not just beating the men’s team, but ‘thrashing’ and ‘dominating’ them:

Women’s teams dominate opening day of GolfSixes (The Scotsman, 5 May)

Hull and Hall joined them in the last eight after thrashing South Africa 4-1 (The Sun, 6 May)

Their successes were described as thrilling and dramatic, and perhaps in this regard surprising:

It was particularly dramatic stuff for Europe’s Mel Reid and Carlota Ciganda, who floored Kiradech Aphibarnrat and Thongchai Jaidee of Thailand 3-0 (Scottish Express, 6 May)

Solheim Cup team-mates Reid and Ciganda did so in thrilling fashion, defeating Thailand 3-0 in their final group game and then beating defending champions Denmark on the first hole of a sudden death play-off (The Press Association, 6 May)

Alongside their success (as defined by beating the men), the female players were widely celebrated as skilled. Words such as ‘stunning’ ‘fine’ and ‘beautifully struck’ were used to describe Charley Hull’s shot making, while Georgia Hall was noted as holing a ‘nerveless’ putt and Mel Reid ‘rolled her putt stone dead’:

It was Hull who roared on the first with a super tee-shot to within a couple of feet...Hall trundled in a putt of some 20-feet for an eagle (The Sunday Herald, 6 May).

Clearly, the performance of the female professionals warranted the media coverage to describe their sporting performances, much like Petty and Pope (2018) found in their analysis of presentations of female footballers. Similarly, Bruce (2008: 66) found that in contrast to gender ideologies of female weakness, female athletes, when representing the nation, can be ‘represented in ways that emphasised physical power, strength and domination’. In a golf context, Billings et al (2008) highlighted that presentations of Michelle Wie were often similar to her male counterparts (in terms of personality and physicality) when competing on the PGA tour. Likewise, here (in some cases) the female players performed better than their male counterparts, so this acted as evidence that they are capable athletes, and enabled them to establish themselves as legitimate golfers (albeit ones that play off shorter tees).

Not only were they successful and skilful, the women were also portrayed as the fan favourites before, during and after the event, with it reported that the European tour had ‘sought to increase the profile by inviting female pairs’ (The Sunday Telegraph, 6 May). During the GolfSixes event, it was noted how the large numbers of fans was a result of the inclusion and subsequent success, of the female professionals. The addition of the women was hailed a ‘masterstroke’ that generated ‘surges of exciting energy’, and made an ‘enormous overall impression’:

Including women in particular was a masterstroke and the fact both all-female teams made it to the knockout stage on day two probably gave the game one of the biggest surges of exciting energy it has experienced for a long time (The Scotsman, 7 May).

This innovative two-day event...attracted double the audience of last year's inaugural tournament. That was partly down to the four women welcomed to the show this year...the quartet made an enormous overall impression.' (Daily Mail, 7 May)

Subsequently, when the women's teams were knocked out, it was portrayed as ruining the golf party:

The Ireland team were defined as 'party poopers after beating the England women's team before lunch' (Daily Mail, 7 May)

Apparent here is a clear media presentation of the female golfers as capable, skilful athletes who drew in the crowds and, in some instances, surprised the golf world and the sports media with their playing ability. Gender in this instance, although central defining the female players, was not evident in how their golf play was described during the event. It resonates that the women had to prove themselves on the golf course, to be considered true competitors in the event. This again marks a move away from how we have traditionally seen women represented in the sports media, with Biscomb and Matheson (2017) highlighting that this is characteristic of a wider shift away in the sports media from focusing on appearance towards the reporting of skill and performance in the writing on female athletes.

#### *Advocates for Women's Golf: Wider implications for female players' involvement*

A final theme around the female players as advocates for the women's game was clear following the elimination of the women's teams, and the culmination of the event (seen in eight of the fifty nine articles). The GolfSixes, staged as a European Tour men's event with a special invitation extended to five female players, presented an unusual opportunity for the women to play golf in front of a different audience:

There is a serious aspect to proceedings with the female players getting the chance to showcase themselves to, potentially, a very different audience than normal (The Glasgow Herald, 5 May).

With this new audience, there was a sense of pressure for the women in a different way to the men. The men could not lose to the women, because sport (and golf) is traditionally a patriarchal, masculine domain in which men dominate. However, the women were under pressure as the perceived face of women's golf in its entirety during the tournament. There was evidence in the newspaper coverage that the female players, and the sports press, felt that there were wider implications for their involvement. The women expressed a sentiment that they were not playing for themselves, but playing for the Ladies European Tour, for women's golf, and for women in sport more broadly. Hull was quoted as saying:

"I feel more nervous in this event. I think it's because if you play bad it would make women's golf look bad" (The Press Association, 5 May).

As Kim, Walcosz and Iverson (2006) highlight, media coverage of female golfers has important social, political and economic effects for both the athletes and the audience. For the athletes, media attention can result in endorsements and sponsorships, for the audience the media can influence perceptions of what constitutes the identity of the female athletes. This is something that the female golfers, and particularly Reid, are aware of here. Indeed, Schmidt's (2018) recent examination found that the sports media are giving significant and respectful coverage to athletes who advocate for social or political issues. Reid was presented as one such athlete:

Mel Reid made no secret of the fact that she was playing against the men in the GolfSixes tournament at St Albans yesterday to prove a point and advance the cause of women's golf (The Scottish Mail on Sunday, 6 May).

However, the female players perceived success in the event, marked mainly by advancing through the group stages during Saturday's play, was sold to the public as a victory for women's golf overall:

Reid and Ciganda may have lost but as far as the women's game is concerned, the GolfSixes has been something of a winner (The Glasgow Herald, 7 May)

The fact that both teams, rank outsiders from the start, advanced from the group stage was an achievement in itself and a welcome boost for the women's game in Europe (The Daily Telegraph, 7 May).

This sentiment was expressed by Mel Reid in her post event interview, which was featured in three reports on the conclusion of the event:

'It's a bit unlucky we didn't win today but it has been a huge success for women's golf' (Reid in The Express, 7 May).

Reid indicates that there were wider implications of the women's success in this event for women's golf more broadly. Reid, as well fellow golf professional Beth Allen, used the coverage of the event as a platform to comment on the state of women's golf in Europe. This centred largely on increasing support for the women's game in Europe:

I hope we've established a platform here and it will help us get some of the support that we really need (Reid in Daily Mail, 7 May).

If GolfSixes doesn't ignite some interest in the LET, I don't know what will! Wrote Edinburgh-based American Beth Allen....hitting the nail firmly on the head (The Scotsman, 7 May).

Much like George (2009: 349) noted with the history of women's participation in golf, their involvement in the early twentieth century was characterised by female golfer's concerns 'in getting recognition for their sex on the fairway'. It appears that this may still be the case for female golfers today. Notable here is the burden on individual professional athletes to selflessly advocate for the entire sport of golf. While golf governing bodies seek incremental changes in female golfer participation, paradoxically, female professional tour golfers are largely unrecognised and unsupported by the predominantly amateur golf organisations in the UK and Ireland.

### **Conclusion: Print Media Coverage of Female Golfers Competing Against Men**

Much like Vincent (2004) found with tennis grand slam events, the GolfSixes event was an opportunity for sports journalists to provide equitable coverage of male and female players, in a particular sport that doesn't offer the same challenges to men's dominance and masculinity as more aggressive sports (McGinnis et al., 2008). In some ways, the representations were progressive, but on the other hand the print media coverage still resonated with the typical representation of female athletes in the popular press. As such, the discussion centres on the double-edge sword of twenty-first century print media coverage of women in sport – positive, informed coverage in parts that is littered with gendered language and traditional binary processes. Much like Eagleman (2015: 237) noted, we found the coverage of female competitors at the GolfSixes 'appears positive at first glance, but actually includes words, phrases or themes that subtly belittle women'.

What was evident when analysing the data was the clear increase in visibility of female athletes within the sport media. In this instance, women's involvement in the event was the real headline story, with forty-seven percent of all headlines about women, compared to only fourteen percent dedicated to the victorious men's team. Given the female players made up less than sixteen percent of the participants, this represents a significant increase in media coverage of female athletes. So, much like Petty and Pope (2018), we argue here that this is evidence of a shift towards a more gender equitable coverage, especially in terms of volume of female sports coverage in specific events. However, with the double-edged sword analogy in mind, we caution that the dominance of the five competitors seems in part due to the uniqueness of their involvement in a male-dominated world.

Moreover, and again unlike Fink's (2015) findings that sportswomen are rarely acclaimed for their athletic abilities, the female golfers were often presented as legitimate, skilful, successful athletes. From this analysis of print media coverage, it became apparent that some of the representation techniques identified by Bruce (2008) provided little help in understanding the way that these female athletes were represented. Despite being infantilised as 'girls' in some places, the representation of the female golfers as able, skilful athletes is in line with more recent research that has noted a shift away from appearance of female athletes to skill and performance (Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Petty and Pope, 2018). Gender comparisons, through the framing of the event as a battle of the sexes, saw women presented positively and worthy of challenging the men in their own event. The continuation of the reporting of the women in the event coverage even when they were knocked out of the event contrasts with Biscomb and Matheson's (2017) claim what women are only reported on when they win. Furthermore, the discussion of women's involvement in the event by the male players marked a significant shift from the 2003 inclusion of Sorenstam.

However, a prominent feature was the emphasis on, and reinforcement of, the socially constructed binary categories of men and women, which is often at its most striking in sport. Gender-marking was ever-present, serving to decipher the female players as different or 'other' to the male players, while the media also paid attention to the use of forward tees, thereby downplaying their successful performances. The expectation from the male players (and print media) that they should beat the women served to highlight male supremacy and dominance, and subsequently demonstrate women's traditional subordinate position in the male sphere of sport (and golf). The framing of the female golfers as intruding in the male world of golf reaffirmed the positioning of women as 'outsiders'. In this way, the women represent a threat to male dominance.

Further, the nature of the women's prominence in the print media and the tone of reporting is worthy of critique. In the first instance, the female athletes were the headline of the event simply because they are women and gender roles became the dominant discourse. Their relative success (which was defined differently for women and men), particularly considering the lack of expectation prior to the event, was in some instances diminished by reminders of differing tee boxes for the female athletes. This subtlety positioned the women's success as acceptable (as they were not explicitly competing on a fair and level playing field) and as such, reduced their challenge to the male hegemony in golf. This continues to emphasise the social construction of gender in a sporting context. When the women were 'successful', there was in some cases a tone of surprise in the reporting, due to their positioning as subordinate outsiders in golf's male space. Thus the underlying tone of their inclusion could be considered condescending or even charitable, given recent moves towards more coverage of women in the sports media.

Overall, in describing the coverage of female professional golfers competing in a men's tour event, we refer to the double-edged sword of women's sports coverage. Whilst we agree with recent research that refers to 'new ages of media coverage of women's sport in the UK' (Petty and Pope, 2018: 1), the unusual case of a mixed gender event shifted the focus strongly onto gender, instead of reporting on sport *as sport* (Petty and Pope, 2018), particularly in the pre-tournament coverage. So, although Petty

and Pope (2018), highlight a shift towards gender equality and a removal of gender as a framing concept in sex segregated sports, we argue that this does not necessarily apply in sex integrated events. Whilst we agree that there was an obvious movement towards equality in terms of type and amount of coverage of the female golfers, gender was the primary headline. Furthermore, Bruce (2015) cautions us to be critical of visibility that occurs simply because women and men are competing in the same spaces at the same time, or more specifically in this instance, in the same event.

Despite the dominance of gender to the framing of the golfers in the media, and despite the fact that the female golfers were 'gender marked' in their media coverage, following their success on the course there was minimal differences in the reporting of their playing abilities. For Adams (2016: 115):

'Many feminists have seen sport as an institution with the potential to challenge sexism and hierarchical notions of gender and to promote equality between women and men. Too frequently, however, sport fails to meet this potential'.

However, in this specific event (in a sport considered ideal to embody gender equity (McGinnis et al., 2008)), the unusual setting of women competing against men opened an opportunity for the print media to promote and highlight equality between women in men. Not only did the GolfSixes event allow this to happen in part, it also provided a stage for the female golfers to become advocates for their sport, voice their opinions and concerns over their positioning within the wider golf world, and demand fairer, more equitable representation across organisation, media and sponsorship. While the women were clearly presented as advocates, the power dynamic with the media is noteworthy, particularly given they hold the key to the very attention and exposure female professional golfers need. While Kitching et al (2017) found that younger female professionals appeared more willing to discuss and confront underlying discrimination in golf (while older professionals suggested 'it's better not to say anything'), the framing of the golf space in this case as masculine, with women intruding, does little to progress women's position within the golf world.

Bruce (2015) suggests that the research strategies used to study media representations of sports women have evolved to become interdisciplinary, intersectional and theoretically sophisticated. She writes: 'this, I think, is a key challenge for those of us focused on sports media: to engage with these deep, often unconscious, feelings that lead media workers and sport audiences to conceptualize athletes within male-female binaries that position women as almost always 'Other'' (p.383). She argues we need to consider engaging at the level of emotion, to try and understand the investments that people have in representations of women in sport, and to open up representational practices in a way that resists or subverts ambivalent and polarized ways of understanding sportswomen. In this vein, it is important to focus on both the positive shifts in print media representation evidenced here, as well as drawing attention to the troublesome nature of using gender as a framing device for female athletes. As Bruce (2015, 2016) further highlights, spaces do exist for sportswomen to be represented in different ways, and challenges us as sociologists of sport to actively seek out new spaces where change has happened. For Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce (2017: 359), inequalities pertaining to gender remain 'stubbornly persistent across sports institutions and practices'. As such, we would be naïve to think wholesale change in the presentation of female athletes will occur quickly. Consequently, it is important to document the slow shift towards what appears to be a more equal and equitable print media coverage of female athletes whilst continuing to draw attention to the problematic ways in which sportswomen are represented, albeit in this unique event.

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