

Through Gut and Grit the LPGA Has Survived 75 Years of Sexism, Racism and Homophobia

“Sure, he was great. But don’t forget Ginger Rogers did everything he did backwards and in high heels.” – Bob Thaves, Frank and Ernest comic strip.

There exists an uncomfortable but undeniable truth extending beyond the borders of golf, overshadowing all of sports and, in fact, haunting every aspect of American culture: For the achievements of women to be recognized they have to overachieve. And even when their dance is sublime, backward and in heels – Ginger Rogers mirroring the brilliance of Fred Astaire – the feat is often viewed as a mere appendage of male genius, not as genius on its own.

When 13 women launched the Ladies Professional Golf Association in 1950 they had the financial support of a few visionary equipment manufacturers who understood how World War II had changed America, identifying an emerging market now that Rosie had been liberated from the kitchen and then traded her rivet gun for a golf club. But traditional sports fans – and sports writers – who were almost exclusively men were not as appreciative, demeaning at every opportunity the efforts of female athletes.

For decades, skeptics – again, mostly men – swamped the LPGA in a sea of derision and burdened the Tour with a weighty prophecy of doom that, at times, seemed to be less predictive understanding and more wishful thinking. They wanted the LPGA Tour to fail. A sports columnist I know once wrote: “I love women and I love basketball, but I hate women’s basketball.”

As with many of my friends in the world of sports writing, the key to my relationship with the man who authored those words was not to

discuss politics. My act of rebellion toward the men who demeaned women's golf was to write about those remarkably talented and determined athletes in the women's game more often and more passionately.

Once, while out to dinner with a bunch of people who worked around golf, I was asked why I was so supportive of women's golf and I said: "Other than feeling it's the right thing to do, I don't know." Another person at the table who knew my background jumped in and said: "Sure you do – your mother." When I thought about it, she was right.

I was a teenager when my father died and my Mom also had a 7-year-old and a 5-year-old to raise. From then on, she worked two jobs to support us. She was a welder from 7 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. and then a cleaning lady in an office building from 6 p.m. until 9 p.m. She taught me the value of hard work, made certain I got a good education and instilled in me an obsession with fairness. Once, she tossed one of the Dad's friends out of our house because he used the N word. Not bad for a woman without a high school degree.

Without ever making the conscious connection, when I had the good fortune to become friends with LPGA Founders Louise Suggs, Marilyn Smith and Shirley Spork, I saw a lot of my Mom in them – smart, strong and determined women with an unrelenting sense of fairness and a compassion that was often hidden behind toughness. When their accomplishments on the golf course and as businesswomen who created a professional tour were demeaned because of their gender, it offended the raging desire for equality that my Mom instilled in me.

Spork has the dual distinction of being not only a founder of the LPGA but, in 1959, she almost single-handedly created the Teaching & Club Pro Division of the Tour, gaining approval of the Board of Directors by

a single vote. With that move, the door was open for women not only to earn money in professional competition but also to pick up paychecks as golf instructors. This was a hugely important victory not just for equality in the workplace but also for the growth of the game, allowing women the opportunity to be taught by women.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the irrational dislike of the LPGA and women golfers by some is that those who feel that way also feel that everyone should share their beliefs. They are not just rooting against female athletes, but rather rooting against women. They enjoy inequality. And why not – they benefit from that inequality. I think often of the line Peter Weiss wrote in his play “Marat/Sade” which became a popular poster in the ‘60s: “Even if it is true that you’ve never had it so good, that is still the slogan of those who have more.”

Bigotry exists because someone – or some group of people – benefits from it. That benefit can be broad in terms of power and profit, or it can be narrow, existing sometimes just to make an individual feel better about themselves. Many times, when I post a link on social media to a story I’ve written about women’s golf, I get a guy who responds by saying: “No one cares about women’s golf.” Sometimes the responses are more explicitly – and disgustingly – sexist, racist and homophobic.

I don’t engage with those social media hatemongers because I don’t believe you can have a meaningful discussion about anything in sound bites of a couple hundred characters. But if I were to respond, I’d point out that, in fact, tens of millions of people around the world are fans of women’s golf and that it’s a pity this particular person is so insecure in his beliefs that he feels the only way he can validate those beliefs is to project his ideas onto everyone else as an indisputable intellectual absolute.

In my decades of writing about women’s golf, I’ve become familiar

with many players. The privilege was mine to become friends with Suggs, Smith and Spork and to interview stars from every generation of the Tour's history. That's a benefit of the fact the LPGA and I were born in the same year – 1950. We grew up together. I always thought a strength of the LPGA was that so many of the 13 founders lived so long and were able to pass their story of survival onto subsequent generations of players – and the writers who were willing to listen.

To get to know these women has been an inspiring privilege. Their stories of courage and kindness, ability and aspiration, perspiration and perseverance are an honor to tell. When asked why I became a golf writer, my answer is: “I don't write about golf; I write about people who happen to play golf.” The stories of the women who founded and pioneered the LPGA are not unlike the stories of those women who broke down barriers in science, business, academia, the law and government.

As voluminously and passionately as I've written about women golfers, I've never felt I was doing them justice. Often, I only tell part of the story because some of the details were too painful or too personal or just plain no one's business. Always, I never sacrificed a long-term friendship for a short-term headline; I never betrayed anyone's trust.

Through it all, I felt these remarkable women were not getting the credit they deserve. I knew their full story was not being told. But I know now that times have changed. The “Me Too” movement has made the denigration of women less acceptable. Gay marriage is a thing now and Gay Pride is totally out of the closet. The ugly truth of racism in America is being told.

Many of the 13 women who founded the LPGA are Lesbians, as are many of its greatest players. That's a story that no longer needs to hide in the shadows. The abuse endured by Althea Gibson, the first Black on

the LPGA, and Renee Powell, the second, are matters of public record but the racist hatred directed toward the Asian players who achieved so much success in the 21st century was, at times, also extremely painful. I know that 20 years ago I'd get hate emails when I wrote about Asian players and I'm certain the players did as well.

While much of the sexism directed toward LPGA players over its first 50 years was limited to verbal disdain and boorish dismissal of their achievements, a more recent generation of players have had to endure stalkers at tournaments and trolls on social media. But there is one enormous commonality that unites all generations of LPGA players: They are vulnerable to attack because they are women.

For decades, I have watched in awe as these remarkable women of the LPGA have danced backward and on spikes against all odds.

First, there were the sexists who sneered: "Who wants to watch a bunch of girls play golf?"

And still they danced on.

Those bigots were followed by the homophobes who jeered: "Who wants to watch a bunch of Lesbians play golf?"

And still they danced on.

Then came the racists who said: "Who wants to watch a bunch of Asians play golf?"

And still they danced on.

The story of the LPGA Tour is a snapshot into the American journey

from World War II into the 21st Century. The war changed things. Black sharecroppers and white farmers moved to the cities for better paying jobs and cultures mixed. Women left the home for the factory not because they were wanted but because they were needed in the fight against Fascism. After the war, that toothpaste could not be put back into the tube.

After the war, women stayed in the workplace – or at least tried to – and some of those who did aspired to be more than assembly line workers and secretaries, beginning the long march toward the C Suite. Some pursued sports, inspired by Babe Didriksen Zaharias, one of the 13 LPGA founders who, with Jim Thorpe, is on the extremely short list of the greatest athletes America has ever produced.

Always to succeed – to advance – women had to not only achieve, they had to overachieve. One of the ways in which women's sports was demeaned was to compare it to men's sports rather than judge it on its own merits.

Instead of saying Babe Zaharias is great they'd say, "She's not as good as Ben Hogan." Even when she won the U.S. Women's Open – the most grueling event in the women's game – 15 months after surgery for colon cancer, there were those who said the achievement was dwarfed by Hogan's U.S. Open victory 16 months after a near-fatal car crash.

Even decades later, when Tiger Woods won his 82nd PGA Tour tournament, tying Sam Snead on the all-time victories list, most in the media failed to point out that Kathy Whitworth won 88 times on the LPGA Tour and that Woods not only tied Snead for first among men but also tied Mickey Wright for the second-most victories on a major professional golf tour.

Sports has served an important role in the evolution of the United States. The games we play are a petri dish in which the melting pot called America experiments with change. Major League Baseball didn't integrate until 1947; but the U.S. Supreme Court did not strike down segregated public schools until 1954. The PGA did not abolish its "Caucasian Only" clause until 1961; but the Civil Rights Act was not passed until 1964. When legendary football coach Paul "Bear" Bryant invited the University of Southern California and its 18 Black players to take on his all-white University of Alabama squad in Birmingham in 1970 – USC badly defeating 'Bama – it helped integrate public universities in the South. While equality may not have mattered in Alabama, football did.

Athletes like track and field Olympian and 10-time golf major winner Babe Zaharias; 1960 triple Olympic gold medal sprinter Wilma Rudolph; Black tennis and golf pioneer Althea Gibson; tennis great and early equal-pay advocate Billie Jean King; gymnast Nadia Comaneci; race car driver Danica Patrick; 18-time Grand Slam tennis singles champion Martina Navratilova, basketball star Caitlin Clark and the United States Women's National Soccer Team have all made the intended slur: "She plays like a girl" a badge of honor

Early on, female athletes had to fight merely for the right to play. Now the struggle is for equal pay. And how different is that than the gender battle waged in the American workplace? It's one thing to get a job; it's another thing to be fairly compensated for your labor. Once again, women are reminding us that the battle is not over, that America is still evolving and that the effort to create a more perfect union is unending. Perfection is not a destination, but rather a process. Equality is achieved in the journey and anything short of complete equality is inequality.

While the 13 Founders of the LPGA will never be mentioned in the same breath as Susan B. Anthony, Eleanor Roosevelt, Helen Keller,

Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman on any list of the most impactful American women, they deserve to be recognized for the contributions they made toward achieving the dream of a country in which all people are created equal.

Those 13 women pushed through that door opened by Rosie the Riveter and built a league of their own – a professional golf tour for women. The early members of the LPGA fought a silent battle for the right to live a Lesbian life decades before Pride Month was on anyone’s calendar. The Tour embraced Black players in the 1960s and later opened the door to Asians, making the LPGA “Golf’s Global Tour.” If America is truly a melting pot, the LPGA has added crucial ingredients to the stew on the stove and stirred it constantly for seven decades in a more impactful kitchen.

The story of the LPGA is a story that began with 13 women and grew to dozens and then hundreds and then thousands who fought to compete at a game they loved and fought to earn a living in the occupation they chose. The story of the LPGA is a story of vision, courage and remarkable perseverance. For 75 years, the LPGA has fought against sexism, racism and homophobia to become the world’s oldest continuous professional sports organization for women – all while dancing backward and on spikes. This is a fight that continues; this is a story that is still evolving.

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