

Women unfitted for golf?

The history of women's golf follows closely the history of women's emancipation in Scotland and other parts of the British isles.

There is no written or pictorial evidence of women who actually appeared to have been playing golf until the 19th century, with the exception of Queen Mary who we are led to believe played some kind of golf at St Andrews in 1563.

Another tradition has it that the Queen played golf against her lady-in-waiting, Mary Seton, and afterwards the Queen presented her with a necklace to commemorate her victory.

The only document referring to women and golf is a 'kirk session' from 1612 in which a woman was rebuked for instructing her son in the mysteries of golf in the town's churchyard on a Sunday; the session does not tell if she played the game herself (Jane George, 'Women and Golf in Scotland', 1997).

According to the Musselburgh Golf Club, women seems to have already been playing golf by the end of the 18th century. The earliest 'official' women's golf tournament was held on the 9th of January 1810 between the fishwives from Musselburgh and Fisherow. Playing a kind of putting contest, the winner's prize was a creel and a skull (small fishing basket and a head-dress), and as consolation prizes two fine Barcelona silk handkerchiefs. The fishwives were not only keen (putting) golfers; they also had an annual (ancient) football match between the married women and the unmarried fishwives.

The announcement on the next page does not make clear how often this annual occasion was held before 1810 or thereafter.

The official announcement of the tournament

Musselburgh 14th Dec. 1810

The Club resolve to present by subscription a new Creel & Skull to the best female golfer who plays in on the annual occasion on the 1st Jan. next, old style (12th Jan. new), to be intimated to the Fish Ladies by the Officer of the Club.

Two of the best Barcelona silk hand kerchiefs, to be added to the above premium of the Creel.

ALEX. G HUNTER, C

(www.scottishgolfhistory.net/royal_musselburgh_golf_club.htm)



*This is how the women looked who played the first women's tournament on the Musselburgh links in 1810: the Fishwives from Musselburgh and Fisherow –
By courtesy of Edinburgh Photographic Society*

Over the years, golf was seen as a men's game where they socialised and enjoyed the challenge and the social aspect of the game, away from the wives and the home.

Originally, the women were allowed (by men) to play some golf; this golf was limited to only the putting or pitch and putt game on fairways not longer than 50 to 100 yards. At that time it was considered as unacceptable for women to make a swing past their shoulders and performing publicly 'violent' swings.

It took until the end of the century before the women were allowed to replace their tent by a shelter. It was men who founded in 1867 the Ladies Golf Club at St Andrews. Early golf for women meant playing on a kind of pitch and putt course. At that time it was considered not very ladylike to make violent swings that passed their shoulders. – Illustrations from the article 'St Andrews Ladies Golf Club', The Illustrated London News, 1889)



The first ladies' club was established in 1867 in Saint Andrews, the so-called 'Ladies' Golf Club'. It was some members of the St Andrews Golf Club who founded this Ladies' club to provide recreation for their daughters, whose sports so far were limited to croquet and archery. On a small piece of ground a short pitch and putt course was laid out for the girls. They had to run their own affairs from a tent and it took till 1898 when they were allowed to erect a shelter.

It was in 1893 that the First Ladies Championship was held at Lytham St Annes, still on a kind of 'pitch and putt' course.

It was the well-known Horace Hutchinson who wrote an open letter in 'Golf' to Miss Blanche Martin, the first treasurer of the Ladies Golf Union:

"... Women never have, and never can unite to push any scheme to success ... They are bound to fall out and quarrel at the slightest provocation ... Constitutionally and physically women are unfitted for golf.... The first Ladies Championship will be the last ...". However the Championship was a great success, and was followed by many more championships. It is said that Horace Hutchinson later changed his mind about women's golf and women's championships.

(www.kirkwoodgolf.co.uk)

Original Life Association golfing print after Michael Brown's 'Aberdovey - Ladies Golf Championship 1901' showing Molly Graham putting and surrounded by her peers. – Illustration from the article 'Legends of the Ladies Links', Liz Pook, Through the Green, September 2008



It took until the beginning of the 20th century for women to start to play on real golf courses and only in the second half of the 20th century did women enter professional golf.

It was in August 2007 that for the first time the Women's British Open was held on the holy grounds of the Old Course of St Andrews.

Annika Sörenstam, one of the greatest female golfers, said there: "It is a big step for women's golf to play this championship at St Andrews, ... I remember that when I played here as an amateur, there was a sign out there that said: 'No dogs and women allowed'."

Women have captured their rightful place in the worlds of golf, both in the professional and amateur fields. It is not men anymore who decide what is good for women golfers and what is not. –

By courtesy of Jamie Lynn

