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Yes Really, Women Are Loving Golf!

By Dr Chris Mackintosh and Christopher Mills

Transforming national governing bodies (NGB), how they operate, work with the voluntary sector and hence impact on participation figures and size and scope of volunteering has been a staple of the sport management industry for over four decades. In the case of this article we take a closer look at the work of golf as an NGB and the context of their wider industry and how they are responding to the challenge in England set by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in 2015 to tackle some of the underlying challenges facing sport. It is our assertion that golf is making considerable progress against specific sector challenges in the field of women and girls golf.

Within golf, female participation rates are low. In Europe, less than one in four golfers is female. In England that figure is lower, with just one in seven golfers being female. A recent survey of golf clubs by England Golf revealed that the average number of members per golf club is 484, but that this only includes an average of 70 women golfers and 6 junior girls.

Academic research conducted in north America and the UK over the past 15 years has tended to characterise golf as a male dominated sport where women experience sexism and constraints on participation. With our own research, we have found instances where male chauvinism persists. One female golfer recently told us that *“there still is an element of some men seeing it as a joke when they see a lady out on the course.....they say ‘who’s doing you ironing today?’ You get that sort of thing.”* When we hear these types of stories, it leaves us wondering whether we really are eighteen years into the twenty first century. It is at least encouraging to note that such instances seem increasingly rare.

Whilst instances of poor female experience undoubtedly exist, it’s important not to make the error of tarring an entire sport with the same brush. In England, there are just under 2,000 golf clubs and our own research has shown that there is considerable variety in culture and practice. Although some golf clubs are failing to offer women a decent experience, most golf clubs are now working hard to attract more women into the sport.

The 2010 Equality Act was a significant milestone for the golf industry. Whereas some golf clubs previously offered different membership types for women and placed restrictions on their playing times, they now have to comply with the Equality Act. It was a moment that tipped the balance and saw most golf clubs take positive steps towards creating a better experience for women golfers.

The golf industry is making a concerted effort to improve the experience of women golfers. It has recognised the enormous growth potential of women’s golf. The R&A, which governs the sport worldwide outside of the United States, launched its Women in Golf Charter in May 2018. The charter creates

a commitment to developing a more inclusive culture within golf. The Professional Golfers Association (PGA) is also promoting initiatives to help more women learn to play. The “*We Love Golf*” scheme is one particular initiative that has refashioned the way that golf is coached to new women golfers and is proving successful at making golf more appealing. A second example is that of *Golf Access* which has been set up to attract beginners to the game by making the format fun and welcoming to everyone. It’s very nature makes it appealing to both girls and boys. It encourages them to compete on an equal footing, playing from the same tees. The emphasis on getting on to the golf course and having fun, as well as the chance to compete alongside, and successfully with boys, has made *Golf Access* attractive. *Golf Access* launched in March 2017, it is a limited company and has around 85 clubs running it. In surveyed clubs running *Golf Access* around 6 months This survey indicated that *Golf Access* had attracted around 1000 junior participants in its first 6 months. Approx 40% of these were females. England Golf are undertaking more formal research piloting of this project to establish best practice.

England Golf, the sports governing body in England, is particularly proactive in promoting women’s golf. Indeed, it has set itself a target of 20% golfers being women by 2020. That roughly equates to finding over 50,000 new female golfers within 5 years. Laura Spray, Women and Girls Manager at England Golf, has the task of supporting initiatives to help achieve this target. Laura explains: “*Golf is having to take steps forward to make sure we are more inviting and more accessible. Whilst there may have been some women happy with the old status quo, perhaps just playing on their allocated weekday afternoon, new women coming into the game want to play on a Saturday. That’s the peak time when you want to go out and play your sport. And if you’ve got a family, you may want to go out together. We’ve got to adjust to that.*”

Female participation is a major strand running through England Golf’s Get into Golf initiative, which aims to inspire more people to try golf. The programme offers low-cost or free beginner activities at golf clubs across England. The campaign branding is young and vibrant with the aim of attracting 25 to 40 year olds. Laura said: “*We’ve seen a really high number of women engage with Get into Golf because they like the structured group format to the coaching. It suits women a lot.*”

England Golf also runs a Girls Golf Rocks project. This is a national project run in partnership with the Golf Foundation and aims to introduce younger girls into golf. “*When we started Girls Golf Rocks four years ago, there weren’t girls only sessions to learn golf*”, says Laura. The project has since seen over 1,400 girls complete the 5 week coaching programme.

In July 2018, England Golf led the promotion of Women and Girls Golf Week, an industry wide social media campaign to raise awareness of women in golf and to challenge perceptions of the sport among women. The campaign, which was also supported by Scottish Golf, Wales Golf, the Irish Ladies Golf Union and The R&A, encouraged female golfers to share their golfing stories

on social media using the hashtag #WHYIGOLF. The response far exceeded England Golf's expectations. The campaign reached more than 2.5m people on Twitter and generated over 12m impressions. Laura said: *"The response during the week from women, girls – and men – joining the conversation with #WhyIGolf was fantastic."*

The campaign fortuitously coincided with England's Georgia Hall winning the Ricoh Women's British Open at Royal Lytham. The 22 year-old from Bournemouth was the first British winner of the Women's Open since 2001. As Laura explained: *"Georgia winning at the end of the week was the icing on the top of the cake. We couldn't have wished for a better ending. We're now working on ways to channel this energy and enthusiasm to grow the game."*

As academics at Manchester Metropolitan University, our own research is currently focussed on the role of volunteers within golf clubs. Volunteers fill a variety of roles within a golf club including governance roles, team captaincy, competition organising, junior coordination and supporting new members. They have an important role to play in setting the right tone within a golf club and supporting new members to get involved and feel welcome. Interestingly, we found that women golfers tend to volunteer at twice the rate of male golfers, yet women remain under-represented in the most influential governance roles within golf clubs. It's something we fed back to England Golf and they have since added to their Volunteer strategy a target to increase the diversity of volunteers at a decision-making level. It's indicative of the growing appetite for change.

There is a lot of effort going into the promotion of women and girls golf, will it pay off? Its early days, especially since success will depend on delivering cultural change that makes women feel genuinely welcome at golf clubs. There are, however, some early signs of progress. England Golf already has some tentative findings to suggest that the female participation rate has increased to 17%. There's a lot more to be done, but things seem to be moving in the right direction.

So, it appears that England Golf and its partners in the wider golf club community of participants and volunteers are responding to the challenges of government challenges in the DCMS (2015) Strategy and associated Sport England vision for a more active nation. The 'gender agenda' is now central to achieving wider organisational goals for golf. We hope that our research is able to deliver evidence-led decision making at club, county and national policy level to better place women and girl volunteers as critical stakeholders in shaping a better future for the game of golf.

For further information on our golf research contact Dr Chris Mackintosh c.mackintosh@mmu.ac.uk. Chris is a senior lecturer in sport management at Manchester Metropolitan University. Chris Mills is a PhD student currently undertaking a PhD examining volunteers in golf in England in a studentship funded by England Golf 2018-2021.