

MODIFYING SPORT COACHING TO MEET WOMEN'S INSTRUCTIONAL NEEDS: A CASE STUDY OF FEMALE GOLF PROFESSIONALS

MACKINNON VANESSA¹

Abstract

Research Objectives: To examine the views of female golf professionals with the goal of developing a better understanding of female golfers' instructional needs.

Methods and Procedures: Open-ended qualitative interviews of ten female golf professionals were used to examine the female professionals' views on female golfers' instructional needs. Responses were analyzed using content analysis.

Results: Female professionals believe women's instructional needs may be different from men's instructional needs. They describe these differences and provide advice for the golf industry on how to meet women's instructional needs.

Conclusions: Sport coaches should take into consideration the instructional needs of both genders. In traditionally male sports such as golf, this is not always achieved. This study examines issues related to female golfers' instructional needs in an attempt to improve the way golf is taught to women, which may in turn assist instructors in other traditionally male sports.

Key Words: Women, Female, Golf, Instruction, Sport .

Introduction

In many traditionally male sports, when it comes to developing instructional programs for potential participants, women are often an afterthought. This may inhibit participation by women, perpetuating the image of the sport as a male domain. It is widely known that golf since its inception has been an

is important for the golf industry to address why there is such a high attrition rate among females. One approach is to examine golf instruction, which is one of the first ways many women are introduced to the sport (National Golf Foundation, 2007). The body of research and literature devoted to teaching female golfers is smaller than the body of research and literature devoted to teaching male golfers. This study

¹California University of Pennsylvania, Assistant Professor, Department of Exercise Science and Sport Studies
250 University Avenue, California, PA 15419 USA.

Email: mackinnon@calu.edu

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overwhelmingly male domain, and in many western nations today fewer than one third of golfers are female (National Golf Foundation, 2010; Australia Golf Industry Council, 2009; European Golf Association, 2010; Royal Canadian Golf Association, 2006). However, the benefits of attracting more female participants-particularly the economic benefits of increasing participation during times of financial challenge- has been noted by several industry analysts (National Golf Course Owners Association, 2010).

In the United States, approximately fifty percent of those trying the sport of golf over the past decade have been women, yet the percentage of regular participants who are female has remained stagnant at between twenty and twenty-five percent (National Golf Foundation, 2010). While women may be interested in learning more about the sport, once introduced to the sport they appear to lose that interest. The retention rate for female golfers is only 33%, as compared with a 54% retention rate among male golfers (PGA, 2010a). It

attempted to reduce this research gap and will hopefully provide useful information to the golf industry on how to increase the retention rate among female golfers. This case study could also serve as useful background information for those wishing to enhance the gender integration of other male-dominated sports.

Existing literature suggests that there are two main avenues of adapting sport coaching to meet women's instructional needs- physiological adaptations and psychological adaptations. The effect of physiological differences on sport technique has been documented in a number of sports such as soccer (R.H. Brophy et al., 2010; S.C. Landry et al., 2007; C. Pollard, S. Sigward, C. Powers, 2007; G. Shan, 2009; S.M. Sigward, C.M. Powers, 2005), hockey (K. Gilenstam, et al., 2008), volleyball (C. Koch, M. Tilp, 2009), tennis (M. Crespo, B. Pluim, M. Reid, 2001) steeplechase (I. Hunter, B. Lindsay, K. Andersen,

2008), baseball (Y. Chu et al., 2009) and sprinting (F. Billaut, K. Smith, 2009).

Specifically pertaining to golf, several scientific studies over the past decade have indicated there are kinematic differences between the golf swings of men and women (C.I. Egret et al., 2006; J.B. Foster, 2007, 2009; S. Horan, 2008; S.A. Horan et al., 2010; J. McCroy et al., 2003; N. Zheng et al., 2008). These scientific studies support years of claims made by experienced female golf professionals in their published works (J. Horn, 1999; C. Reid, S. Eubanks, 2003; V. Saunders, 1975, 2000; D. Steinbach, 2001; K. Whitworth, 1990). Both the researchers and the female golf professionals agree that women have a tendency to use more rotational movement in their hips and shoulders, and generate longer swings than their male counterparts. In golf as well as in the other sports studied, these differences are primarily related to the basic anatomical premise that men are physically different than women: therefore, the way men and women move their bodies during these particular sports is different. It has also been noted that female sports injury patterns may be different from male sports injury patterns. For example, females are more prone to injury in the Anterior Cruciate Ligament, or ACL, than are males (Ambegaonkar et al., 2008; American College of Sports Medicine, 2003; J. Croissant, E. Schmit, 2007; D. Fischer, 2006). Even when men and women are playing the same sport, their injury patterns may differ. For example, female professional golfers are twice as likely as male professional golfers to injure their left wrist while male golfers are much more prone to lower back injuries than are female golfers. (Golf Medicine, 2008a, 2008b; L. Foster, 2004; A. McHardy, H. Pollard, K. Luo, 2006). Literature on psychological adaptations is plentiful. It exists in general sport studies literature (D. Anderson, A. Dixon, 2009; K.J. DeBoer, 2004; T.W. Miller et al., 2008; J. MacLean, S. Hamm, 2008; N.W. Sherman, 2002; C. Silby, 2000) as well as in the fields of education (M. Gurian, 2003; G. Keri, 2002; C.H. Lacey et al., 1998; T. Laird, A. Garver, A. Niskode, 2007; A.F. Grasha, 1994; D.B. Kardina, M.C. Wright, 2004; M. Philbin et al., 1995; E. Wehrwein, H. Lujan, S. DiCarlo, 2007; S.A. Basow, 2010) and psychology (D. Saucier, C. Ehresman, 2010). If such findings are indeed transferrable to golf, it may suggest that when instructing women, golf professionals and coaches should emphasize developing a personal connection with the student, building the student's confidence, and maintaining active verbal communication. In fact, it is these very things that golf industry surveys have suggested after large-scale studies of female golfers in a number of countries. (Australia Golf Industry Council, 2009; Comperio Research, 2005; B. Murphy, D. Holland, 2006; National Golf Foundation, 2005, 2007, 2010; H. Oldenhove, 2008; Royal Canadian Golf Association, 2006 and N. Berkley, 1999 and 2003). Other psychological differences uncovered in these surveys that could potentially impact golf instruction include:

women may be more interested in participating for fun and social reasons and less focused on their score, and due to the pressures of being minorities in a primarily male environment may need more positive reinforcement. For example, Murphy and Holland (2006) surveyed 1198 girls and women in the state of Victoria, Australia, as part of a report commissioned by Golf Victoria, the state's governing body of golf. The participants were asked why they continued to enjoy golf. The most common responses were because it was social (84%), healthy (78%), fun (68%), and relaxing (58%). In the United Kingdom a Comperio Research (2005) study of 1202 female golfers found that the top motivations for continuing to play were the social aspect of the game and getting fresh air. Competition and challenge were lower on the list. While there exists quite a bit of literature supporting the concept that a one-size fits all approach to golf instruction may not be an appropriate method of meeting the instructional needs of women, women continue to be an afterthought in the golf industry, and their instructional needs continue to be overlooked. This is why it is important to further examine the issue of female golfers' instructional needs, and more specifically to examine the issue from a perspective that has rarely been done before: that of female golf professionals. In the United States, fewer than four percent of golf professionals are women (PGA, 2010b). While the scientific studies of physical swing differences and the marketing surveys of female golfers are useful and have been examined in this literature review, to get a more complete understanding of the issue, an analysis of female professionals' views was needed. As both experts in their field and minorities in their sport and in their profession, female golf professionals may be in a unique position to help the rest of the golf industry better understand the instructional needs of female golfers. Capturing this perspective is important, because LPGA professionals can provide insight that may not be obtained from scientific studies, research by non-golf professionals, or even male golf professionals. The perspective of LPGA golf instructors is unique and it is hoped that this study of their perspective will help address the existing literature gap.

Methods and Procedures

This study formed part of the author's doctoral dissertation research and involved qualitative open-ended interviews of ten Ladies' Professional Golf Association (LPGA) golf teaching professionals. The impetus for this study was a previous online survey in June of 2010 by the author (using SurveyMonkey) of 100 members of the LPGA Teaching and Club Professional Division. In the online survey, the participants were asked questions about gender-related physical and psychological differences in golf instruction. The results of the online survey, to be published in the *International Journal of Sport and Society*, indicated that a large majority of the LPGA golf professionals surveyed adopted different teaching

techniques when working with beginning female golfers than they did with male golfers. This percentage fell slightly when dealing with intermediate golfers and significantly when dealing with advanced female golfers (Table 1) The results of the online survey were significant enough to warrant further study, as the author was interested in delving more deeply into the topics suggested by the LPGA professionals in the survey. As a result, the current study, which commissioned in-depth open-ended qualitative interviews of LPGA professionals, was developed. The research questions for the study were as follows:

- Q1: What are the perceptions of female golf professionals in terms of what the golf industry could do to improve the way golf is taught to women?
- Q2: What are ways in which female golf professionals teach their average female students differently than their male students when it comes to physical swing technique?
- Q3: What are ways in which female golf professionals teach their average female students differently than their male students when it comes to lesson atmosphere and psychology?

Research participants were all members of the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Teaching and Club Professional Division. This organization has over 1300 members and is the oldest currently existing women's professional sporting organization in the world, having been established in 1959 as an outgrowth of the LPGA tour. While LPGA Tour players are primarily professional competitors and rarely teach, Teaching and Club Professionals are primarily teachers and coaches and may only occasionally play professionally. The participants ranged in age from their early thirties to their mid sixties, and were geographically diverse, hailing from six US states and one foreign country. The study was pre-tested using two pilot test interviews, for a total of twelve total participants. The interview protocol was approved by Northcentral University's Institutional Review Board as part of the researcher's doctoral program. All twelve participants were given an Informed Consent Form and were assured anonymity. Participants were chosen from a pool of volunteers who had become aware of the researcher's study and had offered to be interviewed. The average number of years the twelve participants had been playing golf was over 32 years, with the average number of years of experience teaching golf being over 18 years. Participants were also asked to indicate what percentage of their students have been women. Responses ranged from 50 to 80 percent, indicating that these women all teach significantly more female students than the industry average for golf professionals. Many of the participants have also been recognized for their golf instructional abilities, with several having been ranked among America's top 50

female golf instructors by either Golf Digest or the LPGA, or serving as instructors and/or evaluators for the LPGA's National Education Program, which teaches the curriculum for aspiring LPGA professionals. As a group, these women are truly the experts in their field.

The two pilot interviews were conducted in person in order to better allow for feedback and participant-interviewer interaction. Nine of the ten subsequent interviews were conducted over the phone, with one being conducted using Skype at the participant's request due to the participant's location in a foreign country. All interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and transcribed. Interviews ranged in duration from twelve minutes to forty-eight minutes. During the pilot interviews, the questions were structured. However, it was felt that the specificity of the questions resulted in the participants giving shorter answers and was not encouraging the respondents to address their first thoughts. Therefore, the ten subsequent interviews were only semi-structured, with three main questions being asked of the respondents and then follow up questions being asked depending on the participants' answers. Following transcription, the data was analyzed using content analysis in three different stages. First, the researcher searched for and analyzed themes that emerged as a result of repeatedly being referenced by multiple participants. Secondly, the data was analyzed by a second independent trained coder, and finally, the interviews were analyzed using the Atlas computerized software program for qualitative analysis. Codes were not predetermined in advance for the analysis: coding was done post-hoc. According to Creswell (2009), it is more common in the social sciences to allow codes to emerge during the data collection phase. This is in line with the exploratory design of this study, whereby open-ended questions are used to investigate perceptions.

It was through this process of analysis of themes that a description of female golf professionals' views on teaching female golfers was constructed, in order to develop what Moustakas refers to in his description of phenomenological content analysis as "a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole." (Moustakas, 1994, p.121) The primary limitation of this study was a small number of participants.

Results.

The content analysis revealed certain main themes (Table 2), grouped by the research question each theme answered. With regard to Research Question 1, what the golf industry could do to improve women's golf instruction, many of the respondents noted that the high attrition rate among female golfers might not be as related to instructional issues as to the golf environment in general. Responses relating to the golf industry in general included: golf taking too much time to play and consequently not being manageable for women with children and/or careers; golf courses

not being designed or set up with women in mind; not having enough equipment options for women, and the golf industry as a whole not taking women seriously as consumers, in response to which many suggested that it will ultimately be economics that helps to change the unequal treatment of women. As women become more economically powerful, the participants noted, the golf industry will have to specifically target them if the industry is to survive in uncertain economic times. From a broad instructional standpoint, the respondents also noted that golf facilities should hire more female pros, because female golfers may be more comfortable with a female pro; introducing male PGA pros to the concepts that are taught to LPGA pros, in order to make male instructors more aware of gender issues in golf instruction; and ensuring the availability of opportunities for participation that are particularly appealing to women—such as social and league play—and then making it easy for women to be introduced to and included in these opportunities. Examples of responses to the first research question included: “women need to feel like they’re more welcome in the facilities”, “forget the disrespect—its more than that—it’s a business decision. If you want golf to survive you can’t disregard half the population”, “it takes time, it takes training, and I think the women get more training in the teaching”, “I think that if they take a clinic on how to give women lessons from a woman pro— that should almost be a PGA requirement for males—the guys don’t know because they were never taught”, “I think female teachers tend to be very successful working with beginning women because many may be more comfortable learning from a woman”, With regard to the second research question relating to physical technique, the main theme that emerged was working with the individuals to help them find the unique swing that works for them, rather than having every student imitate model PGA Tour players. Several other themes emerged, some of which were closely related. For example, using fewer technical terms and teaching in a less mechanical way was one theme, but at the same time many participants noted that it was more important for women to have the proper technique, because they often lacked the physical strength to be successful without proper technique. Many noted that women may not be as strong as men, but that they might use their flexibility to their advantage. They also noted that women’s hips move differently and that those women with large breasts may need to adjust their setup position accordingly. A final theme in this area was often accompanied by the caveat of it being relevant only to women who did not have an athletic background— that different cues may need to be used when working with women without athletic backgrounds, since analogies to other sports would be meaningless to these women. The participants noted that it was important not to assume anything. Several referenced how male instructors may tell a female to swing her arms as if she is throwing a ball, without realizing that some women have never

learned how to properly throw a ball. These women, the participants noted, need to be specifically taught how to execute the movements, or need to be instructed using cues from areas other than sport. By far the most often-cited theme in the area of instructional technique was ensuring that women are introduced to playing golf on the golf course, rather than just practicing the technical aspects of the swing on the driving range. Examples of responses to the second research question included: “too many instructors get tied up in the mechanics and not in how the student wants to play the game”, “a lot of our teaching is way too mechanical and complicated and that applies really to everybody but I think even more so to women”, “introduce them to the golf course as much as you can”, “to get ladies to play, you need to create a situation where in your instruction you’re getting them comfortable on the golf course”. Finally, the third research question addressed the psychological aspect of gender issues in golf instruction. The main themes that emerged were: women in general want golf to be more social and more fun; women want to be treated with respect, not looked down upon; it is important to always be positive— to praise and celebrate small victories; and to work with women to address and deal with the fear and anxiety they may experience as women in a primarily male environment that may at times be unwelcoming or intimidating. It was for this third research question that one overarching conclusion could be drawn, as every respondent emphasized the importance of conducting an initial interview with the student, in order to make the lesson more personal by developing rapport with the student, learning about her goals and her background, and understanding her motivation for learning and playing golf. It was this lack of personal rapport, the participants believed, that was one of the main reasons why women who took golf lessons did not continue with the sport. Examples of responses to the third research question included: “treat people the way you want to be treated”, “one negative thought takes ten positive thoughts to get rid of”, “always praise people, even on bad shots— point out something they did right”, “the opening interview you have with a student is, I think, crucial. It’s going to give you an idea of the person’s athletic ability, their experience in sports in general—that will let you know whether or not you can talk to them in certain ways.”; “figuring out their personality and what makes them tick is super important”, “it’s not the athletic woman we lose, it’s the average woman who could enjoy this game and who want to be taught in a way that gives them self-worth, self-confidence”, “women are very social so I think we need to find ways to introduce them to other women playing golf”, “some of the men instructors don’t understand that from a woman’s perspective and her concerns— in the golf world we are kind of like a second-class citizen in the sense that we need to perform better to achieve the same level. We do feel the pressure for

achievement and we need to help [our female students] overcome that, address that”

Discussion

The themes that emerged from this study reinforce many of the findings addressed in the existing literature. The results indicate that the LPGA professionals interviewed are very much in tune with the concerns of their female students- concerns that golf industry reports have frequently referenced about female golfers feeling unwelcome and believing that they are not taken seriously as golf consumers.

According to a recent National Golf Course Owners Association (2010) report, a third of current female golfers said women are “treated as second class citizens at the golf course” (p. 70). A survey of recreational female golfers by L. McGinnis and J.W. Gentry (2006) revealed that negative interactions with golf facility personnel and with male golfers was one of the primary reasons limiting the participation of current golfers. Negative interactions included golf professionals and facility staff ignoring women completely or addressing comments only to their male companions or playing partners (expecting the men to answer and make decisions for the women); golf course marshals singling out and repeatedly following the women’s groups in anticipation of the women playing slowly; starters insisting that even professional female players play from the forward tees, and negative or threatening non-verbal cues from other patrons (male golfers). According to a recent industry survey by Golf Datatech (2010), one of the main factors inhibiting play by women was that almost a third of the 1,000 female golfers surveyed considered the average golf course to be a very male oriented place. The National Golf Foundation (2007) found even more emphatic results, with more than half of the female golfers surveyed reporting feeling intimidated. With regard to physical technique, a surprising number of professionals noted that while there may be a few differences between men and women when it comes to strength and flexibility, many of the modifications they used when teaching golf were not gender-specific but were always geared to the body type and athleticism of the individual golfer. All of the participants indicated that they did not teach their students using a specific swing model. While in one respect this lends support to the findings of scientific studies which revealed that men and women swing differently and supports the view that men and women should not be taught using a “one-size fits all” approach, it also somewhat contradicts the theory that the reason for eschewing that “one size fits all” approach is purely gender-based. With regard to psychological techniques, the female professionals offered a number of suggestions, with many noting that while the implementation of these suggestions would make women feel more welcome during golf instruction and contribute to a higher retention rate among female golfers, the same suggestions could also be helpful when teaching men. This was particularly the case with regard to all the

participants’ emphasis on the importance of the initial interview to personalize the lesson and establish rapport and learn about the student’s goals and background. According to the participants, personalization of the learning experience is extremely important for all students, but particularly so for women. The one area where the participants felt there was the most difference between men and women when it came to psychological concerns was the impact of tokenism on the anxiety and confidence levels of female golfers, and how golf professionals need to acknowledge this concern. This supports previous findings by L. McGinnis and J.W. Gentry (2006) as well as findings in research on other male-dominated sports. This study also revealed that female golf professionals are very interested in improving the golf environment for women. The participants were passionate and enthusiastic about the topic, and were willing to share their ideas and suggestions. The older participants were particularly keen to participate, having seen improvements in golf’s gender imbalance made during their careers and hoping these improvements could be continued with the younger generation. In addition to the golf-specific implications of this study, many of the findings could be applicable to other sports that have long been the domain of males. For example, encouraging more women to become involved as managers, instructors, and coaches of that sport would contribute to a more welcoming environment for women, as would acknowledging the increasing financial impact of female consumers. Offering sporting equipment options suited to women who may be shorter and not as strong as men could also entice more women to participate, as could offering more social, less time-consuming opportunities for participation as opposed to traditional highly-competitive or overly serious options. When it comes to physical techniques, all sports may be different, but sport coaches should acknowledge that women may set up or generate power in slightly different ways than their male counterparts, and as a result it is important to tailor the technical instruction to the individual rather than basing all instruction on the technique of a highly successful male athlete in the sport. Finally, with regard to psychology, men may underestimate the impact that being a minority has on a woman’s psychological state when learning the sport or first attempting to participate in the sport. Instructors and coaches should be sensitive to these concerns and attempt to build confidence using positive reinforcement and confidence-building techniques wherever possible. Ultimately, the study involved a small sample, and was specific to the sport of golf. Future researchers might wish to focus on a larger sample size or answering the same research questions in other traditionally male-dominated sports to determine if guidelines can be developed to assist the sporting community as a whole to attract and retain greater numbers of female participants.

Tables**Table 1**

Percentage of Online Survey Respondents (LPGA Members) who said they adopt different teaching styles with women than with men

| | Psychologically | Physically/ technically |
|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Beginning golfers | 84.2 | 74.5 |
| Intermediate golfers | 66.3 | 67 |
| Advanced golfers | 50.5 | 51.1 |

Table 2

Themes Emerging from Qualitative Interviews of LPGA Golf Professionals

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Q.1 (overall) | Less time commitment |
| | Easier courses |
| | More appropriate equipment options |
| | Take women seriously as consumers |
| | More female instructors and coaches |
| | More opportunities for social, fun participation |
| | Better teacher-training programs for male professionals |
| | |
| Q.2 (technical) | Work with the individual- do not use only one method |
| | Less technical / mechanical |
| | Acknowledge and adapt technique to physiological differences |
| | Use appropriate cues (fewer sport analogies) |
| | Conduct more instruction on-course (more playing lessons) |
| | |
| Q.3 (psychological) | More social and fun |
| | Treat women with more respect |
| | More positive reinforcement |
| | Address the issue of intimidation and anxiety |
| | Importance of interview to personalize lesson |

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