

Golf: widening the gap between those who can and cannot

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Golf is a multi-million pound industry. We have just seen the open in Scotland that will do much for raising the profile and interest in the sport. Indeed, the Open in the UK is one of the four big annual major tournaments, with Sky paying a reported £15m a year to broadcast the event, which itself can be worth some £140m to the local host economy (Wilson, 2016). A report by Sheffield Hallam also highlights that UK golfers spend a whopping £4billion per year. Despite this golf still has its problems with gender inequality and falling participation.

Given the limelight associated with The Open and in-turn Golf, Dr Paul Widdop (Leeds Beckett University) and Dr Dan Parnell (Manchester Metropolitan University) take a close look at golf to help better understand the current landscape.

Eminent sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) once stated that the practice of sports such as tennis, riding, sailing or golf doubtless owes part of its 'interest', just as much nowadays as at the beginning, to its distinguishing function. More precisely, to the gains in distinction which it brings. It is no accident that the majority of the most select, i.e. selective, clubs are organized around sporting activities which serve as a focus or pretext for elective gatherings. Certain sport like the arts is then used as a symbolic marker (distinct from other less worthy forms of sport) used to reinforce and reproduce the class position. Furthermore, through relational mechanisms individuals can use access to certain sports as an instrument to develop social capital and access to lucrative job market. This is certainly true of golf, where certain clubs put economic barriers up through obtrusive membership fees and strict rules of etiquette, to remain exclusive and exclude those not worthy of membership. Clearly for Bourdieu the taste for the game will be consumed by members of the higher classes, due to the social profit that it brings (such as building new networks, enhancing social capital, both of which can be exchanged at a later date for economic benefit). In other words as in other leisure and cultural fields, sporting taste and sport participation is intertwined with social class, or the symbolic meaning a given sport presents to others, which brings us to golf.

Indeed, inclusivity did not appear at the forefront when the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews (Scotland) admitted females to its membership for the first time in history. The first female being, The Princess Royal, reaffirming the class orientations and distinction of the sport (Widdop and Parnell, 2015). Despite this, the future might offer some hope, with another 'THIS' branded initiative, This Girl's Golf, which was launched in 2015, to change female perception of and participation in golf. Nigel Freemantle, chairman of the British Golf Industry Association (BGIA), said "Females are getting more and more into the game... Also, if we can get women with children to take up the sport, then they might bring their youngsters to the club and get them into the game too." Freemantle also offers further positivity suggesting golf is not in a bad place.

Despite the positivity, and the excitement and grandeur associated with The Open 2016, we are reminded of our colleague, Professor Jim McKenna's comments on the legacy of the Grand Depart in Leeds. McKenna draws on the work of Dennett to help us consider the ploy of 'using lay audiences as decoys'. So, a big sport event may get the audiences, public attention and the associated media spreads, pages, tweets and likes. It is all too easy to follow, enjoy, consume and applaud who ever heads the leader board. Therefore, as easy audiences we act as decoys.

Like the Grand Depart, The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and no-doubt The Open 2016, we will adopt what Dennett terms ‘Occam’s broom’; when this broom is being used it whisk inconvenient evidence under the carpet. Freemantle and others offering positivity, might just be well-intended advocates of the broom, whisking the broom clearing inconvenient truths about golf and the more genuine and likely impact and non-impacts of a this event away.

Much work has been undertaken to ensure golf accessibility to the masses in terms of class and geography, despite persistent regulations and codes, such as the firmly enforced attire and etiquette, which are hard to decipher for those lacking in the prerequisite cultural credentials, creating symbolic boundaries of exclusion.

Yet, according to KPMG, England reported a decline of 2.4% in registered players in 2015, while Scotland recorded a drop of 0.8%, although it may be that golfers prefer to play on an increasingly ad hoc basis, paying for golf per round rather than registering with a club or course (Wilson, 2016). This is not just about participation, it is about class, geography and inequality.

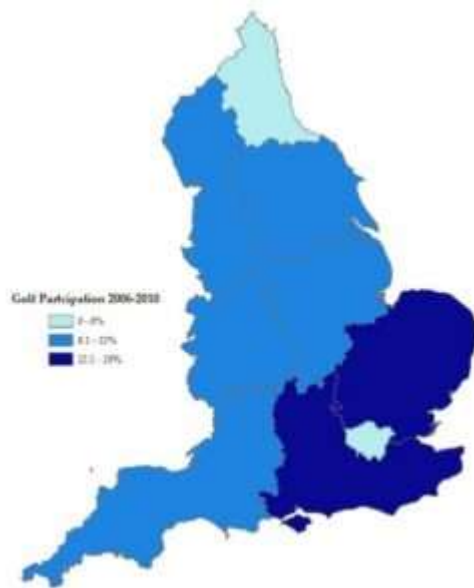
Class

Using data from the DCMS, Taking Part Survey (2006-2010) a worrying trend had emerged. Indeed, rather than a systematic narrowing of class inequalities, there is in fact a growing disparity. Figure 1 below illustrates, from 2006 to 2010 salariat classes (i.e., the professional and managerial occupations) have an upward trend in the consumption of Golf, whereas in comparison, the working class consumption rate is decreasing systematically year on year. Clearly more evidence is needed to determine if this trend is continuing. However what is not in any doubt is that there are major class disparities in the game that need to be addressed, to rid it of elitist connotations’.



Geography

Alongside class, gender, and ethnicity, there are hidden spatial inequalities that impact upon consumption, which includes golf. Mapping the aggregate data from the Taking Part Survey (2006-2010) against Government Office Regions of England, highlights these spatial inequalities in Golf participation. Individuals residing in the affluent South East, and East of England make up 33% of golf participants. There is a fraction of evidence that points at the much debated North South divide. Whilst we must be aware of the limitations of inferring from a large spatial scale, the data supports the finding that you are more likely to participate in Golf if you reside in the South of England.



Inequality

“Golf is still too often wrongly stereotyped as something from yesteryear, but it is not a sport from bygone days or just for old boys in funny trousers,” says Mr Freemantle (in Wilson, 2016).

Freemantle offers a hope that golf doesn’t cost too much, suggesting a basic set of children’s golf clubs costing around £50 (Wilson, 2016). Whilst this doesn’t account for club fees, other equipment and balls (the authors were often explorers of the ‘rough’ during golf and after hours to retrieve their or others balls!)

Despite this, we believe the much of the nation, whether related to general house-hold responsibilities or participation choices, are ‘tightening their belts’ or just have less to spend. Austerity has had a real impact on the lives of people and research has shown that spending on sport per household has been negatively impacted as a result (Eakins, 2016).

The price to play may have got higher. Like others sports such as swimming (Parnell, Millward and Spracklen, 2014), municipal golf has faced financial changes. With many municipal golf courses, who mainly cater for the working class golfers up and down the country, either under threat, have been sold (sometimes for housing) or have been left in disrepair (see the below case studies).

Case examples

There are examples across the country of courses closing or under threat of closure. Indeed, Western Park Golf Course in Leicestershire is one such example of a golf course under threat of closure (Leicester Mercury, 30th July 2013). A further example is Amington Golf Course, which has been lost because of funding cuts by Tamworth Borough Council (BBC, 28th September, 2014). Many municipal courses have also been sold to private companies and enterprises, for example, Wirral Council and neighbouring West Cheshire have agreed to sell-off seven municipal golf courses: Arrowe Park, Brackenwood, Bebington, The Warrens, Hooton, Knights Grange and Westminster Park. Tenders have been invited although it is not known what will happen if the council does not receive any attractive bids. Councillor Chris Meaden, Wirral’s cabinet member for leisure, sport and culture, said: “Along with our colleagues in Cheshire West and Cheshire, we are keen to continue pay to play provision, and are confident this combined package across the two boroughs will attract customers and operators who will be able to put

those courses on a sound and sustainable financial footing.” (Golf Club Management, 2nd February, 2015). The most disturbing case may well be Keele Golf Course in Staffordshire. RMW Ltd, fronted by Masters winner Ian Woosnam was due to take control of the course, but the deal with Newcastle Borough Council collapsed after the councillors claimed the company had begun making unreasonable demands. Since then, the course has remained closed (The Sentinel, 10th March, 2014). The only activity on the course is the opportunistic local entrepreneurs who have ploughed the overgrown fairways. The council is considering a number of options including a housing and golf re-development (The Sentinel, 10th March, 2014), yet at the time of writing the course remains closed (and overgrown).

The future

What does the future hold for golf? The announcement of opening up the game to female golfers should see a spike in participation for this group, and this should see a diversification in Golf consumers. However, there remains concerns this just reinforce the growing class and spatial inequalities currently inflicting the game. As we move towards greater levels of unease at what appears to be institutional inequalities, it is difficult to envisage a future whereby Golf can free itself of elitism. Despite this, England Golf (the national governing body for the sport) recently recruited a new Chief Executive. Nick Pink, who steps into this role offers some hope for those wanting to raise participation in the sport. Pink, who in his past role as European Manager of the International Cricket Council was able to claim a 35% in participation in cricket in the Europe. A laudable achievement that may serve England Golf well during this difficult fiscal period.