



‘Maybe they just aren’t interested’: How psychology can recruit women to golf

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Read any article proposing ways to include more women in golf, and you’ll find comments negating the proposed solutions, with comments about how “women just aren’t interested in golf.”

Or maybe women aren’t interested in an activity that hasn’t become inclusive to meet their basic psychological needs.

Periodically, articles emerge about the opportunities the golf industry has to make the game more appealing to a wider audience. Golf’s deep-rooted history of catering only to white men has severely capped the sport’s potential growth. In 2020, the number of rounds of golf played in the U.S. was up an impressive 14% year-over-year. However, of those playing, just 24% are women — up from 19% a decade prior, but a number leaving room for growth.

Blatant examples push women away, such as restricting when women can play certain courses (e.g. tee times after noon on weekends), but more subtle suggestions persist that women aren’t welcome — or that they are at best an afterthought on the course.

It’s been noticed that at most courses the forward sets of tees (identified as where women or new golfers should hit from) are rarely as level or as well maintained as the back tees, where men and more experienced golfers hit from. It sends a message. There’s also strong anecdotal evidence that women shopping for golf equipment are often assumed to be searching for their boyfriends, or steered only to the small selection of pink merchandise — before actually having their needs assessed. Despite women’s genuine interest, the ways in which new or female golfers might be treated as they approach a course leaves much to be desired.

Golf's culture of exclusivity is no longer serving the sport, but some basic principles of sport psychology may pave the way forward.

The application of specific, universal psychological needs can make clear that female golfers belong, and fulfilling them would only take some straightforward new policy.

Acknowledge competence: Golf is a difficult sport, so it's no surprise that a new golfer might feel overwhelmed and unlikely to return. However, lessons — not just about how to swing, but also about the often unwritten rules and etiquette of play and course management that can intimidate new golfers — can help remediate these challenges.

In several other settings, new participants receive an orientation class or session. When you join a new gym, a trainer will generally walk you through some of the machines or basic exercise routines. In classes like CrossFit, you might attend a separate orientation class to prepare you for the actual classes. Golf courses should make orientation sessions readily available and advertise them to golfers of all abilities, but especially to newer golfers.

A program like the PGA's Get Golf Ready program or the LPGA's Golf 101 offer so many benefits that can position a new golfer to feel more competent on the course, but also feel like they belong after knowing the rules, etiquette, and swing fundamentals, and through connections made with other new golfers in these programs.

Build relatedness: An initial recommendation to foster a sense of relatedness at the course is to hire women in leadership roles there. This can not only help to provide role models for girls, but also put female golfers more on the radar at golf clubs, as opposed to sitting as the afterthought with respect to tee boxes, bathroom access, tee times, events, and so forth.

What does change look like? Ideally, clubs could facilitate ways for golfers of similar abilities, or for women specifically, to find each other for shared tee times. Pairing golfers of similar abilities can promote a sense of relating to others and belonging. Whereas feeling like they are a lot worse or a lot better than their playing partners can lessen the appeal to return.

Recognize autonomy: Autonomy ultimately refers to the degree of control the participant feels in their activities. In golf, that can look like when they play, what tees they use, with whom they play and generally giving women a voice at the club. This voice can be fostered casually through conversations with the golfers, but it could also be facilitated more regularly through follow-up surveys or suggestion boxes.

Listen, then address the need. Actively hearing the concerns women express about playing can enable clubs to both intervene before the player has ceased participation and promote the further recruitment of a happy, diverse group of new golfers.

Recent National Golf Foundation data found that in 2020, female golfers were an average age of 39 years old, college educated (51.6%), and earned a household income of over \$100,000 (53.7%). Furthermore, these women were not just playing once or twice, but rather averaging more than 17 rounds per year, which offers a significant impact on the market. Between the 30% of female golfers who are Gen Z and the 30% of all golfers who are beginners, the time is now to hook this new set of golfers as participants by helping them feel included and competent golfers for life.

By offering women a supportive and welcoming culture that extends beyond an afterthought, a growing and sustained interest is sure to follow.

Melissa Davies, Ph.D., is assistant professor, sport management, at Ohio University. This piece is crafted in partnership with The Collective Think Tank, a global consortium of academic minds and industry leaders focused on gender parity and improving diversity. The collaboration is led by The Collective, Wasserman's women-focused division.

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