Outsiders in the Clubhouse

The World of Women's Professional Golf

Todd W. Crosset

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To
Hope Seignious, Betty Hicks
and Ellen Griffen—

Conceivers, creators and defenders
of the Women's Professional Golf Tour

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The LPGA as an Agent of Social Change

INTRODUCTION

Cricket had plunged me into politics long before I was aware of it. When I did turn to politics I did not have too much to learn.

—C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*

This is a study of a world within our world; an insulated subworld on the fringe of American society. This world revolves around an elite occupation. The shared experience of the work yields a group of people linked not just by a common purpose, but by shared understandings, values, and ideals. Like other subworlds[1] on the fringe of our society, this group's uniqueness strikes some as unusual.

One of the most distinctive aspects of this world is its focus on women within an enterprise historically monopolized by men. This organization, originally created by women, continues to be shaped by its women members. In this organization, women occupy a position of independence. Here women members don't work for anybody, don't punch a time clock, and aren't forced to sign contracts with corporations. They work for themselves. They take vacations when they want. They do the hiring and the firing. There is no network, good old boy or otherwise, which determines their place in the organization or their pay. These women are paid according to how well they perform—strictly merit raises.

Women lucky enough to join this group work in warm, comfortable climes, migrating with the summer sun. Someone else handles domestic chores like cooking and cleaning. Wealthy people give over their most prized leisure facilities and lush parks to this organization

every week. Every working day they can take time out to notice the blue sky and the green grass or listen to the birds.

Typically their income is higher than the national average.[2] Exceptional members can become very wealthy through their active participation, making between $200,000 and $400,000 a year. If they fall upon unusually hard times, there always seems to be a benevolent outsider to help defray costs.

In this organization, women are the center of attention. In each town they visit newspaper reporters and television crews report on them and even follow them, seeking interviews. But unlike most admiration for women, these women are not admired for their looks. They are admired by men and women alike for what they do. The admiration is so great that some well-established businessmen envy these women's employees. Although few well-established men actually do "drop out" and hit the road to work for these women, in every city they visit, hundreds of wealthy men pay thousands of dollars for the privilege of sharing a day with one of these women, to watch her do what she does so well, to talk to her, and to be a part of what she does. These women, you see, do what most men can only dream of doing. Nonetheless, because they are women in a male world, they remain outsiders.

The distinctiveness of this world is reflected in the way its members refer to their place in society. They are, they say, "Out Here"—as if it were other-worldly, defying time and space. "Out Here," as if any comparison to the "real world" would be inappropriate. "Out Here," they say, "it is like a fantasy world."

Admirers refer to their organization as "The Ladies Tour." Its formal name is the "Ladies Professional Golf Association," or the LPGA. This is a study of the subworld of professional women's golf. Its primary goal is to capture in words the experience of life on the tour, its tensions and conflicts with the broader culture, and the subsequent resolution of those conflicts through the players' ways of living.

My attention to sport as an area of academic research is motivated by concern—the same sort of concern one might have for a good friend. Supportive, yet critical. I have been involved with sport in some way, either playing it or making a living working in it for as long as I can remember. I am close to sport, but I did not enter this project with either the giddy love for sport that too often reduces serious scholars to romance writers, blind to the injustices and contradictions of sport, or the hostility of the betrayed or failed athlete turned social critic, who sees nothing but exploitation in sport.

My initial interest in sport as a sociological concern arises out of my experience as a collegiate swimmer. I had a successful, albeit undistinguished, career at the University of Texas. Although sport is pretty much the same everywhere in the country, it became clear to me early on that the social meaning of sport varies widely. Nowhere is that lesson more evident than when competing for the University of Texas. Be it high school, college, or professional, Texans take their sports very seriously.

Despite the wide variations in the social significance of sport, the logic of sport is universal. Regardless of race, class, sex, or sexuality, in sport, participants are rewarded according to merit. Theoretically at least, excellence cannot be denied in sport. Indeed, it is this promise of sport which makes it so appealing in a world that promises the same but rarely delivers. It is also this promise that motivates this research.

The meaning assigned to an athletic feat and the significance of the actual achievement as dictated by a sport are often in conflict, particularly when the athletes are women. The contradictions between norms and reality, between expectation and actions with regard to gender in sport were revealed to me decades ago. Swimming is one of the few sports in which men and women train together. Although there are significant differences in performance times, there is little distinction in the training regimes of men and women. As an athlete I became uncomfortable with the notion that women's athletics are something less or different than men's athletics. I am not embarrassed by, actually I point with some pride to, my struggling to stay within a body length of Mary T. Meagher during practice sets of 200 meter butterflies. Keeping up with Mary T. during practice was something of a badge of ability within the swimming world. And Mary T. was only one of many inspiring women athletes with whom I trained. My female training partners have had more of an impact on this study than can be expressed.

I can trace my interest in the LPGA to my career as a swimmer as well. A teammate's younger sister, Kim Shipman, was an exceptional golfer at UT who eventually qualified for the tour. Kim would get me tickets to the LPGA tournament when it came to the Boston area, where I was attending graduate school. It was these excursions to LPGA tournaments and subsequent conversations with Kim that sparked my interest in the life of the tour players.

My desire to do a study of the LPGA can be traced to a specific moment in 1985. I was sitting in the dining room of a country club watching Kim approach the buffet line, feeling somewhat out of place. I probably looked out of place as well. At the time I sported an untrimmed

beard and a pasty complexion which comes from spending too many hours in the library. I probably wore a T-shirt and jeans. Kim had spiked hair and wore mid-thigh length shorts. Given other circumstances, neither one of us would have been allowed out of the parking lot of the country club. But this was the week of the LPGA tournament, and all membership and dress code rules were suspended. I watched as Kim moved right to the front of a buffet line. She "butted" in front of country club members who seemed sincerely pleased to allow her in line, almost grateful for the opportunity to be helpful to an LPGA player.

At that time, I was studying gender relations under the direction of Shula Reinharz and Kathy Barry, two eminent sociologists. Through their training I had gained a fairly sharp and critical insight into the workings of the gender order in our society. On the surface the LPGA seemed an anomaly: a place where women hired men to follow them around and perform menial tasks (caddies not only carry a player's clubs but also her name across his back). A place where women moved to the head of the line and wealthy men obliged. Something weird and possibly wonderful was taking place when the LPGA took over a country club and I wanted to understand it. Four years later I started this study.

It is not the sole criterion, but a social researcher's status is often elevated according to the "danger" of their field site. Even the general public seems to perk up and take interest in studies of far-off peoples or the highly secretive criminal world. If danger or difficult access is not inherent to a field site, researchers generally have the good sense to suffer from a lack of funding and painfully make do with limitations which hamper the research. At the very least, it seems obligatory that researchers struggle to track down enough willing and qualified participants to make up a representative sample.

Although I took off after the tour in my pick-up, equipped with all my camping gear, plus a file cabinet and laptop computer, bubbling with the anticipation of roughing it, studying the LPGA proved to be something of a boon to the quality of my life. Far from malaria-ridden jungles or dangerous coal mines, the LPGA floats from one safe, bucolic, manicured country club to the next. At each tournament site, I was awarded a press pass and enjoyed all privileges of the press. I received three free meals a day and an endless supply of coffee. At some tournaments, the meals were prepared and served by the host country club's staff (I was introduced to cold strawberry soup at one tournament). At the very least, I dined on pizza donated by the local pizza parlor. At the end of the day there was usually a free beer or two to be had and cynical but amusing conversations with the local press. The

press pass, as it turned out, was better than most academic grants a social scientist could hope to receive.

Folks in and around the tour seemed generally pleased to help me out with my research. All in all, I interviewed sixty people affiliated with the tour in fifty-five interviews. Professional women golfers make up the majority of these interviews. Thirty-four interviews were with active players and three other interviews were with former players. The player's interviews are rounded out by a variety of interviews with caddies, volunteers, staff, and partners. For more details concerning data collection and analysis I invite the reader to look over the methods section in the appendix.

I harbor no special fondness for the sport of golf. I play the game but once a summer, and then rather poorly. Fortunately, this book is not about competitive golf. This book is about life on the LPGA tour. More precisely, it is about the social relations which have developed around the occupation of professional women golfer and the production of elite-level golf.

My ignorance about the sport was more a blessing than a curse. While it clearly caused me to ask some painfully simple questions, which in retrospect are embarrassing, the distance from the sport gave me the perspective of an outsider. Unfettered by the subtleties of the game and thus ignorant of much of the pleasures of watching golf, I was able to observe the world that revolved around the sport without being drawn into it. I do not think I could do the same sort of research on the sport of swimming.

My experience as an athlete, however, was not unlike those of the professionals I studied, and enhanced my understanding of the golfers' lives. There were common understandings about competition, excellence, practice, and travel which made conversation easy. I did not have to discover metaphors in my own life in order to make sense of their experiences. In the voices of the members of the LPGA I heard articulated beliefs I once held. In their words I believe are sentiments shared by all athletes, a sense of justice, and a latent politics: a belief that sport has something to offer far beyond entertainment.

There are probably twenty or thirty books that could be written about life on the LPGA tour. No one book can cover it all. Indeed, one of the difficulties I had in writing this book was deciding what to leave out. Because I chose to focus on the social structures of the tour, the book is somewhat abstract in parts and critical throughout. As such, I think the book misses much of what is fun, colorful, and dramatic about women's

professional golf. But I will leave that to the sports writers, the historians, and the biographers. My task as a sociologist is to bring forward the social arrangements which shape the players' lives, to question the logic of these arrangements and suggest what may, or ought to, lie ahead.

This book is divided into four sections. My aim in the first section is to lay out the parameters of the book—historical, analytical, and material. The analysis, as I have indicated, is essentially structural. Chapter 1 defines the levels of the structures and discusses broad themes that run throughout the book. The next two chapters detail the economic and political history of the structures we call the tour. The final chapter in this part details the requirements necessary for entry into and membership in women's professional golf—the material reality of becoming a professional golfer.

The second part details the ideological conflict between being a professional golfer and being a woman athlete in a sexist society. The first chapter of this part introduces the primary social issue for the tour player: the ideology necessary for becoming a female professional athlete is in conflict with what is expected of female public figures. One set of ideological beliefs is a response to the social terrain of professional golf, the other to the mainstream society. The next four chapters examine the "fallout" from the tension between gender and prowess. The primary concern of these chapters is to locate patterns of social behavior which arise out of either the unique qualities of tour life or as a result of conflicts with the broader culture.

The third part focuses on the battle being waged over the symbolic meaning of the tour. In the three chapters which make up this part I discuss the competing ideological explanations of women's athletic prowess. Each chapter details the meaning of women's golf from a particular political/social stance: conventional culture, feminist politics, woman athlete.

In the final part I discuss women's golf in terms of the democratic promise of sport. Beginning with the proposition that all sport holds the promise of equality of opportunity and at certain moments in history has been an institution which spearheads democratic social reforms, I discuss the progress of women's golf. Specifically, I examine the role of women's professional golf in the ongoing struggle against gender, race, and class stratification.

To cite all the people and their contributions to this book would involve writing another volume. I would like to mention my friends and colleagues who put their faith and time into me and this project.

This research began as graduate work at Brandeis University and I am grateful for the advice and encouragement I received from my teachers: Peter Conrad, Kathy Barry, Shula Reinharz, and Egon Bittner. I was lucky to be tutored by one of the finest collections of qualitative researchers under one roof. Alan Klein, although he resides elsewhere, is something of an idol for me, having written two exceptional ethnographies on sport. It is a rare gift to have him as an advisor. I am especially grateful to sport sociologists Mike Messner and Don Sabo, without whose encouragement I would never have begun or finished this project.

I am most grateful to a circle of friends who have heard about the LPGA for five years and listened repeatedly to "sociological insights," all with the endurance that comes only with true friendship. A number of these people have made significant contributions to this project. Jeff Meyerhoff spent a good part of a year transcribing interviews in unusually good humor and turned unmanageable data into sociological riches. For two years Joan Alway met with me monthly to discuss my research. Most of what is theoretically interesting can be attributed to her. Jim Ptacek has served a similar role for the final revision, and his fingerprints will be obvious to all who know him. Ellen Davis served as copy editor, and so much more, for the first draft. Jim Blau helped me clean up the final draft.

Finally, Anne Richmond provided more support than can be imagined. She lived with this project for five years and knows what is on each page of this book without having to read it. In ways that cannot be articulated she has shaped the analysis that follows. I will be forever grateful.

PART I

THE SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE LPGA

CHAPTER 1

OUT HERE

It is really a fantasy world out here. It is something that you dream about doing. You are your own boss. Especially being a woman, I can't think of any other place where you can do exactly what you want to. I really never felt like I have been harassed by the opposite sex in our world. I have never felt like I was competing with men.

In the corporate world it is a little bit different. There are the men and women competing for the same jobs. We are not. As an organization we are competitive with the men's tour as far as getting sponsors, but as individuals we are competing against other women.

That's why I have stayed out here so long. I don't want to join the real world; it's hard work. This has never been work to me.

—Tara[1]

The expression "out here" is used with such frequency by the players that it hardly causes a ripple in the flow of conversation. In the context of the tour it is a shorthand way to refer to either life on the tour, or the high level of golf played on the tour. "Out here" names a social place or condition and in so doing refers to its uniqueness without drawing undo attention to it. But as is often the case with handy, all-purpose phrases, their power is not what they reveal but what remains hidden. Catch phrases often veil the uncomfortable in the context of polite conversation.

The expression "out here" is a clue toward understanding the women's professional tour. The expression both hides and succinctly