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## GOLF AND SOCIAL CLASS. A BARRIER TO PARTICIPATION.

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**Abstract:-** This research topic is based on the following two premises: that golf is an elitist sport, and that it has a public relations problem in that it is still perceived as such. Having once again become an Olympic sport scheduled to feature at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, redressing this view is both timely and necessary. By examining the current state of golf participation and looking more closely at the reasons why people do and do not take up the sport, we can speculate on what the future demographics of golf may look like and suggest ways and means of increasing participation across social groups and nations. The purpose of this study is to collect information about the state of golf participation in a given region as a proxy for golf participation in Switzerland more broadly, and use historical and geographical contexts to analyse participation patterns in the sport. This will set the tone for a discussion on the barriers to taking up the sport, with the hypothesis that these are not purely economic. By increasing our understanding of the issues related to why people do and do not take up golf as linked to social class, we can reassess strategies to mainstream the sport.

**Keyword:** Golf and social class , public relations problem , Olympic sport scheduled.

### INTRODUCTION

“Golf is a day spent in a round of strenuous idleness.” (William Wordsworth) “A golf course outside a big town serves an excellent purpose in that it segregates, as though a concentration camp, all the idle and idiot well-to-do.” (Osbert Sitwell) “No game designed to be played with the aid of personal servants by right-handed men who can’t even bring along their dogs can be entirely good for the soul.” (Bruce McCall)

The issue of class is one that has been closely linked to golf throughout its history, and remains particularly obvious in certain parts of the world. There are several reasons: it is an expensive sport to partake in, and the preserve of a particular social class; not everyone who can afford it becomes a member of a golf club. Generally therefore, golf is one of those pastimes repeatedly cited as elitist, along with other “country club” sports, such as tennis or polo. It implies one being wealthy or retired, having lots of disposable time and income, and being a member of a club with other such persons. It also implies quasi-religious knowledge of an extensive set of rules, traditions and etiquette linked to expected conduct and attire on the golf course. There are, however, a few other particularities about this sport that do not quite add up to this view, suggesting rather that it is a popular pastime with a broad fan base that makes it worth investing in to sponsors. A look at the Forbes list of the highest paid athletes reveals that a golfer -- Tiger Woods -- sits at the top, with 71.8 million in earnings in 2013 (Badenhausen 2013). This sport has also recently been voted back on the roster of Olympic sports and will feature at the Rio 2016 Games. Referring to the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) Evaluation Criteria for Sports and Disciplines (2012), this should by definition mean that golf is on the contrary a “popular” and “universal” sport. This beckons the question of the extent to which golf has actually become more mainstream, or whether it is still the preserve of a particular social class.

Perceptions of the sport as well as accessibility, cost and popularity vary across the world and these geographical considerations should not be underestimated. However, for the purpose of this study it is suggested a local analysis may yield some initial insights that may be used as a proxy for a broader set of conclusions, which may in turn be the basis for further study. Such an endeavour is further justified by the limited scope of existing and current work on the particular links between golf and social class, while existing studies of economic impact, sustainability or even gender parity are more comprehensive. Furthermore, while some commentary exists on golf’s social role in the countries largely recognised as the founding nations of

the modern sport, namely Scotland, England and the US, and to a certain extent the broader Anglo-Saxon golf tradition worldwide, comparative research at a regional level in Europe generally and at a national level in Switzerland in particular is sparse. This paper therefore draws from the Anglo-Saxon histories and traditions of golf as a basis for comparison with the state of golf in Switzerland, and complements these observations with research into local practices and insights drawn from a set of semi-structured interviews with golfers in the Lake Geneva region. Golf in Switzerland is described using data and resources from the Swiss Golf Association (ASG) and the Swiss Federal Office for Sport (OFSP). Further opinions have been canvassed informally to illustrate various points throughout the study and are referenced as appropriate.

In sum, the ultimate objective of this article is to comment on the relation between golf and social class, and in doing so suggest strategies to mainstream the sport. In theoretical terms, Bourdieu's notions of capital and habitus serve as the basis for a broader set of sociological references that provide a framework for exploring the linkages between golf and social class, as well as the means of gaining additional insights using interview questions as proxies for these notions. Starting from the premise that golf is an elitist sport, this study aims to demonstrate whether the barriers to taking up the sport are purely socio-economic, with the hypothesis that they are not limited to this, and include instead elements such as a lack of opportunities for trying out the sport, and lack of a local or national superstar athlete to induce interest in the sport. The suggestion is that such elements do in fact have a much greater role to play and that strategies to mainstream the sport should look at these factors rather than focus on the question of cost and class.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The basis for this study is Bourdieu's seminal work, "Distinction" (Bourdieu 1994), where the interconnectedness between capital and habitus are discussed in such a way as to illustrate how they shape tastes for consumption, the pursuit of social recognition and, by extension, how they serve to perpetuate class distinctions. Here, capital is not a financial asset but rather represents "resources individuals possess, accumulate, and exchange in order to augment their hierarchical position in society" (Ceron-Anaya 2010). It takes social, cultural and symbolic forms. Social capital denotes the belonging to a certain group of persons. This affiliation gives rise to certain privileges in terms of access and powers in terms of influence. Symbolic capital derives from social capital and has to do with being identified and recognised as a member of a collectivity by its members and outsiders. It is a cognitive construct by which persons are affiliated to groups and hierarchies between these groups are created. These groups can by extension be institutionalised as clubs or status groups, which are perpetually redefined in a daily struggle between individuals and groups to assert themselves. Cultural capital is that which is accumulated, maintained and displayed by individuals, as demonstrations of their achievements. It is a complex notion, which Bourdieu subdivides into three further types: institutionalized, objectified and embodied (Warde 2006). The point here is that sport is seen as a means and an end when it comes to various forms of capital. For our purposes, we will compare and contrast insights from interview subjects belonging to different golf clubs in the Lake Geneva area, including how they came to become members and feel a part of these clubs.

Along with accruing and demonstrating various forms of capital through sport, the second notion of key importance to our study is the idea of habitus: "that is to say, members of different social classes have cultural and physical dispositions which are deeply embodied, dispositions by means of which class position can be performed, recognized and represented" (Warde 2006). Here we will therefore consider the extent to which golf is the preserve of a particular social class by asking the subjects in our study to cite their educational backgrounds and comparing their professions, as well as the budgets they devote to the practice of the sport (club membership, green fees, trips, equipment, etc.). This should reveal whether a preference for the sport of golf reflects habitus and by extension an accumulation of the cultural capital referred to above. Bourdieu in "Distinction" confers with our hypothesis regarding economic capital not being the only determining factor for developing a taste for golf:

"...Economic barriers -- however great they may be in the case of golf, skiing, sailing or even riding and tennis -- are not sufficient to explain the class distribution of these activities. There are more hidden entry requirements, such as family tradition and early training, or the obligatory manner (of dress and behaviour), and socializing techniques..."

We also find this to be relevant when looking at the golf landscape in Switzerland. Maguire (1995) confirms the need to appreciate the intersection between sociology, history and geography, and we will carefully consider the context of the latter two in this case as they are very important to understand the state of golf in Switzerland. Indeed, its history has been very much linked to the development of high-end hotel resorts desirous to cater to a certain upper class by offering a suitable array of summer and winter sports in the most desirable, scenic -- and therefore expensive -- locations. A poster published by the Swiss National Tourist Office in 1927 stated that "Switzerland is the Sportsman's Paradise. The golfing enthusiast has the choice of twenty admirably planned links, where he can indulge his hobby amid splendid scenery" (Grandjean 2002). Technological advances at the beginning of the 20th century notably when it came to the golf ball (by American Coburn Haskell), had made some progress in improving access to the sport by making it easier to play and demand for new golf courses followed. The ASG was formed in 1902 as a response to this trend reaching Switzerland following the creation of the International Golf Union of Ireland in 1891, that of Wales in 1895, and of course The Royal and Ancient Golf Club (R&A) agreeing to formalise its governance role and establish the Rules of Golf Committee in 1897 (Ratray 2013).

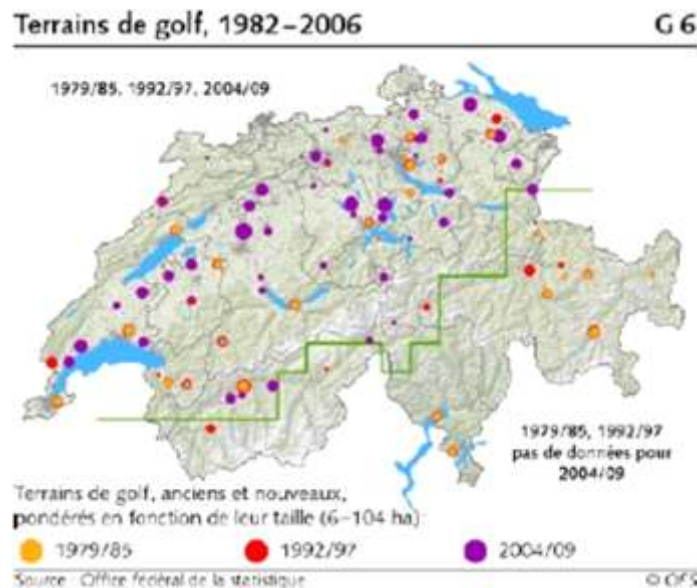
Coming back to the literature review, our main hypothesis that the economics of playing golf is not the only factor to consider in mainstreaming the sport was also found to have been cited by Stempel (2005) in alluding to a study by Taks et al. (1995):

"When social scientists and others who do not study sports are informed that adult sport participation is strongly

associated with social class they are frequently inclined to reduce this class inequality to economic barriers, focusing on sports such as golf played at exclusive clubs. Taks et al. (1995) shattered this economic reductionism by demonstrating that the monetary cost of playing sports is only weakly associated with the class status of the sports, as measured by the modal 'socio-professional' status of the participants. For example, golf is among the most expensive sports and its participants have high socio-professional status, while bowling and bodybuilding may also rank high in cost, but much lower in socio-professional status. Clearly cost barriers and conspicuous consumption are not the only principles of distinction operating in the field of sports."

Our study will therefore not be ground-breaking but it is our hope that we will nonetheless propose some interesting conclusions for a regional and local level, and perhaps make additional insights as to the other forces at work and in terms of new strategies for making the sport more accessible.

Further sociological studies on golf, such as that by Riess ("From Pitch to Putt: Sport and Class in Anglo-American Sport" 1994), offer an additional useful background to our study, although its conclusions are not necessarily applicable to our geographical context. Riess' work concludes that there are marked differences within Anglo-Saxon historiographies as to the extent to which class has played a key role as linked to sport, particularly when considered alongside other factors such as colonialism or questions of race. Have we such elements to consider in Switzerland? We have already noted the development of golf in Switzerland was closely linked to that of the high-end hotel industry in the early 20th century, which to some extent has perpetuated the perception here that golf is a sport for a wealthy elite. There is, however, another important component to consider, which, although it is not a socio-cultural trend such as those noted above, may in fact be the determining factor in mainstreaming golf in this country: geography. Only one third of Switzerland is inhabited, the rest of the country being made up of mountains, lakes and other land formations. While there has been a staggering increase in the number of golf courses, this trend is not sustainable and may have reached a plateau: the Swiss Federal Office for Statistics (OFS) noted in a 2011 study that the surface of golf courses had more than tripled in the last 24 years, increasing by 337% such that it has overtaken the total surface of private home gardens. The figure below illustrates this boom in golf course construction.



**Figure 1: Golf course expansion in Switzerland 1982-2006. Size of the bubble indicates extent of the course (6-104 ha)**

In parallel, we must take into account a substantial development in terms of the golf offering in the country, which is closely linked to the rapid expansion in golf courses described above. 20 years ago, there were 46 clubs that were members of the ASG and it numbered 22'400 affiliated players (Pasche 2013). Comparing this to the latest figures for the end of 2012, there are now 57'300 players in 96 clubs. To add to this, the creation in 1998 of the Swiss Independent Golfers.

Association (ASGI), now numbering 16'200 members, followed by the Migros Golf Card and its 11'200 members, give us a total of 85'000 officially affiliated golfers in Switzerland (note: there are some golf clubs across the French border in the Geneva-Lausanne area that are also members of the ASG). Both of these organisations are under the umbrella of the ASG which has the main responsibility for overseeing golf's organisation in Switzerland. So while the elitist perception of the sport, its history in this country and limited surface area may seem to be factors inhibiting the democratization of the game, we have in fact observed that the actual trend in the country as a whole has been for a rapid expansion of choices for the Swiss golfer in terms of new courses and new models of membership. We draw on these facts for the methodology of our research.

## DISCUSSION

The most conspicuous result in our study is undoubtedly that the comments and observations made by the respondents in our sample do not show noticeable commonalities within the selected membership categories, except in that the Group 3 golfers had a greater annual golf-dedicated budget. This would seem to imply that while different golfers have different means to play golf -- or varying levels of economic capital -- this is expressed by their choice of club and does not appear to influence their taste for and opinions on the game -- in other words, their cultural capital. We will nuance this affirmation by offering two alternative points of view. Firstly, our sample has several biases. These are all relatively young persons (all between the ages of 28-42, with one 51 year-old). They are all relatively good players (2.5-27 hcp). They have all attended university and we now educational credentials are a key component of cultural capital (Stempel 2005). They are all passionate about the game and devote a considerable amount of time to the game on a weekly basis (in season, but also out of season through golf holidays). Here we note that the selection of our sample may not have been as rigorous as desired for this type of study in that it is made up of acquaintances and acquaintances of acquaintances, which probably makes the group quite homogenous to some respect when it comes to their views of the game and golfing habits.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has included historical, geographical and sociological considerations to conclude that the forms of capital required to develop a taste for the game of golf are not merely economic, contrary to the premise that golf is a rich man's sport. Indeed, our framework and the interviews conducted on this basis show that while golfers may have varying levels of spending power they have all developed a comparable taste for golf, which they have either inherited from family, learned from friends, or been challenged to adopt on competitive sporting grounds. This may have been further developed by adhesion to a club, but we found that there is a level of socialisation among golfers in general regardless of their club affiliation that is closely related to the strong influence of rules and etiquette in the game. Including questions in the interviews relating to education, introduction to the game, level and time spent playing golf has helped us differentiate between several groups. On the one hand is the group acquiring a taste for golf through cultural capital gained via a family member or acquaintance. This "generic" cultural capital is also reflected in the level of education of the respondents, which is of a similar level across the board. We might therefore conclude that the first means of developing the sport is through proponents practicing the sport themselves. On the other hand, we also have a group that became interested in the sporting and competing component of the game, developing in other words a "field specific" cultural capital linked to golf as a sport. This was particularly true of the golfers spending a lot of time playing and with a lower handicap (these seem to be correlated in the sample, although the literature offers differing points of view on the relationship between amount of practice and level attained). The responses to the question regarding golf's Olympic inclusion seem to suggest that this latter group might be developed by this, in that golf in the Olympics will firstly crystallise its status as a sport as opposed to a hobby, and secondly in that it will therefore reach a much wider audience of non-golfers.

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