

**Online activism and athlete advocacy in professional women's golf: Risk or reward?**

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## **Abstract**

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 terms of visibility, endorsements, prize money and media coverage, women golfers lag behind their male counterparts. Meghan MacLaren is a professional golfer on the Ladies European Tour and whilst competing, simultaneously documents her life as a professional athlete through her online blog, much of which intertwines her career trajectory alongside the inequality she faces. MacLaren's posts advocate increased pay and opportunity in professional women's golf and have coincided with a period of progressive policies in women's professional golf, including mixed gender events and increased prize money. Building on other collaborations, this chapter considers the potential for athlete activism to stimulate change in professional golf. A truncated analysis of MacLaren's online posts is initially presented, prompting questions around female athlete advocacy and activism, which were posed directly to her. Using a collaborative approach, MacLaren responds in her own writing, contributing as a co-author. The resultant discussion considers the risks and rewards and the social and economic implications for female protagonists who speak out in male-dominated arenas such as professional sport.

## Introduction

In recent times, online media has become central to commentary on, and presentations (self or otherwise) of female athletes. Social media platforms have given rise to the ‘accessible athlete’, enabling athletes and organizations to bypass mainstream media outlets and present their product to the audiences unfiltered (Sheffer & Schultz, 2013). Sports media academics have pointed to the potential for digital media, such as social networking sites and online blogs, to redress the lack of coverage and challenge prevailing hegemonic media representations of female athletes (Allison 2018; Antunovic & Hardin 2012; Bruce & Hardin 2014; Toffoletti & Thorpe 2018b). Further, while female athlete activism is being increasingly reported on (e.g. Cooky 2017, 2018; Tredway 2020), and while cultural icons such as Billie Jean King, and more recently, Megan Rapinoe, have been the subject of academic analyses (e.g. Schmidt et al., 2019), the self-narratives of female athlete activists are not well evidenced in the literature. Notably, recent evidence informs us that many female athletes are under pressure to feel grateful for the opportunity to compete as professionals, thereby inhibiting them from speaking critically about their involvement (Pavlidis, 2020). This chapter makes a novel contribution to this field, particularly in the presentation of MacLaren’s direct voice and her role as co-author.

In line with Cooky and Antunovic’s (2020) recent call in relation to athlete activism to tell stories differently, this chapter examines the online blogposts of professional golfer and athlete advocate, Meghan MacLaren. Whilst competing on the Ladies European Tour (LET), MacLaren simultaneously documents her life as a professional athlete through her online blog ([www.megMacLaren.com](http://www.megMacLaren.com)), much of which intertwines her career trajectory alongside the structural and institutional inequality she faces as a female athlete. Building on other collaborations in which the authors appraise MacLaren’s blog through postfeminist lenses (Kitching et al., under review), and examine MacLaren’s self-representations (Kitching et al., 2020), this chapter considers the potential for athlete activism to stimulate discussion and change in women’s professional golf. We firstly present a shortened analysis of MacLaren’s online posts, thereby prompting questions around female athlete advocacy and activism. We then presented these questions directly to MacLaren, and she

responds in her own writing, thus contributing as a co-author. The chapter considers the risks and rewards and the social and economic implications for female protagonists who speak out in male-dominated arenas such as professional sport. We also explore the delicate balance for athlete advocates between advancing their sport and maintaining personal wellbeing in and through online media.

### **Digital media and female athletes**

Much has been documented about the ways in which sportswomen negotiate multiple demands to self-present in online spaces. A number of authors have examined individual female professional athletes and their interactions with sports media, including UFC branding and representation of Ronda Rousey (McClearen, 2018), WTA acceptance of Serena Williams (Tredway, 2018), golf governing bodies' Twitter representations of female professional golfers (Bowes & Kitching, 2019b), and print media representations of professional golfer Leona Maguire (Kitching & Bowes, 2020). Blogging has received some attention for the way that the medium can provide a space for sportswomen, fans and commentators to share, debate and enhance the visibility of women's sport (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Bruce & Hardin, 2014). Antunovic and Hardin (2013) attest that as blogging gains popularity, women's ubiquity in the blogosphere increases, and therefore can assist "women's efforts toward social change and provide visibility to their endeavours" (p. 1374). Skateboarding blogs have offered alternatives to other online representations, where participants embraced more fluid definitions of sporting femininities, rejected male/female binaries and challenged male dominated institutions (MacKay & Dallaire, 2012, 2013).

Online media not only provide opportunities for female athletes to self-represent on their own terms, but also present sportswomen, fans and commentators a space to share, debate and discuss women's sport (Bruce & Hardin, 2014). Some comment that female athletes operating online can contest the discourses that devalue sportswomen and transform the traditional hegemonic representation of female athletes (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Bruce & Hardin, 2014; Sanderson & Gramlich, 2016). Conversely Sanderson (2013) comments that social/online media can provide a

venue for sexist commentary, while Mogaji et al. (2020) caution that there are risks associated with using social media, and sportswomen must be mindful of online ‘trolls’. A study on female athletes at the Rio 2016 Olympics found that they felt pressure to post sexually suggestive images and that they received unwanted private communications from male fans (Geurin, 2017). In terms of blogs, Antunovic and Hardin (2013) caution that some women’s sports blogs reproduce hegemonic norms around gendered sporting bodies, while their engagement with broader social issues varies, a point that Thorpe et al. (2017) also make. Thus, whilst research points to the benefits of online spaces for female athletes, there is caution about the wider impact on the representation of female athletes.

### **Professional women’s golf**

Golf has always been a contested site for women, from the early days of hidden games (George, 2010), to the modern day, where they have been othered or objectified (Mitchell et al., 2016), and struggle for access, opportunity and employment (Kitching et al., 2017). Professional women’s golf developed much later than its male equivalent and has struggled to catch up in terms of visibility, endorsements and prize money. An ethnographic examination of the LPGA tour found that women golfers were ‘outsiders’ in the world of women’s professional golf (Crosset, 1995). Traditional media depictions of women professional golfers have shown how televised, print media and magazine coverage of golf have continued to use representations that reinforce divisions of gender, class, disability and race (e.g. Billings et al., 2006). More recently, our own work has demonstrated that while there has been some progress, print and online media are reproducing images which continue to ‘other’ women within golf cultures (Bowes & Kitching, 2019a, 2019b; Kitching & Bowes, 2020).

In spite of this evidence, women’s golf has gained ground in recent years. The Royal and Ancient (R&A) have published the Women in Golf Charter, which, it is hoped, national golf federations, golf bodies and golf clubs will sign up to, to encourage more women and girls to stay in golf (The Royal & Ancient, 2020). A number of high profile – previously dissenting – golf venues have opened their doors to female members, including Royal Troon, the venue for the 2020 Women’s

Open Championship, and after formally inviting women members to join the club for the first time in 2019, Muirfield in Scotland will host the Women's Open championship in 2022. In 2019 the prize fund for the tournament jumped by a huge 40% to \$4.5million, though the winner still earns just 35% of winner's purse at the men's Open championship (BBC Sport, 2019). In mid-2020 the Ladies' European Tour signed a deal with the LPGA, which would potentially provide a bigger platform for players through more tournaments, visibility and sponsor support (Ladies European Tour, 2020b).

### ***Meghan MacLaren***

Meghan MacLaren is a professional golfer from England, and a two-time winner on the Ladies' European Tour (LET). As of September 2020, she ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> on the LET order of merit and 284<sup>th</sup> in the official world golf rankings (Ladies European Tour, 2020a; Rolex Rankings, 2020). She has become as well known for her honest and insightful engagement on social media – through Twitter and her blog ([www.megMacLaren.com](http://www.megMacLaren.com)) – as she has for her golf. Through her posts, MacLaren has established herself as an advocate for increased pay, terms and opportunities for women players. In 2019 MacLaren was identified by Golf Monthly as one of the top 10 professional golfers to follow on Twitter, the only female to appear on the list (Heath, 2019). While MacLaren's blogging has raised her profile, and while women's professional golf has made some progress in the years since she turned professional, concurrently, her golf game has plateaued. MacLaren is aware that her advocacy for women's professional golf could be to the detriment of her own golf, where she acknowledges, "I spend half my time worrying that I'm sucking life out of my own golfing potential by concerning myself with the life of the LET" (3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019). This brings us to the research question for this chapter: what are the risks and/or rewards associated with online athlete activism for a female professional athlete operating in an individual, male-dominated sport?

### **Perspectives**

When considering the significance of athlete activism, contemporary perspectives on feminism have much to offer in terms of the traditional tenets of female athlete power and agency, along with the intersections of athlete subjectivities and representational politics. In this chapter, we use postfeminism in order to understand the agentic role of MacLaren as an athlete advocate. In line with neo-liberalism, Gill (2007) articulates postfeminism as a cultural sentiment, where femininity is marked by discipline, intensified self-surveillance and individualized empowerment. What sets postfeminism apart from neoliberal feminist perspectives is the recognition of underlying social and historical relations, and the patriarchal and capitalist conditions that are at play. Through this perspective we can consider the operations of alternative media formats such as online blogs and interrogate the way women athletes are both enabled and responsible for raising their profiles via social media, whilst concurrently recognising inherent patriarchal and capitalist cultural conditions. In the way that Gill (2016) and Fullagar et al. (2018) put forward postfeminism as a critical object of inquiry or category of analysis, we use postfeminism in this chapter alongside critical feminism, which is concerned with social institutions and underlying social relations, oppressive structures and problems of inequality. Critical postfeminism as used here recognizes the potential for knowledge production that can lead to social change and the emergence of new possibilities and actions. followed by the methodological approach used in this chapter.

### **Activism and advocacy to this point**

Given that our previous two analyses adopted similar theoretical positions, and that they will inevitably inform and shape this chapter, we believe it is salient to outline some of our key findings to this point. In this section we give a short account of our analysis of MacLaren's blog, focusing on the political activism and athlete advocacy evidenced. In Kitching et al. (2020) we examined how MacLaren self-represented through her blogposts and found that she wrote and represented both trust and doubt, self-represented as real, authentic and true, was determined to publicly respond to others. In the latter theme MacLaren illustrated the dilemma she faced in airing her views, where she abandoned the expectation that a female athlete – and especially one under financial or sponsorship constraints – might comply in relation to politically sensitive issues. For example:

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. (29th October 2018)

In Kitching et al. (under review), using both neo-liberal feminism and postfeminist outlooks, we examined how MacLaren responded to issues of gender inequality. We found that she held herself publicly accountable in confronting the issues in women’s professional golf. In her open letter from 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019, MacLaren refers to male professionals and their opposition to her equality arguments:

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

In MacLaren’s 2019 blog posts, there was a gradual shift in her writing in becoming more vocal on behalf of the players, for example, “I haven’t yet moved past the stage of caring. I hope I never do...I like to think I’m a good representative for our tour” (3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019). She spoke in support of other female golfers, including Se Ri Pak, who she juxtaposed against coach and commentator Hank Haney who had made disparaging comments towards Asian players: “Se Ri Pak is responsible for far more major champions than Hank Haney ever will be” (3<sup>rd</sup> June 2019). In the same post MacLaren acknowledges that she is exhausted from the critical stance she takes, where she “probably comes across as a whiny woman who will never be satisfied”, but she also comments “things are changing, and I’m excited to be a part of this world that is making them change (3<sup>rd</sup> June 2019). Another element that arose in this paper is MacLaren’s acknowledgement that change may be beyond the players alone. Clearly, she is aware of the wider patriarchal and cultural conditions in golf, but she also excused this perspective with market forces and was careful not to upset those who work in and



for women's golf, thereby demonstrating the limit to her agency and activism (Kitching et al., under review).

### **Methodological approach**

To this point we have outlined a condensed description and analysis of the activism and advocacy elements of Meghan MacLaren's blog. Our previous work with MacLaren offers additional depth on elements that are not elaborated on here, such as ethical considerations (Kitching et al., 2020, under review). This chapter uses the same collaborative approach as Kitching et al. (2020), where the primary authors (Kitching and Bowes) collaborate with MacLaren as a research participant and co-author, and where MacLaren responds to the primary authors in her own written word, a role that was not found heretofore with athletes in the literature. Using our central research question around the risks and rewards of being an online athlete advocate, the primary authors gathered sub questions which were emailed to MacLaren in September 2020. These included: what progress has been made on gender equality in women's professional golf, what opportunities have you gained or rejected, what (if anything) have you lost, and what (if any) harm/distraction has happened? MacLaren was invited to respond in her own written words, which she did in October 2020.

### **Meghan MacLaren's response: October 2020**

*When I look now at the bigger picture of gender equality/inequality in golf in comparison to when I first really remember getting involved in the 'debate', I think there has been huge progress. I say that as much with regards to the conversation around the issue as the actual realities, which I think still have a long way to go – but this is mainly due to how far behind women's golf has been historically. When I look at social media interaction – not just with me personally – with this issue, I have definitely noticed a shift in the general perception and reaction – there seems to be a lot more agreement with the need for female golfers to be given more opportunity and respect – whereas a couple of years ago I felt there was far more*

*resistance and shutting down of the conversation. That to me is a sign of progress, even if it hasn't had a huge impact on the financial reality or media coverage etc. I've come to recognize all the interaction I've had on social media and outside of that, even if it was at times very negative, has maybe been a small part in the way the entire conversation has started to shift. Things that I wouldn't necessarily have noticed before, such as gendered language or omissions of female perspectives, has [sic] definitely become more positive. Hopefully as that becomes the norm, more companies will recognize their responsibility to treat male and female athletes as equal, and the opportunity and access will continue to rise for female golfers. The creation of the Rose Ladies Series this summer, and the consequent backing of several high profile companies, is the perfect example of that.*

*I haven't had any explicit sponsorship or financial opportunity from anything I've done or said on social media or beyond. I possibly receive more media attention – my blogs have become more well received and my followers on Twitter have increased as a result.*

*I have since started a monthly column for the magazine Today's Golfer, so that could be a result of my online presence, although I did previously write for Women & Golf magazine as well. Today's Golfer is a paid column whereas Women & Golf was not. I also worked with the BBC 5 Live team for radio commentary of the 2019 Open Championship at Portrush, which was a paid opportunity. Obviously it's always hard to know why or where these opportunities come from, but I am on good terms with many people in the media, which I guess comes in part from my willingness to share my thoughts honestly and speak up about important issues.*

*To be honest, I haven't involved myself as much in social media 'debate' over the last few months. This is mainly due to the fact I think things are progressing and the conversation is changing, as I stated earlier – and so I don't think there is as much to be gained from highlighting disparities in the men's and women's game. Previously I thought there was a big lack of awareness and that was something I felt the need to draw attention to, as I didn't think we had a chance of change when so few people knew or even cared. Having said that, there is also a side of it that is negative, and while it may not have ever affected my golf, I am aware*

*of it negatively affecting my mental well-being on occasion. I am lucky in that I can put that to the side, particularly if I think there is a positive overall impact, but I would be lying if I said there weren't times comments online have made me angry or upset. I've also felt that when I have seen it directed at other people speaking out on similar issues too.*

*One thing I also think is worth mentioning is the issue of Saudi Arabia. I'm turning down the opportunity to play for more money in two weeks than I may earn all year, because I am aware I'm standing for more than just my golf. It's obviously a personal decision and there are many points to this particular debate, and I can't say with certainty what my stance would be if social media didn't exist. But there is definitely an element of how I have come to present myself, as authentically as possible, through social media and how that fits with this issue. I'm not comfortable with speaking up about every issue, be it political or humanitarian or anything else, but I do recognize my willingness to not separate the lines between 'golfer' and 'person', which creates situations with both positive and negative consequences.*

### **The risks and rewards of athlete activism**

Postfeminist frameworks inform us that female athletes have choice and control over their self-representations and interactions online, but also that these choices are framed through patriarchal cultural conditions. We see in MacLaren's concluding paragraph above, how, as an athlete who is not willing to "separate the lines between 'golfer' and 'person,'" she has difficult ethical choices to make in her profession. In November 2020, the LET ran a double series of tournaments in Saudi Arabia, and, in response to concerns regarding human rights, MacLaren has taken a principled stance in choosing to boycott the tournaments for a greater good. In so doing, she is forgoing the opportunity to compete, enhance her world ranking, and earn increased prize money, all of which are so crucial to her upward trajectory in professional golf. While MacLaren is demonstrating freedom of choice here, she also exhibits the self-surveillance and public accountability previously documented (Kitching et al., under review), where there is "definitely an element of how I have come to present myself." While

her stance might depict individualized empowerment within postfeminism, she does so not for her own individual benefit, but for reasons of morality and integrity, and ultimately, for the benefit of others.

The limited opportunities MacLaren has gained from her blog exposure are clearly coloured by the negative attention she receives through online media; in this regard Kavanagh et al. (2019) highlight that increased online connection comes with the potential for misuse and abuse, especially for sportswomen. Previously, we documented how MacLaren was determined to respond to others and defend her position (Kitching et al., 2020). In this piece she mentions that there was “resistance and shutting down of the conversation.” The interactions she had on social media were “at times very negative” and it appears that she has partly stepped away from online interactions in recent times in a need to protect her mindset, where she says “I am aware of it negatively affecting my mental well-being on occasion.” This perhaps demonstrates a threshold to the benefits of female athlete activism through social media, and also, how easily disaffected some athlete advocates could become given the tirade of negative commentary they may receive.

Under postfeminist frameworks, the burden of responsibility to find solutions to gender inequality often falls on individual women themselves. In our previous work, MacLaren had mentioned that change in professional women’s golf might be “beyond us,” and she confirms this here, saying, “I didn’t think we had a chance of change when so few people knew or even cared.” Although she has had negative interactions on social media, she has begun to realize that it has played “a small part in the way the entire conversation has started to shift.” Here, she admits that there has been “huge progress,” there has been a “shift in the general perception and reaction,” and that “the conversation is changing”. MacLaren has also acknowledged her contribution in playing “a small part in the way the entire conversation has started to shift.” This is a small win for MacLaren who, as a sole trader, and with the greater good as a goal, has taken on the burden of female athlete advocacy, particularly in the context of patriarchal and structural inequalities that exist. Significantly, she comments that this is all progress, even if it “hasn’t had a huge impact on the financial reality or media coverage.”

## **Conclusion**

When Meghan MacLaren initiated her online blog, she used it to journal her thoughts around her game and make sense of her golf performances. In 2017 that all changed, when she began to unselfishly speak out on behalf of women's professional golf. In this study, we see that when female athletes use their voices in a political way, they initiate important conversations and they can effect positive change. However, in the platforming of their voices online, there is recognition that standing up for the greater good is not always the most sensible strategy. Whilst documenting the peaks and troughs of her golf, MacLaren has simultaneously experienced the highs and lows of online interactions. In using digital platforms to voice their views, there is a balance to be achieved between contributing to incremental progress and the female athlete's personal wellbeing. MacLaren has admitted that negative interactions have left her "angry or upset", which must serve as a distraction for an elite athlete.

Female athlete advocates such as MacLaren have an important role in shaping the future of patriarchal institutions, and historically male spaces such as golf. Yet if they are not on the world stage of Rapinoe or Williams, they can become ostracized or even forgotten within their sport. Athletes in MacLaren's position have much more to lose than to gain from the incremental progress they make in their sport. While we know from Allison (2020) that professional female athletes value moral judgements, players who sacrifice material reward for emotional satisfaction and advocate for future change, we also know that they can little afford to speak out. MacLaren's boycott of the Saudi Arabia tournament is incredibly admirable, given the potential detrimental impact on her season and earnings, while she may also face isolation from her fellow players (who may be similarly compromised), the LET and sponsors. In channelling critical postfeminism, and the emergence of new possibilities and actions related to feminism, we suggest that opportunities for reflection and support amongst the research community be made for such female athletes.

## **Acknowledgement**

To finish, the primary authors wish to speak directly to Meghan: thank you for your strength, courage and unselfish acts which have – we are certain – brought about change in golf. We have come only a tiny way along your journey in golf, and our hope is that you will truly realize your world-beating qualities on a big stage, both on and off the golf course.

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