

# **‘Write when it hurts. Then write till it doesn’t’: Athlete voice and the lived realities of one female professional athlete**

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## **Abstract**

Digital media has played a central role in promoting women's sport, where female athletes are increasingly using online platforms to control their own representations and challenge male dominated sporting institutions. Alternatively, some commentators claim that female athletes' use of digital media contributes to patriarchal practices in sport, where through self-promotion and image building they do little to advance representations of women's sport. This paper interrogates these ideas, adopting a postfeminist sensibility and collaborative research approach to examine the online self-representations of a female athlete and blogger. The athlete in question is Meghan MacLaren, a professional golfer on the Ladies' European Tour who documents her life as a professional athlete through her online blog. Primarily, the authors present a critical analysis of MacLaren's blog posts over a period of three years, from MacLaren turning professional to the present day. This initial analysis prompted a series of questions around MacLaren's blogging and self-representations, which the authors then posed directly to her, and Meghan was invited to respond in her own voice. Using a collaborative approach with MacLaren as co-author, this paper seeks to draw attention to the diverging realities of a female professional athlete fulfilling dichotomous identities as a simultaneously trusting and doubting golf performer on the course and a self-appointed athlete activist online, all the while operating in, and influenced by the patriarchal and capitalist cultural environment of golf.

**Keywords:** blogging; golf; media representations; post-feminism; professional athlete

## **Introduction**

In the emerging and dynamic information environment, digital media has become central to commentary on and presentations (self or otherwise) of athletes (Bruce and Hardin 2014). Social media platforms have given rise to the ‘accessible athlete’, enabling athletes and organisations to bypass mainstream media outlets and present themselves to their audiences (Sheffer and Schultz 2013). In terms of women’s sport, increased exposure to both traditional and diverging media platforms has given female athletes more opportunity to have their voices heard and their sporting performances critiqued (Petty and Pope 2018). Recently, for example, the performances of the USA soccer team at the 2019 Women’s World Cup lived alongside their wage discrimination lawsuit against the US Soccer Federation, with Megan Rapinoe’s media contributions (digital and otherwise) important in generating attention and support for the team (Cooky and Antunovic 2020). While there are many examples of female athletes such as Rapinoe using online platforms in the same activist approach, in golf there is one stand out: Meghan MacLaren, a professional golfer from England, who blogs to ‘frame the joy and angst of the beautiful, maddening sport that she loves’. In an interview with Meghan, Golf Channel contributor Randall Mell (2019) also states:

Meghan MacLaren isn’t a major championship winner, hasn’t won an LPGA event and isn’t among the top 250 female players in the world, but if you love the game, you really ought to get to know her work, if you haven’t already. The 25-year-old Englishwoman won her second Ladies European Tour title this year, but she’s making a mark beyond her run at the tour’s Order of Merit title. She has carved out a special place in the game beyond her own golf. She’s a gifted young writer...while MacLaren has some strong opinions, especially about gender pay, her appeal as a writer is often in the vulnerability she shares as she explores her world.

As such, MacLaren's blog documents her peaks and troughs in professional golf whilst simultaneously critiquing its unequal gender practices. Building on the contribution Kim Toffoletti, Holly Thorpe and others have made to feminist sports media analyses (see, for example, Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce, 2017; Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018a; 2018b), this paper uses postfeminism to examine MacLaren's lived realities as articulated through her online blog. Perhaps unlike the research to date using this lens to focus on athlete image, and in response to the contestation from Antunovic and Hardin (2013) that little work has been done to document women's voices in sport blogs, this research aims to evaluate the digital self-representations of one female professional athlete, alongside her rationale for blogging. The paper also considers the influence of patriarchal and cultural conditions in professional golf on the writing, responding and representation choices she makes, and the decisions or dilemmas that she faces. In an effort to move beyond typical examinations of media representations of female athletes (which we and many others have done), this research is collaborative in nature where it couples a postfeminist empirical analysis of one athlete's online posts on a digital platform, with a direct response to this analysis from the individual athlete herself.

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

Several commentators have outlined the potential for digital media – such as social networking sites and online blogs – to challenge prevailing hegemonic media representations of female athletes, contesting the discourses that devalue sportswomen and transforming the representation of female athletes (Antunovic and Hardin 2012; Bruce and Hardin 2014). These traditional media representations are rooted in gendered ideologies, with Bruce's (2008) analysis of international research identifying five media techniques used in the representation of female athletes: gender marking, compulsory heterosexuality, appropriate femininity, infantilization and the downplaying of sport. In developing her own work, Bruce (2015)

outlined two new rules in how sportswomen are represented in media: firstly online, through their own voices, on their own terms, and secondly through the discourse of ‘pretty and powerful’ over ‘pretty *or* powerful’. In a context where traditional media outlets have been criticised for ignoring or trivialising female athletes, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) conclude that while they remain underrepresented across traditional and online media outlets, social media is a potential tool for female athletes to redress the lack of coverage.

The potential benefits for female athletes in online spaces has been evidenced by multiple researchers. 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. These fora can provide a space for sportswomen to challenge rigid gender binaries and hierarchies. Likewise, MacKay and Dallaire (2012) suggest that the internet is a place where women can create more fluid definitions of sporting femininity, providing women with opportunities to control their own (re)presentations and challenge male dominated institutions. Not only this, it also provides a space for sportswomen, fans and commentators to share, debate and discuss women’s sport (Bruce and Hardin 2014; La Voi and Calhoun 2014).

Research into female athletes’ online representations, and the subsequent interpretations of these, is a growing field of study. Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) found that fans invest meaning in the social cues provided in athlete profile pictures (e.g. abstract impressions such as passionate, confident or arrogant athlete dispositions), where athletes who highlighted a sport

context were consistently ranked most favourably. In examining female athletes' perceptions of other female athlete representations on social media, Kane, La Voi, and Fink (2013) and Fink, Kane, and La Voi (2014) found that sporting competence was the most important aspect in determining self-representation. Similarly, Shreffler, Hancock, and Schmidt (2016) examined the Twitter profile photos of 207 female athletes from 6 sports (33 of whom were professional golfers on the LPGA), and found that athletic competence was the most common theme. These authors illustrate that online audiences favour female athletes who profile themselves in a sporting context, and when female athletes have the opportunity to self-present and control their image through social media, they often choose to focus on their athletic identities and expertise as athletes – noteworthy considering traditional media representations of women in sport.

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. Both Lee and Pedersen (2018) and Barnett (2017) found female athletes on social media self-represent in potentially problematic ways; the former finding an emphasis on casual, over sporting, profile photos, and the latter identifying examples of female athletes emphasising their traditional feminine roles alongside their sporting identity. La Voi and Calhoun (2014) suggest that through emphasising femininity over athleticism online, some female athletes may inadvertently contribute to annihilistic practices that may help them gain visibility, promote their brand, and secure sponsorships, but inevitably, do little to advance women's sport. Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017) suggest that sportswomen who emphasise their personal lives and sexuality online pay little attention to the broader gender arrangements influencing their sporting femininities. Further, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) query the transformative

capacity of user-generated digital communication to invoke alternative narratives of femininity. They note that female athletes demonstrate an implicit understanding of the blurred lines between being an athlete and being feminine and were aware of the risks of appearing 'too strong'. Given that, like its traditional form, digital media is 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 provides a further platform for sexist commentary. And, in asking whether or not 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. So, whilst research points to the benefits of online spaces for female athletes, some remain cautious about its wider impact on the representation of female athletes in mediated sport spaces.

There is a growing (and yet still emerging) body of research on the portrayal or presence of female athletes on sports blogs (Antunovic and Hardin 2012, 2013, 2015; Bundon, 2018). Antunovic and Hardin (2015) suggest that female sports bloggers offer a variety of alternative approaches through which to view sport, including a focus on both pleasure-and-participation as well as power-and-performance, while Antunovic and Hardin (2013) attest that as blogging gains popularity, women's ubiquity in the blogosphere increases. Evidence from the Antunovic and Hardin (2012) study examining advocacy for women's sports in blog posts found that bloggers enhance the visibility of women's sports. However they also caution that some women's sports blogs reproduce hegemonic norms around gendered sporting bodies and their engagement with social issues varies. Thus, while scholarship on blogging reveals that women engage online around a variety of issues and topics, little work has been done to document women's voices, identities and positionalities within the online blogosphere. This is especially true of professional female athletes, particularly where women in blog networks are mostly

participants and not professionals (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015). So, whilst we are starting to see an increasing body of literature on the topic, there is little interrogation of the rationale behind the use of social media and/or blogs from the authors themselves, which is the central focus of this research. The next section introduces online blogger Meghan MacLaren – professional golfer and collaborator on this paper – and the professional golf context in which she works.

### **Professional women's golf**

Women's involvement in professional golf is one that is rooted in both discrimination and privilege. Though 'Gentleman Only, Ladies Forbidden' has been used to describe golf (Davies and Hungenberg, 2019: 161), women have been involved in the game since its inception, albeit on different terms to men, where they were often hidden on different courses and separate areas within the clubhouse (Crosset 1995, George, 2010). Increasing equality and diversity is a challenge for golf, and the inherent expense of the sport often leaves it only accessible to wealthier, cash-rich and time-rich women (Davies and Hungenberg, 2019). While golf provides an avenue through which women can play professionally, more men have the opportunity to do so and when they do, they make more money than women. In April 2019, the European Tour and the LET played concurrent tournaments on different courses in Morocco, hosted at the Royal Golf Dar Es Salam in Rabat. These tournaments, held at the same time, illustrate the stark contrast: whilst the women's event was not televised, the men's event was screened live on a subscription sports channel; the winner of the men's tournament, Jorga Campillo, earned €416,660 – similar to the €450,000 total prize fund for the LET event, in which Nuria Iturrios secured €67,500 with her victory (Cooper 2019). Clearly, disparities exist between the worlds of men's and women's professional golf, in terms of visibility, endorsements, prize money and, as the primary authors have evidenced in previous work, media coverage (Bowes and Kitching,



2019, 2020a, Kitching and Bowes, 2020). Jamieson (2015, 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'.

Meghan MacLaren is a professional golfer on the Ladies' European Tour (LET), where she competes regularly at international tournaments. Following an outstanding amateur golf career (at the end of which she won the 2016 LET Access tournament in Zaragoza, Spain), in 2017 MacLaren won the LET Access Series order of merit in her first season as a professional, which guaranteed her a full card on the LET for 2018. As of August 2020, she ranked 12<sup>th</sup> on the LET order of merit and 271<sup>st</sup> in the official world golf rankings (Rolex Rankings 2020). Alongside her professional golfer career, she is an active blogger at [www.megmaclaren.com](http://www.megmaclaren.com). Hosted on WordPress, she posts a blog (wholly text) on average once a month, with the posts averaging at 735 words and all posts linked to her Twitter profile. MacLaren's blog posts vary in length and depth, and for the most part are personal reflections on her golf performance, including analysis of her game and psychological state. However, she also discusses wider issues in golf, her perspective as a sports fan, male professional golfers, and has some postings about wider social issues. As of August 2020, her blog has 44,791 hits. Primarily due to her blog and related content, 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). In June 2020 she wrote the script (narrated by Suzann Pettersen) for the online launch of the new LET-LPGA partnership, and in July 2020 she was appointed a columnist on the Today's Golfer magazine.

## **Theoretical framework**

Previous work by the primary authors in golf environments has been framed using a critical feminist lens, highlighting the marginalisation, underrepresentation and exclusion of women and the simultaneous privileging of men and men's activities (Bowes and Kitching, 2019, 2020a, Kitching and Bowes, 2020). Our later research moved away from this second wave outlook to employ the perspective of neo-liberal feminism which moves beyond (or even ignores) gender discrimination, to consider women in the economic space, some of whom have become entrepreneurial agents in control of their own destinies (Bowes and Kitching, 2019). Using this lens, Banet-Weiser (2015a) suggests that in 'economies of visibility' not only are women compelled to assume responsibility for finding innovative solutions to gender discrimination but they are encouraged to demonstrate visibly their entrepreneurial abilities. This perspective is suited to the corporate and commercial world of professional golf, where prize money, tournament/career earnings, and athlete endorsements are used as highly prized markers for professionals to strive for. According to Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017), gender inequality is still recognised within this perspective, but reactions to such inequalities are framed by individual economic and entrepreneurial discourses. Thus, use of neoliberal feminism can provide an insight into how female professional athletes might self-promote and market themselves. However, scholars have voiced concerns about the neoliberal lens of postfeminist individualism. In a later paper, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) are critical of the neoliberal representation of sportswomen, which places more responsibility on the athlete herself to generate media coverage and broadcast a successful image of female athleticism. Further, Toffoletti (2016) critiques how postfeminism has been used in sports media research, where it has become a perspective for interpreting a narrow range of contemporary cultural products such as sports advertising and marketing.

New conceptual challenges such as neo-liberal feminism, which characterise women as active and knowing agents in the making of their own subjectivities may deem it difficult for feminist sport scholars to speak about women in the media as objects of patriarchy (Toffoletti 2016). Informed by Gill (2011), who argues that it is the discursive construction of the individual as free to choose within postfeminist media texts that has become the dominant mechanism through which gender inequality remains unchanged, Toffoletti (2016, 203) reports:

...individual women are expected to constantly engage in processes of reinvention and transformation to adapt and keep up with economic and social changes...depictions of sportswomen as sexy and strong deflects responsibility for the sexualisation of female athletes away from media institutions and places the burden of representation/self-representation onto individual sportswomen.

Toffoletti thus advocates for a ‘postfeminist sensibility’, itself a strand of critical feminist thought, in order to consider the operations of alternative media formats and interrogate the way women athletes are both enabled and responsible for raising their profiles via social media, whilst also recognising inherent patriarchal and capitalist cultural conditions. A postfeminist sensibility ‘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, 205).

There remains considerable scope to further theorise the ways in which sportswomen negotiate demands to present as authentic in online spaces. When considering the theoretical perspective employed in this paper, it’s important to highlight the athlete’s voice. Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) indicate that the technological shift into a social media age allows consumers to more intimately explore engagement with celebrities, including professional athletes. They note that

social media users value – and expect – authenticity, defined as content that demonstrates some aspect of a ‘true self’, and results in some level of emotional attachment. However, as Hall (2015) notes, authenticity in online, social media spaces is merely an effect of the personal branding required by social-media performance. Taking Toffoletti’s (2016) piece into account, and understanding the centrality of the athlete’s authentic voice in their self-representations, this paper prioritises postfeminism, where issues of voice, authority and power in the text are significant and females’ diversified and varying identities, realities and voices are realised. The use of postfeminism here, will allow the authors to forefront MacLaren’s identities, whilst also recognising the underlying patriarchal and cultural conditions shaping her self-representations.

### **Methodological approach**

In writing their selves in qualitative research, female athletes have presented highly personalised and revealing lived experiences, many of which outline shifting, fluid and contrasting identities (Tsang 2000; McMahon and DinanThompson 2011). The female athlete voice has been presented in multiple ways in regular editions of this journal, for example, in the writing and analysis of narrative accounts (Fasting and Sand 2015; Cavallerio, Wadey, and Wagstaff 2017), realist tales (Carless and Douglas 2009), creative non-fiction (Krane et al. 2014) and autoethnographies (Douglas 2009; Mitchell, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2016), some of which are situated in golf. Douglas and Carless have made a huge contribution to the evidence base around the experiences of women professional golfers and, concurrently, alternative qualitative methodologies, for example in their use of narratives (Carless and Douglas 2013; Douglas and Carless 2009a), poetry (Douglas 2012; Sparkes and Douglas 2007), autoethnography (Douglas 2014) and ethnographic fiction (Douglas and Carless 2009b). In terms of female athletes’ responses to their online self-representations, most of the available

evidence has centred on photographic/social media profile self-representations, with follow up interviews to reveal the intended messages they looked to convey (Devonport, Leflay, and Russell 2019; Krane 2010; Kane, La Voi, and Fink 2013). While these approaches engaged directly with the athletes, and though there has been much written on both female athletes' autobiographical accounts and their digital self-representations, a method combining the two – with the athlete as a collaborating researcher-participant – was not found heretofore in the literature. In the way that it invites the athlete to respond directly in her own voice to the researchers' analysis of her blog content, and then review the final paper, this research is collaborative. Whilst this methodology cannot claim to attest 'true' authenticity – which, as Manning (1997) explains, will never exist, through providing MacLaren with a role in the research paper as a co-collaborator, we attempted to offer a space for her to write freely, and for her own words and experiences – often marginalised in both sport media and professional golf settings – to be seen as having inherent value in this space.

In part 1 of the data presentation, Meghan MacLaren's online blog was examined. Though she has been penning her blog since February 2015, the authors chose to focus on the period of Meghan's career as a professional golfer (since November 2016), a time when pay equality in professional women's sport was to the fore (Cooky and Antunovic 2020). Thus, from her first post after turning professional (22<sup>nd</sup> December 2016) to the 6<sup>th</sup> November 2019, 34 blog posts were included for analysis. Prior to analysis, the corresponding author outlined some guidelines centring on the research question: how are Meghan's voice, subjectivities, self-representations, writing and responses presented, and how are her writing, responding and representation choices shaped and influenced by the patriarchal and cultural conditions operating in professional golf? With a postfeminist standpoint in mind, the primary authors were interested in instances where Maclaren wrote about her self-representations, vulnerability, voice and

power, and how this was shaped by her experiences of the culture of professional golf. Once this was communicated, both researchers adopted theoretical thematic analysis, the organic, flexible or reflexive approach which acknowledges the researchers' role in knowledge production (Braun and Clarke 2019). As individuals the primary authors went through the series of steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013), from familiarisation, reading and re-reading, to coding, and then generating, developing and reviewing themes. As postulated by Braun and Clarke (2019, 6), where more than one researcher is involved, the coding process is collaborative in order 'to develop a richer more nuanced reading of the data'. At this point, the primary authors shared their themes and subthemes and began the process of finalising the analysis. Knowing that Meghan would be writing a response afforded the primary authors the opportunity to identify a number of elements in MacLaren's blog that were omitted, unexplained or unfinished. This resulted in a set of queries which were put to Meghan ahead of her written response. This was the phase in which the collaboration with Meghan was forefronted.

Ethical considerations from access to anonymity and consent are salient in this research. Acknowledging the debate about whether online spaces are public or private, presenting data from a personalised (though public) athlete blog and subjecting this presentation of selves and identities to research analysis may create obvious fears, discomforts and tensions for MacLaren. The primary authors in this research are both connected to and have written previously about women professional golfers and know Meghan (and she them), thus lessening any issues with access, trust and rapport. Ethical approval was granted by the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (A19-041), following which MacLaren was formally contacted by the researchers (30<sup>th</sup> September 2019), where they proposed the project. All subsequent contact with Meghan was via email, and is available on request. On October 10<sup>th</sup>

2019 Meghan responded, indicating her interest to take part, saying ‘It's been a hectic few months but I hope you know I'm very much looking forward to helping you out with this, I think it's a great idea and I'll be really interested to see it once it's all done’. On November 8<sup>th</sup> 2019 the corresponding author sent Meghan an email with a one page summary. This document highlighted what the two primary authors’ analysis found to be a key narrative throughout the blog (see analysis section below) and included a variety of extracts from Meghan’s blog. The summary then presented a list of questions for Meghan to respond to around the purpose of the blog, her position as a female golfer and the seeming necessity to represent as authentic (the full list of questions are included in the discussion section). The email to Meghan also outlined the next steps in the writing process:

...rather than focusing on ‘what’ you write about (e.g. golf performance, gender parity in professional golf), we want to hone in on ‘why’ you write. So our questions for you centre on the purpose of your blog. We have put together a one pager (see attached), which has a number of queries which we’re hoping you can respond to in writing, just like a blog post I guess. We had originally intended on sending you the whole paper, but we believe that could prejudice how you respond, and we’d like your response to be authentic and true, just like you write...This is your writing space so just respond as you feel appropriate.

The authors also outlined that her written response would be inputted directly into the paper, unedited. MacLaren had 3 weeks to write her response to the primary authors’ request. Looking beyond legitimacy checks such as member checking, and building on the work of Tracy (2010), Smith and McGannon (2017) advocate ‘member reflections’, an approach which provides participants with the opportunity to critique, affirm and collaborate and the space for ‘reflexive elaboration’. Cavallerio, Wadey, and Wagstaff (2019) have recently utilised member

reflections in an elite gymnastics setting, where the athletes' responses were collected through focus groups discussions. While the member reflections approach is relevant, the approach used here is more collaborative in situating the athlete's voice centrally through the data collection and analysis. In the final step of data analysis and collaboration, once the primary authors wrote the conclusion, they sent the whole paper to Maclaren for her review. Her comments are included in the summary.

### **Primary authors' analysis of Maclaren's online blogposts**

The total data analysed from MacLaren's blogs was over 25,000 words, of which there was multiple angles the primary authors could focus on. However, relevant for this paper was the way MacLaren self-represents as a real, authentic and yet vulnerable professional athlete (and writer), something that pervades through the majority of her blog posts. Given the aforementioned significance of online spaces for female athletes' voices, the purpose of her blog, and the way in which MacLaren self-represents, was of significant interest to the primary authors. These aspects of diversified and varying identities will be further explored in the ensuing three themes, following which the primary authors identify queries for Meghan about the choices she makes in her writing and representations.

### ***Writing and representing trust, doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability***

The initial writing of a blog, and in particular one which forefronts a female athlete's experience of professional golf, is one that is aligned with the notion of 'economies of visibility' (Banet-Weiser, 2015b) – namely, that MacLaren was empowered to find an online space to tell her story could be considered a response to the patriarchal and cultural conditions of both golf and the sport media. As such, Meghan's self-appraisal of her golf performances and her thoughts and reflections on her progress and journey as a golf professional are present



in almost every blog post. Evident many times throughout her blog are the notions of trust and doubt, and the uncertainty and vulnerability lurking between the two. On August 17<sup>th</sup> 2018, Meghan wrote ‘it’s a fine line between trusting your own ability and being aware of your own tendencies’. Her voice is central to this explication between trust and doubt where she appears simultaneously both assured:

The thing I’m trying to remind myself of though is that really, it only matters if you, yourself, think you’re doing the right thing. If you think you’re doing what is best for yourself, getting yourself where you want to get to...then that’s what counts...Trusting yourself, and looking after yourself...that’s what works. (24<sup>th</sup> February 2018)

And uncertain:

...trust the process. They’re probably the three most used words in the athlete world, and yet I think we say it as a reminder to ourselves rather than a statement of intent. But isn’t that the definition of trust? To have complete faith in something we have no definitive proof of?...Analysis, rationality, doubts, plans, trust... all full cycle, day after day, week after week. Not knowing when, or if, it was all going to come together... knowing when to question, when to adapt, when to trust. (12<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

...uncertainty has been the running theme throughout 2018. Analysing things to death might well be a character flaw, because it makes it very difficult to trust a decision in which there are no guarantees. (19<sup>th</sup> October 2018)

In her post from August 20<sup>th</sup> 2019, ‘the line between progress and paralysis’, Meghan writes in great detail about the self-doubt she experiences during or a round of golf, some of which appears crippling, particularly for a professional athlete.

Because remember that tournament you should have won earlier this year?

When you were cruising, until you made double from the middle of the fairway on a hole where the wind was off the right and the ball was above your feet and there was water on the left and your shot pattern is a draw?

After you let that one heal, you knew it wasn't anything other than golf exposing a bad shot with the worst possible outcome. It happens; it didn't have to mean anything more than that. You tried to keep trusting. But was that poor course strategy too? Are you missing something? Are you kidding yourself? (20<sup>th</sup> August 2019)

Other times she assures herself that self-doubt is ok, where 'it's ok not to feel comfortable. It's ok to drift, whether it be from people, places, or yourself' (5<sup>th</sup> July 2017), and 'it's ok to fail, it's ok not to have everything all figured out. Accepting that is part of making yourself better' (13<sup>th</sup> June 2018). MacLaren's 'warts and all' version of the realities of her career is not always something that would be typically expected from a commodified professional athlete, whose behaviours and interactions are often subject to monitoring by both their employers (the tour and sponsors) and fans alike (Sanderson, 2008). This may be especially significant for an athlete who depends on financial endorsements and support. The reality of being a professional golfer, where only half the field are going to take a pay cheque home, is exacerbated when a missed cut - 'that'll still be in your mind as you're grinding on the range on Saturday at the course you desperately wanted to be climbing the leaderboard on' (20<sup>th</sup> August 2019) - or when you 'lose' a tournament on the final day. The significance of that is greater when you are a woman on tour, and your earning power is restricted by the gender inequality evident throughout the sport. As such, the economic reality of being an underpaid professional athlete might explain the critical stance she takes, but as depicted in the ensuing section, she doesn't sugar-coat this reality for her own self-gain and financial benefit.

### *Self-representing as real, authentic and true*

Through her writing MacLaren is acutely aware of the ways she represents herself and her identity as a professional female athlete. She often describes the authenticity that she aims to portray in her blog posts, and not excluding the struggles, peaks and troughs of life as a professional athlete. In one post she further elaborates on the significance of presenting herself as real and true, where 'one thing I am certain of though is that I want to be honest' (19<sup>th</sup> October 2018).

Maybe deleting Twitter and Instagram and all the rest is the better way to deal with things. But if you're going to show any of the picture, I strongly believe you should show more than just the highlight reel. If we're going to build things up...then I think we have a responsibility to use social media to reflect too. Or to at the very least be honest that a result hurts, that you're frustrated, or angry, or disappointed...Professional sport, especially golf, is a minefield of pain and doubt and indecision. But navigating all of that is what makes it so rewarding. That's what makes it real. And should being real really be the thing we're trying to hide? (13<sup>th</sup> June 2018)

It would be fair to say that Meghan, on the one hand, understands the empowered visibility of social media usage, whilst also critical of the narrative users often portray. In the same post, MacLaren depicts the social media process as the antithesis of what she aims to portray:

The social media world brings with it a complete reluctance to be real; an unwillingness to show weakness and admit struggle. Part of me doesn't want to show anything at all on social media, and part of me also understands the reality of professional sport... showing any sign of

weakness can be an opportunity for your opponents to get ahead of you. It's part of being an athlete, of wanting to be the best you can be. But the devastating consequences of living in this virtual, partial reality are becoming more and more prevalent. It's a glittering magnet that sucks you into the black hole it's hiding; the bright lights, the sunsets, the coffee art, the bikini bodies and perfect couples and the never ending stories of success. We're hypnotised by it all, endlessly tapping and scrolling on a screen full of people we don't really know, if at all. Their slices of happiness. (13<sup>th</sup> June 2018)

MacLaren here is again critical of the role of social media, the necessity for perfection, the problems associated with displaying weakness, especially for a professional athlete. The 'highlights' reel is characteristic of a postfeminist or neoliberal feminist approach – sportswomen who are seemingly in control of their representations, but who are also operating within a patriarchal matrix (Toffoletti, 2016). In an earlier post she writes about presenting herself and her realities as a professional athlete:

...I think it's incredibly important to see every angle. I don't ever want to pretend those reactions; those emotions, those 'losses' aren't real. I don't think people are always willing to admit to, or accept, or maybe even let themselves see that there are both ends of the spectrum; there are highs and lows and that's ok. (20<sup>th</sup> December 2017)

She writes that doubt is real, authentic and a central part of the process of improvement:

I think it's incredibly important to see every angle. I don't ever want to pretend those reactions; those emotions, those 'losses' aren't real...I think there has to be a way to see it all, to feel it all, and to appreciate it all. Because if you choose to ignore anything other than self-satisfaction, I

think it undermines both your desire, and your capacity for improvement...it undermines your potential. (20<sup>th</sup> December 2017)

And she adds that negativity, pain and hurt are also central to getting better:

And I know I would say this with where I am at career wise, but feel like you can learn possibly even more by getting yourself cut a few times on the way up. (5<sup>th</sup> August 2017)

You might hurt yourself as you make yourself better. Knowing which cuts to leave alone to heal and which ones to pick at is almost impossibly hard.

But it's the process of getting better. Knowing what's bleeding and what's healing. And then trusting. (20<sup>th</sup> August 2019)

These posts outline Meghan's determination to present as honest and even vulnerable in her online blog. Professional athletes are often media trained (Bowes and Kitching, 2020b) and/or tied to contractual agreements in how or what they present about themselves, and Douglas and Carless (2015) note that elite, professional athletes' (and more specifically, 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. While Maclaren's presentation of her realities and her truths are seldom associated with sponsors and operators at the peak of the professional game, it also could be illustrative of the precariousness of professional sport for female athletes.

### ***The authoritative voice? Responding to others and defending her position***

Linking to her earlier comments on social media use, while Meghan actively uses online platforms to voice her opinions – like many people online she is simultaneously critical of the perils of social media. She claims that 'social media is all about the superstars; the players at the top' (9<sup>th</sup> January 2018) and that 'social media sways more in the direction of worthless,

unfounded opinions’ (14<sup>th</sup> September 2019). When discussing her consciousness around social media, she is aware of the dangers of misinformation, or polarised views, where ‘black and white also reduces our understanding, our balance, our empathy, our compassion and our reasoning. Our ability to see more than two (or one) sides of the story. To see things are more than our own self-interest’ (6<sup>th</sup> November 2017). Aware of these limitations, she tries to ensure that she is fully informed:

Choosing to question whether the information being presented to you is what it says it is. Quietly, arguments are presented and ‘evidence’ given to validate bigger decisions that are made. And quietly, those arguments and evidence don’t always hold up. (30<sup>th</sup> January 2017)

Anyone can make themselves sound like an expert if they use language effectively, especially if they are in a position of influence. Of course we’re all going to have differing opinions on differing subjects, but again, knowing where those opinions come from is probably more important than what they actually are. We shouldn’t be able to differ in our versions of the facts. (19<sup>th</sup> May 2017)

In this way, while MacLaren is the sole voice on her online blogs, she is aware that every story or account can be seen in multiple ways. At the same time, she defends her points of view and writes that ‘standing up for what you believe in is a very good quality to have’ (6<sup>th</sup> November 2017). Here, the postfeminist lens enables us to view MacLaren’s individual voice (and not her feminine, female body) as empowered. She is telling her own story, she has a perception of agency and control over the narrative, but her experiences of professional golf are also rooted in gendered inequality. In later years she has clearly experienced the wrath of diverging opinion on social media and admittedly struggles with how and whether or not to respond to critics, often around her outspoken views on gender inequality in professional golf. She notes:

It is impossible to write or say anything, whether fact or opinion, without it being torpedoed back to you with some kind of grenade attached. Perhaps everyone just has an underlying need to feel right about things, perhaps social media gives a platform to people who just shouldn't have it. We're in the age where instant access to information is our best and our worst friend. Quite simply it seems, people don't like to agree. Which is fine; debate can be engaging and productive. Going on Twitter to watch incomprehensible arguments ignite appears to be a primary source of entertainment in 2018. There are many times I want to continue a 'conversation' with somebody online, only in the effort to enlighten them (or, grudgingly, be enlightened myself), and yet the responsible mini-me sitting on my shoulder desperately jumps on the lock button to force me into a better use of my time. Some people don't want their minds changed, no matter what you present them with. (29<sup>th</sup> October 2018)

Through this data, MacLaren illustrates the dilemma she faces when choosing to publicly air her views. Nonetheless ultimately she has defended her position, and, in this way, abandons the expectation that a female athlete, and especially one under financial or sponsorship constraints might comply or 'toe the line' in relation to politically sensitive issues.

### **The next steps: queries for Meghan**

As earlier mentioned, postfeminist perspectives have considered how female athletes have become entrepreneurial agents in control of their own destinies, where they are characterised as active or knowing agents using sports marketing, advertising and social media in the presentation of their own subjectivities. Using a post-feminist sensibility allows us to interrogate the way women athletes are both enabled and responsible for raising their profiles

via social media, and the influence of patriarchal and capitalist cultural conditions. This brings us to the purpose of Meghan's blog and if and how this purpose has changed in the time since she turned professional. In the 17<sup>th</sup> August 2017 post, she writes, 'so anyway...this blog is as much for me as anyone else'. The following year (19<sup>th</sup> October 2018), she elaborates on the purpose of her writing:

Write when it hurts. Then write till it doesn't. I don't know if I write because things hurt, or if I write just because it helps me make sense of things. Most of the time I think it can't possibly make sense to other people.

And the following year:

In the last few weeks I've had some people ask me why I write my blogs, and each time I've struggled to put it into words (ironic I know). In some ways though, maybe that's the part that does make sense. My blogs are usually me trying to make sense of golf... to make sense of a game that more often than not, doesn't make any. To try and find the words to explain this path we all stumble down with varying degrees of blindness. (27<sup>th</sup> February 2019)

And later again:

My blogs are really just a succession of me trying out different pieces in different places at different times – they're a little fragment of the mess of my brain that slides its way into the right place in the jigsaw. (19<sup>th</sup> March 2019)

And most recently:

I might be way too long winded about it sometimes (exhibit A) but I like sharing some of what the ebb and flow of being a professional golfer looks



like, because it's undoubtedly one of the loneliest sports on the planet. But we're somehow together in that loneliness too. (6<sup>th</sup> November 2019)

These limited commentaries do not give a clear picture as to Maclaren's motivation for writing the blog. Thus the following are the series of questions the primary authors posed to Meghan in advance of her written response: (1) why did you start the blog, (2) How (if at all) did the purpose of the blog change when you turned professional, or in the years since then? (3) Can you comment on what has influenced you to articulate your self-representations, including your (a) your self-identity as a female professional golfer and a representative/advocate for women's professional golf (b) your self-representations as real and true, and (c) your response/defence of your position.

**Maclaren's response to the primary authors' analysis (email to primary authors, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2019)**

*Being authentic... sometimes I think that's the most important value in my life. And then sometimes I wonder what being authentic even means. Being authentic could possibly answer every question anyone ever has about why I write, or why I write about the specific subjects I do, or why I put it out for the world (or a fragment of it) to see. Why I give long winded answers to closed questions and why I prefer writing to speaking, why I want to reason with ignorance on social media and why I don't ever want to be defined by one thing.*

*It's funny looking back at some of the blogs I've written over the years. Even though they might all vary in subject matter (slightly), you could conclude that they actually all have the same purpose. Just me trying to figure things out. Me trying to give shape and form and substance to the shadows that chase themselves endlessly into every corner of my mind. It's almost*

*cathartic to transform the intricacies and complexities of my thoughts into black words on a white page. There's a finality to it.*

*I knew as I got into my last year or so of school, and then as I went into college in the US, that writing was the medium I found it easiest to express my thoughts. The trouble was, I was always confined by the subject matter of academics. I enjoyed much of that, but there was always more on my mind than whatever I was being asked to study. When I wrote my first blog, I felt like I had a thousand identities crashing into one another with no idea what it all meant. I was an English amateur golfer spending most of each year as a college student on the outskirts of Miami, studying English and Politics half my time and chasing golfing excellence all the time, sometimes representing an American college team and sometimes representing my country. It was like being permanently jet-lagged. I needed a way of understanding all the pieces of myself. Writing did that for me, and putting it out for people to see helped me realise it was ok to have all those conflicts.*

*I think the only thing that's changed in the past year or so is that I've grown more comfortable with my own voice. I think showing vulnerability is a way of showing strength, because only by questioning yourself can you begin to understand yourself. Understanding myself helps me get closer to where I want to go... which is to be whatever I'm capable of being. I guess since I finished college, I've also had less distractions outside of the golf world, so the issues that arise in golf tend to be the issues on my mind. Golf has transfixed and consumed me for a long time, and every time you think you might have fit a piece into the jigsaw, you realise you were looking at the wrong picture anyway. That's why it gives me so much to think about, and therefore to write about. But I think that identity has also connected me with people, and that's one of the*

*reasons I keep writing. The world needs more honesty, more admissions of truth and vulnerability and understanding.*

*Social media provides us with an opportunity to consume and understand and opine on almost anything happening in the world. That can be brilliant, and illuminating, but also damning. I've seen both ends of the spectrum just from sharing my own thoughts. It frustrates me and inspires me in equal measure. I never set out to be an advocate for anything in particular, but as I said, writing is an outlet for my thoughts; for my identities within this world and my own world. Sometimes that leads me to bigger, more controversial topics. I'm lucky to do what I love for a living, but it exposes me to the realities of how the world works too. There's plenty I am yet to understand and plenty I can be better educated on, but I think and write from my own experiences; and if that shows me something that I think is unjust or misinformed or not conducive to a better world with better opportunities, I'll reason my point of view. As far as I'm concerned, that's all I've really done.*

### **Summary thoughts**

The paper has adopted a postfeminist lens to consider the online blogging of a professional female athlete. As Banet-Weiser (2015b) indicates, there is a specific imperative for women to make themselves visible in the current moment. The *demand* for visibility is created because women and girls are seen in crisis, and the *supply* can take many forms, but is most clearly enhanced by the proliferation of online digital media (Banet-Weiser, 2015b). Female athletes are then expected to be entrepreneurial and adaptable in their self-promotion, and it's this form of new sexism which highlights the way MacLaren, in writing her blog, is a product of both the patriarchal and cultural conditions of golf. As Toffoletti (2016, 205) notes, 'the gender bias in sport is then remade as one of women's own making – a result of new modes of femininity

that cast women athletes as empowered agents that are free to choose how they express themselves'. In this paper, the expression is within MacLaren's written word, and in writing her own posts Meghan has full control over her self-representations, and she uses the platform to illustrate the unsettled and dynamic process of life as a female golf tour professional. She is not fearful of presenting her voice as vulnerable and highlighting the trust and doubt she flows to and from, on the contrary, she is determined to present herself and her voice as honest and true. This is significant in presenting as authentic, something fans and consumers expect of athletes they connect with in online spaces (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). She ties in the trust and doubt she experiences with awareness and recognition of her own voice, biases and representations, particularly in responding to others and defending her position. In the existence of her blog alone (before getting to the analysis of the blog posts), it is clear that Meghan has taken on the responsibility to make her own voice public, which digital media has enabled many female athletes to do. Using a postfeminist lens, we can then position MacLaren as an entrepreneurial agent, empowered to find a space for her voice in the sport media and identifying a new articulation for what it means to be a woman in sport – which is a woman who is not silenced, a condition that sport and the sport media often impose. As Vered and Humphreys (2014) note, a postfeminist sensibility is valuable for drawing critical attention to the changing cultural conditions that shape how women are represented – and then, as in this paper, how women can represent themselves.

The primary authors had many thoughts on the purpose of her blog, where possibly initially motivated out of an interest in writing, it appears that she writes as a reflective or therapeutic exercise to help her rationalise her performances, in the hope that it will help her progress and improve both personally and professionally. Far removed from her 'demonstrating her entrepreneurial nous' or 'self-promotion' as pitched in neo-liberal feminism, and in portraying

the multitude of representations available to women that postfeminist understandings appreciate, MacLaren doesn't feel the need to present the perfect, successful image, and has courage in the conviction of depicting her reality in her written words. While her seemingly entrepreneurial approach to finding a space for her voice may have gained some publicity (e.g. Mell, 2019) and opportunities from her blog, writing is not something, it appears, that she does to self-promote or market herself. As explained through her response, she writes in order to make sense of her performances in order to reflect and learn more about herself.

While MacLaren was upfront in her response about the purpose of her blog, there are deeper messages at play, particularly from a postfeminist viewpoint. Through articulating her truths and realities, Meghan ignores or bypasses the commercial and financial consequences associated with the sometimes media-sanitised version of reality portrayed by many professional athletes. Through her honest and critical writing perspective, as an athlete advocate she is potentially marginalising herself from sponsors and supporters in golf. It is admirable that she would do this, and remain honest and authentic to herself, given the risk involved. Further, it is possible that Meghan's online blog presence is both a result of and response to the patriarchal and cultural conditions in which female professional golfers exist, where the vulnerability she expresses is a reflection of a precarious profession. The realities of a transient and uncertain existence coupled with the negativity and critique she has experienced through online platforms have clearly shaped and influenced her voice, and in this way perhaps she has become an outcome or an object of the patriarchal world of golf.

Following the completion of the first draft of the paper, the primary authors sent it to MacLaren for her review, and her email response below (dated 19<sup>th</sup> December 2019) demonstrates the link between Meghan's positioning and the theoretical approach taken in this paper.

*It's incredibly weird reading something that's so specifically about me, but I hugely appreciate you wanting to do that. It's quite amusing and possibly worrying reading how I pose the same questions in slightly different ways over a long period of time. But in terms of how you've presented it and delved into what I've written and why, I think it's great and I don't have any issues with it. It's actually really interesting considering what I've done in the context that you are addressing... and I think you've got a very real point that the reality of women's professional golf might well be a factor in the actual "why" behind my writing... not in a content point of view but the very publication of it. The more I think about it now, the more that makes some sense to me... one of the reasons I've continued to write is because I know it connects with people – I have physical/verbal evidence of that, in the comments people have made. And yet throughout my time as a professional golfer there is such a marginal space for female professional golfers to have their voices represented. Without it being a conscious decision, that may have influenced me to write both honestly and publicly.*

In the context of this special issue, we (the primary authors) have tried to offer an alternative but original depiction of a female athlete's online self-representations. Whilst we may be critical of the increasing demand placed on female athletes to carve an online space for themselves to generate media coverage (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018b), here MacLaren demonstrates the possibility it can create to have her voice presented exactly how she wants it to be heard. While we initially set out to write about her athlete activism, through the collaboration with MacLaren, we began to reveal deeper significance in how her digital self-representations are shaped by the patriarchal and cultural circumstances in professional golf. Going beyond member reflections, we believe that the paper offers a rigorous way forward to understand athlete self-representations in the diverging digital landscape. We also present an alternative way to begin to understand and make sense of those representations by directly

collaborating with the athlete, giving further credence her voice and how she wants it to be used.

At the same time, we acknowledge some difficulties with what we have portrayed. While the research was collaborative in nature, we could have allowed more space for MacLaren's voice, but there is potential for this in the next iterations of our writing together. Further, we are acutely aware of how fortunate we were in working with an extremely articulate athlete – not all professional athletes are armed with the cultural and educational capital that circulates in particular sports such as golf, while many more will be reluctant to share so personally and deeply. Finding athletes who are presenting themselves through alternative digital realities (whether in image, written or other forms) and engaging and fore fronting their stories in research will be salient in order to widen the discourse and debate in the world of professional sport.

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