

The value of golf to health

[The Football Collective](#) November 4, 2016 Health, Sport Edit "The value of golf to health"



In a recent article in the *British Journal of Sport Medicine* researchers provided their findings on a scoping review exploring the relationship between golf and health. Here Dr Dan Parnell and Dr Paul Widdop, of ConnectSport, offer an insight into the research and its implications for community sport.

Golf is undoubtedly a global sport, played largely outdoors on open-air greenfield courses and involves striking a ball and walking (mostly), which makes it an interesting pastime to study health. Evidence suggests that the game is reputedly played by around [55 million people](#) in [206 countries](#), but courses are concentrated in nations with larger GDPs, as are prestigious international tournaments. Those who participate in golf are demographically diverse, with a breadth of people playing from young and older age cohorts, and those with a range of abilities. Whilst this is true, certain sections of society are more inclined to participate in the sport, given its somewhat elitist nature, which we have discussed further in a [previous post](#).

Why is golf of interest to health?

Golf has widespread international interest and appeal, emphasised by international tournaments and vast acres of land given over to private and publicly financed courses. Furthermore, as of 2016 it has been reintroduced as an Olympic sport, which it is hoped will raise the profile and participation of the game globally.

Golf does [not offer the exercise intensity](#) of cycling, swimming, football, tennis, but it still has an important role to play as the [fifth most popular sport in England](#) (behind football, cycling, athletics and swimming). Perhaps the low intensity is what makes it attractive to sections of society, for example older age cohorts, who might be unwilling or unable to participate in alternative sports. Furthermore, but not specified in the paper, are the social aspects of golf for health and mental well-being, that is the social capital generated, from a Robert Putnam tradition. Perhaps, golf and its association with the 19th hole (slang term for the clubhouse) is unique in this aspect, as the end of the game is built on socialising.

The [Health Survey](#) for England 2012 data outlines that 2.2% of persons aged 16 and over reported playing golf in the four weeks prior to the survey, although participation levels are greater in higher socio-economic groups.

It has also been highlighted that older age cohorts play to a greater extent than younger groups ([Scottish Health Survey, 2013](#)), and to a greater intensity. But there is a lack of evidence as to whether cost and other types of *capital* restrictions influences these findings.

Given the economic recession and challenges for keeping people active and recruiting new participants, making golf accessible for all is a key challenge for the industry. This is growing increasingly difficult given the counter-intuitive strategies of some elitist clubs, who embark on policies which detach themselves from communities, through [excessive pricing structures](#).

The scoping review

This scoping review included published and unpublished reports of any age or language, identified by searching electronic databases, platforms, reference lists, websites and from consulting experts.

Using a three-step search strategy the authors identified relevant considerations. In all, 4944 records were identified, later filtered down to 301 studies, which met the criteria set by the research team.

What did the scoping review find?

The findings surround three keys areas and reflect a growing development in the breadth and depth of research undertaken in golf participation.

1 Physical health: Golf can provide moderate intensity physical activity and is associated with physical health benefits which include improved cardiovascular, respiratory and metabolic profiles, and improved wellness.

2 Mental health: There is limited evidence related to golf and mental health.

3 Risk of injury: The incidence of golfing injury is moderate, with back injuries the most frequent. Accidental head injuries are rare, but can have serious consequences.

What are the implications for community sport?

We should take some encouragement that participation in golf is associated with improved physical health.

Providing evidence and placing golf at the forefront of the psyche of practitioners and policymakers, by identifying the social benefits associated with golf individually and

collectively for communities, is essential. The following points illustrate where funding and evidence must be generated for programmes to support increased participation:

- improved physical health.
- improved mental well-being.
- contribute to increased life expectancy.
- increase community-level social capital.

This might be particularly relevant for older participants, where golf can contribute to increased muscle strength, balance and falls prevention (and mental health).

Risk of injury is rare, but remains a factor in golf, like other sports. It will be important for those in community sport to consider reduction strategies and pro-active support ahead of programme implementation.

Where possible, practitioners and policy-makers should seek to engage with universities to develop research and evaluation opportunities to fill the identified gap in our understanding of golf and health.

Community-level social capital through sport is often a throw-away line. But golf has a social aspect which community sport groups need to explore for the benefit of community cohesion and civic engagement.

This article is based on the following research article:

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