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Scottish Golf and Covid-19

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Abstract

Much has been made in the press about the cancellations and postponements of large scale national and international sporting events and competitions, but little attention was given to the impact Covid-19 had on grassroots sports participation. This chapter considers the immediate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on golf in Scotland. It also examines the challenges facing the sport prior to the Covid-19 crisis, such as declining club membership and the difficult relationship between the sport's governing body, Scottish Golf, and its affiliated clubs. Golf in Scotland was one of the last club sports to stop in the wake of the increasing restrictions on day-to-day life introduced to curb the coronavirus. The chapter also looks at the guidelines introduced by Scottish Golf along with their implementation and adaptation by local clubs in Scotland. Finally, the possible longer term impacts of the crisis are discussed.

Much has been made in the press about the cancellations and postponements of large-scale national and international sporting events and competitions. Little focus, however, was given to the impact Covid-19 had on grassroots sports participation. Yet, in those critical days in early March when other sports were ceasing to function in any meaningful way, golf continued. *Bunkered* declared, rather sensationally on March 18, "Almost HALF of Europe's golf courses are now CLOSED!" (McEwan, 2020, para. 1). McEwan added that nearly half of Europe's golf courses (4,121 out of 8,940) were in lockdown. Despite the high number of closures across Europe, the golf courses across Scotland, the home of golf, all remained open. Why was this?

This chapter explores the reasons why Scottish golf courses remained open much longer than many of their European counterparts and indeed, longer than many other sports in the United Kingdom (UK). This chapter considers the impact of the pandemic and the UK and Scottish governments' actions on golf in Scotland. Golf in Scotland was one of the last club sports to stop in the wake of increasing restrictions on day-to-day life, in fact in the immediate days leading up to the UK entering a state of complete lockdown golf, was the only sport, other than running, to be actively endorsed by the government. As such, people were keen to play and as a result, Scottish Golf had to react quickly to draw up effective regulations which allowed play to continue, but also abided by the health guidelines set down by the UK and Scottish governments. The methods introduced by Scottish Golf and the adoption of those methods by local clubs are also covered in this chapter.

Golf in Scotland

Scotland is known as the "Home of Golf." The robustness of this claim has be debated by sports historians such as Zhang and Wu (2019), none the less, the label has stuck and is

used shamelessly in tourism marketing and strategies both nationally and internationally (Visit Scotland, 2020). There is little doubt that golf in Scotland does indeed have a rich history spanning several centuries and has been played in large numbers for many years. However, that picture is changing.

Scottish Golf is the governing body of amateur golf in Scotland. It was established in 2015 when the Scottish Golf Union, the governing body for men's golf, and the Scottish Ladies' Golfing Association merged. The organisation has had a turbulent existence. All clubs in Scotland must affiliate to Scottish Golf and pay an annual fee to them based on the number of members their club has. In return, Scottish Golf is responsible for the organisation competitions, managing the national team, providing guidelines and regulations in conjunction with the Royal and Ancient, and promoting the game at a grassroots level. The challenges that Scottish Golf have faced have been manifold; in relation to membership there are several substantial issues from declining playing numbers to an aging player profile and gender imbalance. The clubs themselves are, in the majority of cases, no longer financially viable due to declining membership numbers and increasing running costs. Scottish Golf has tried to address these issues with various policies, however the fractured relationship between the clubs the NGO establish right from the outset of its establishment have meant that these policies have been viewed with suspicion and even open hostility.

No academic research has been conducted into the organisation of Scottish Golf, however, there are some parallels between the challenges facing them and other sports governing bodies. Rhodes (1996) has demonstrated that governance is the process through which an organisation establishes it course of action, budgets and it relationships with those within its remit. In doing so, he has highlighted the critical distinction between governance *of*

an organisation and governance *between* organisations. Until recently, scholarly focus has been on organisational governance (Hoye & Doherty, 2011). As Parent and Hoye (2018) noted, in order for an NGO to function efficiently there needs to be an agreed set of governance principles in place. While there is a basic formal governance framework set out in the constitution of Scottish Golf and agreed upon by the member clubs which deals with the governance *of* Scottish Golf, there is no such set of principles set out around *how* these organisations work together on an everyday level. As a result, there remains some dubiety about the motivations of actions taken by Scottish Golf. Tensions between NGO and affiliated organisations, particularly those at a grassroots level, are not unusual (Shilbury, Ferkins, & Smythe, 2013), however, in the case of Scottish Golf, these tensions have been further entrenched by the problematic position of the formal club-based game in Scotland.

In recent years, golf in Scotland has been declining, or more specifically the numbers of players registered with clubs has been in decline. This decline has been quite dramatic. In 2005, there were 260,000 members registered with Scottish Golf, the national governing body, and by 2019, this figure had dropped to 180,281 (Scotsman, 2020). This is a drop of approximately 30% in less than 15 years. The number of clubs has also, unsurprisingly, dropped too from 600 private clubs in 2005 to 560 in 2019 (Laird, 2018). The public sector is primarily comprised of local councils or municipal authorities running 72 golf courses, which represent 12% of golf course facilities in the country (SportScotland 2003). The game itself however, remains as popular as ever in Scotland, it is simply that membership of clubs has become less attractive. The accessibility of cheap rounds at courses across the country has spawned a new type of golfer, often referred to as the "nomadic" golfer, who prefers to play

whenever and where ever best suits their individual circumstances, rather than joining one club and adhering to its regulations which often constrain their ability to play.

The gender profile of Scottish Golf membership in Scotland mirrors that of wider European trends. As noted in the KPMG golf survey (Sartori, 2019), the majority of registered members are male 68%. The trend of decline is also a feature across Europe as "45.5% of European markets experienced some decline, including prominent markets such as England, Scotland and Scandinavian countries" (p. 3). Scottish Golf and individual clubs have tried over the last 10 years to stem the flow of declining membership through a variety of strategies. Recent figures show that these have not yet been successful with membership numbers continuing to decline and consequently clubs becoming economically unviable (Speirs, 2019). It is against this precarious backdrop the crisis of Covid-19 plays out in Scotland.

Covid-19 in Scotland

The first confirmed case of Covid-19 in Scotland was on March 1. The number of confirmed cases in Scotland gradually increased but remained low, by March 6 there were 11 cases and by March 9 only 23. On March 13, the first death in Scotland from Covid-19 was announced and confirmed cases rose to 85. By the March 16, just as *Bunkered* was announcing the cumulative closure of golf courses across its European neighbours, Scottish cases had jumped to 171 (Scottish Government, 2020). March 16 is a key date in the Scottish timeline of Covid-19. This was the date that the Scottish government introduced a ban on mass gatherings of 500 people or more. The immediate impact of that ban on sport was the cancellation of football matches in the Scottish Professional Football League and a Six Nations rugby home game between Scotland and Wales (Duffy, 2020).

The case of Scotland is somewhat confusing by its relationship with the UK. The UK is made up of four countries: Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland. Each of these countries is governed by a centralised UK government which sits in Westminster, London. However, Scotland has its own parliament in Edinburgh, which holds devolved powers over areas such as health and education. As such, the Scottish government has the power to make different decisions to the rest of UK if it believes these are in the best interests of the Scottish people, something which First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has reasserted during the crisis and in particular in relation to the UK government's lockdown "exit strategy." With the exception of the ban on mass gatherings, the Scottish government policies concerning Covid-19 have however been, up until May 2020, in line with Westminster.

On the March 18, it was announced that schools in Scotland would be closed starting on March 20 and on March 22 all cafes, bars and restaurants are asked to close (BBC, 2020). On March 23 the UK entered a full lock down. People were told that, unless they were key workers in vital sectors such as healthcare, they were not permitted to leave their homes except for essential shopping and daily exercise, alone or with one other person from the same household and of no more than one hour once a day (Scotsman, 2020). The police were granted temporary authority to stop and fine anyone breaking these regulations.

Government Responses

The UK government was slow to take decisive action in relation to sport in the UK. Cases of Covid-19 in the England were growing faster than anywhere else in the UK, yet the government allowed large-scale sporting events to continue maintaining that "banning such events will have little effect on the spread" (Freeman, 2020, para. 2). Several weeks later, as it becomes clear that the number of deaths from Covid-19 in the UK has continued to grow at

a faster rate than most of its neighbouring countries, the public's focus has, in retrospect, been given to the government's policies and in particular to the decision to allow large scale events in England to continue in contrast to Scotland. The Cheltenham Festival, where over the course of the four-day race meeting between March 16-19, 251,684 people attended, has been singled out as being linked to a number of cases, in particular those of high profile individuals such as Prince Charles, who is heir to the British throne (Freeman, 2020).

The UK government's guidance in the weeks leading up to the lockdown was clear: continue with life as usual unless you were returning to the UK having visited an area with high levels of infection, in which case a period of 14 days in isolation was recommended (UK Government, 2020). Daily updates in the press speculated about the impact of the virus once it took hold in Britain and questioned what people should be doing to prevent its spread. This government approach changed on March 12 when, after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 an international pandemic, the UK government raised the risk level from moderate to high but no legislation was introduced to reflect this change or enforce any measures which would have prevented the spread of the virus. Instead they encouraged people to start implementing social distancing measures, advised against non-essential travel and suggested people should avoid pubs, clubs and theatres, and work from home (BBC, 2020).

So where did this leave golf? Many grassroots sports were closing down their activities due to lack of demand which resulted from the informal government guidance discussed above. Golf however was specifically discussed by Sir Patrick Vallance, the UK government's chief medical advisor in this period. At a select committee hearing on Covid-19 he was asked directly about playing golf during the crisis. Dean Russell MP asked,

> Exercise is going to be key [especially for older people]. If someone wants to play
>
> golf, can they still do that if they're not close together?
>
> Sir Patrick Vallance stated: We're not asking everyone to be completely isolated. The
>
> specific advice is to avoid close contact. A walk is OK if you keep a distance.
>
> (Dunsmuir, 2020, para. 1)

This was later endorsed by a number of disease control specialists. Dr. Catherine Troisi, infectious disease epidemiologist at the University of Texas Health Science Center noted,

> in the actual playing of golf, you're not at much risk. Sunlight and other
>
> environmental conditions can kill viruses like this. Also, relieving stress by playing
>
> golf outdoors helps your immune system. Physical activity boosts your immune
>
> system, so for both mental and physical health it's good to get activity however you
>
> can get it without putting yourself at risk. (Hiseman, 2020, para. 3)

This was the news many golfers had hoped to hear. For them golf was the ideal sport to play in these times of social distancing.

Scottish Golf Recommendations and Local Clubs

As early as March 12 Scottish Golf (2020a) had released a statement and broad guidelines for continuing play across Scotland. The statement, which encouraged members to keep playing, noted that, "In these difficult times it is important to highlight the health benefits of golf as a sport that allows players to exercise outdoor in the fresh air where the risk of contracting Covid-19 is low" (para. 4). The next day Scottish Golf announced it had cancelled a number of national championships in April and all non-essential face-to-face meetings for staff and clubs. The sport organization also encouraged clubs to share "best

practice" examples of changes they had made in their own clubhouses and courses to limit the spread of the virus but which still allowed members to keep playing.

While some players joked in online club forums about their own poor play ensuring they were *always* at least two metres away from other players, other players and clubs sought reassurance that golf could be played "safely". As one (Leonard, 2020) wrote in the Scottish Golf Facebook forum, "Scottish Golf, is it definitely keeping golf safe? I help run a junior section at my local club and I admit I'm torn between having the kids play or cancelling. It is Scottish Golf who think playing golf is safe or have you received health advice from relevant qualified authority to say golf, if social distancing is adhered to, is safe?" (para. 1). Scottish Golf continued to reassure its members, developed its guidelines in consultation with government advice and encouraged golf clubs to make modifications to ensure safe play.

The clubs developed a number of common approaches to making golf "safe". Most clubs closed the communal areas in the clubhouses such as lounges, bars and caddy car rooms and increase cleaning in the areas which remained open. They introduced contactless payment systems for green fees. Many clubs also chose to close or restrict access their locker rooms and toilet facilities. They also limited the numbers of people able to play together, this varied from club to club, but generally was a maximum of two unless there were more than two players from one household wishing to play together.

In terms of playing golf, Reilly (2020) noted that there were a number of adaptations to the course and rules. These included items such as staying two paces away from each other, removing rakes from bunkers, smoothing bunkers with feet instead of rakes, putting with the flagstick in, picking up ball out of hold with gloved hand, changing shoes in parking lot, coming reading to play by not changing clothes before or after the outing, giving a

thumbs up on the first and last green, refraining from handshakes and fist bumps, and using digital devices when possible to submit scorecards. On the whole, these adaptations were welcomed by players as it allowed courses to stay open and kept players and club staff safe. The public Facebook forums of various golf clubs and organisations highlight that players were keen to keep playing. They argued that golf was the ideal sport to play in these socially distancing times. One player summed this feeling up well, "surely it would be safer to play golf on a big wide golf course on your own compared to exercising in a public park" (Smith, 2020, para. 1).

These adaptations to play and clubhouses also allowed player to legitimise their own participation. Discussion in golfers' forums had queried whether they would look bad for continuing to play their sport when so many were being closed down (Randall, 2020). The majority, however were simply happy that they were able to continue playing a sport they loved safely. Indeed, it is arguable that the changes to play were too successful. The combination of other sports closing down, people increasingly working from home and a period of good weather in the 10 days leading up to lockdown meant that many clubs were inundated with players and visitors. For example, the weekend of March 20 many clubs reported higher than usual numbers of members playing on their courses (Smith, 2020). This was echoed by players themselves. For example, in an interview with the author on April 4, 2020, one golfer noted that, "Golf, we felt, was a great form of exercise and we quickly adapted to the 2 metre rule and the local rules set by the club." This also meant that it was popular, as the golfer added, "Unfortunately, our courses were inundated by visitors who we felt could have been bringing the virus into our village when we were being encouraged not

to travel. In fact, the few days before the shutdown it was like the middle of the summer holidays with packed car parks and courses."

On March 17, Scottish Golf cancelled all grassroots competitions. All golf came to an end with the imposition of a full lockdown late on March 23. Scottish Golf (2020b) announced that in line with UK government guidelines all courses must now close. "While golf is an outdoor sport that allows players to exercise in the fresh air, the message to all of us is clear, we must stay home and play our part in containing the spread of COVID-19," noted the announcement (para. 4). "With this in mind, Scottish Golf asks that all golfers in Scotland refrain from golfing until further notice" (para. 5).

Looking to the Future

The short-term impact on golf of the restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 crisis in Scotland will be manifold. We can only speculate at this point what those impacts will be. There were very real fears that the complete closure of Scottish golf clubs might be the death knell for those already hovering on the brink of closure before this crisis and may mark a significant decline in Scottish Golf registered players.

Certainly there will be substantial financial implications for both individual clubs and Scottish Golf. Clubs themselves have had to continue to pay staff and other costs, whilst at the same time those staff have been unable to maintain the courses and buildings as required due to government restrictions. They will therefore be left with substantial costs to return the playing surfaces to the required standard after the nine-week period of lockdown. Perhaps more concerning however is the fear that the crisis will have raised questions in the minds of loyal members about the need or desire to continue with their membership. The lockdown ensured that paying members could not access facilities they had paid for in advance through

their annual fee. Many have demanded refunds or extensions the playing calendar to allow them to recoup what they perceive to be their monies worth. The appeal of the lifestyle of nomadic golfers, who play where they wish and pay only for the rounds they play must surely be of increasing appeal?

Longer term, there are also serious questions around the role of Scottish Golf. Before the Covid-19 crisis there was a growing resentment amongst clubs towards the NGO. The manner in which Scottish Golf handled the crisis seems only to have highlighted that tension further. At a time where the NGO could have placed itself at the centre of crisis by providing clear leadership and feedback to its membership, it is evident that this did not in fact happen. LaGree, Wilbur and Cameron have highlighted the importance of comprehensive communication strategies during crisis management by sport organisations (LaGree et al, 2019). The communications strategy adopted by Scottish Golf was, at best, limited. Formal statements were released regularly on their website and directly to clubs, but were often lacking in detail or guidance. Their Facebook page, a space they use daily to communicate with clubs and members, was updated throughout the crisis but comments, questions and feedback from the membership went unanswered. As time progressed the responses to posts on Facebook became predominantly negative towards Scottish Golf (2020c). During lockdown the CEO Alan McKinlay left his post and a war of words between Scottish Golf and the Scottish media ensued (Dempster, 2020). By contrast England Golf, which before the crisis was also facing significant criticism from its membership, have adopted a much stronger and arguably more effective approach to their communications strategy. They gave regular detailed updates, engaged directly in discussions on social media channels with members and leadership figures from the organisation gave interviews to key media outlets.

For some NGOs, such those who are signatories on the EU Position paper on the impact of Covid-19 on sport, the Covid-19 crisis has been seen an opportunity to innovate and rethink policies, processes and priorities and make significant changes which will strengthen their organisations and their sports in the longer term (EU, 2020). It remains to be seen if Scottish Golf will seize this opportunity to make positive changes or if the impact of the crisis will prove to be simply too overwhelming.

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