

Conventional to comfortable or respectable to practical: the evolution of women's golf clothing in Britain, 1890-1935

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Title: Conventional to Comfortable or Respectable to Practical: The evolution of women's golf clothing in Britain, 1890-1935.

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Abstract: The emergence of sports specific clothing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been explored by academics, yet with only a few exceptions, little has been written about the development of sportswear for women in Britain in this period.¹ Similarly, there has been little in the way of consideration given to the growth and development of women's golf during this time. Yet, both are areas of considerable change and worthy of detailed study. In this paper we will trace the developments of golf clothing for women from the early days of the formalised game in the late nineteenth century until the end of the interwar period. In doing so we seek to highlight that golf fashions, like those in other sporting arenas mirrored the changing expectations of female players whilst also reflecting the societal expectations of women of the period. We will discuss the everyday clothing worn by the pioneers of the game and the modifications they made to their garments in order allow them to play effectively. We will also explore the growth of specialist sports clothing developed specifically for golf and the ways in which these sports clothes were marketed and ultimately became fashionable modes of attire beyond the golf course by the end of the interwar period.

Key Words: Golf, interwar, femininity, sport history, modernity, sportswear

‘Sporting tailors have recently been giving attention to special garments for ladies on the links’: Women’s golf clothing in Britain, 1890-1930.

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Introduction

There have been a number of studies which have mapped the growth and development of commercial sports specific attire during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, most notably the works of Park, Williams, Anderson, Pyper and Bill.² These articles have explored the emergence of sport-specific clothing and equipment, tracing changes in the design and production, often focusing on a particular sport or producer of sportswear and with a tendency to focus on the male experience. Yet despite golf being a rapidly growing sport amongst the middle and upper classes in Britain during this time the development of golf clothing has not featured significantly amongst these discussions. Perhaps the reason for this is that golf is often viewed as a conservative game, one where social and gender norms have historically been reinforced rather than disrupted? We would argue that it is precisely because of this perception that women’s experiences in golf deserve study. As we will demonstrate in this paper, women were also taking up the game in significant numbers in these years and were seeking out solutions to the challenges of playing the sport whilst maintaining their femininity. In this article we will trace the developments of golf clothing for women from the early days of the formalised game in the late nineteenth century until the end of the interwar period. In doing so we seek to highlight that golf fashions, like those in other sporting arenas mirrored the changing expectations of female players whilst also reflecting the societal expectations of women of the period.

Growth and development of the women’s game in this period

Women have played golf for hundreds of years, the earliest record being of two married women who competed against each other on Bruntsfield Links in Edinburgh with their husbands as caddies in 1738.³ However, it was in the late nineteenth century that significant numbers of women took up the game across Britain. It was in this period that we see the origins of the modern organised game emerging. Scotland led the way in this regard, with the founding of the St Andrews Ladies Golf Club (later known as the St Andrews Ladies Putting Club), in 1867. The club was formed by and for local middleclass women who wanted to play the game. As membership increased a designated space was sought and landscaped into a 15-hole putting green near to the Royal and Ancient (R&A) clubhouse. The club, run by a mixed committee, none the less provided women with a space where they could play the game by themselves, but the location of the course meant that they were still under the watchful eye of the male members of the R&A.⁴ Other clubs were subsequently established for women across the UK and Ireland, amongst the earliest of these were Carnoustie in Angus, Scotland Westward Ho! in North Devon and Wimbledon in London.

The formalization of the game nationally came about in April 1893, when Issette Pearson founded the Ladies Golf Union (LGU). The LGU had a clear purpose, which was broken down into five objectives; to promote the interests of the game, to obtain a uniformity of the rules, linked to this it was tasked with establishing a handicapping system, it was to act as a ‘tribunal and court of reference’ on the rules and finally it was to arrange an annual Championship for its members.⁵ The LGU was initially composed of only 15 clubs, all of which were based in England.⁶ Membership grew steadily with over 50,000 members having joined the organization from around 400 affiliated clubs by 1911.⁷ The LGU was successful in all of its initial objectives, rules and regulations were drawn up and circulated to members, the first Championship was played in June 1893 and a universal handicap system was established by 1896. It became clear quickly however, that each nation needed their own women’s golf

organization to manage and represent players at a local level. As a result, the Irish Ladies Golf Union (ILGU) was established in December 1893, the Scottish Ladies' Golfing Association (SLGA) in 1904 and the Welsh Ladies Golf Union (WLGU) in 1904. The establishment of national organizing bodies created a higher profile for women's golf, while at the same underpinning it with a sense of legitimacy through its formalized rules, handicaps and competitions.⁸ This in turn encouraged more women and girls to take up the sport, with numbers of those affiliating to the regional bodies growing continuously well into the mid-twentieth century.

Golf was almost uniquely placed to accommodate societal expectations of Victorian women and their desire to play sport. Society functioned around a strict set of ideals which saw women as the 'angel in the home', whose primary roles were associated with the care and nurture of their children and wider family members. They were expected to find personal fulfilment within their homes and its related experiences. Their biological functions were understood to be substantially different to that of men; they were thought to be weaker, to have a finite amount of energy and that overexertion could cause significant trauma to their reproductive capabilities. Sport therefore sat outside of their sphere of influence. Sport was regarded as the perfect training ground for young men as competitive participation pushed them both physically and mentally, making them stronger and more robust. By contrast similar competitive exertions were thought to be dangerous to women's mental and physical wellbeing. Golf, however, it represented a good compromise as it was not physically demanding, in the way that hockey or football could be, and it was not aggressively competitive. The game was governed by strict rules of etiquette and was generally played in exclusive private clubs which ensured that when women played, they would only be mixing with men of similar social standing and within clearly defined and socially acceptable circumstances. For these reasons, as we can see below, although records are fragmentary, women's participation rates in golf

increased significantly during the later decade of the Nineteenth Century and the early decades of the Twentieth Century.

Table 1, Number of Golf Clubs Affiliated to Ladies Golf Union 1893-1939.					
Year	Scotland	England	Ireland	Wales	Total Number of Affiliated Clubs
1893	1	15	-	-	16
1897	2	200	-	-	202
1914	12	479	-	-	491
1925	97	756	13	56	922
1926	106	782	14	67	969
1927	127	792	14	69	1002
1928	132	826	14	68	1040
1929	141	873	14	74	1102
1930	160	907	14	79	1160
1931	166	928	15	85	1194
1932	173	938	15	87	1213
1933	180	951	12	87	1230
1934	200	994	15	85	1294
1935	211	1012	15	91	1329
1936	216	1030	15	94	1355
1937	222	1036	15	100	1373
1938	228	1051	14	105	1398
1939	236	1060	14	107	1417

Source: Figures calculated from lists of affiliated clubs in the *Ladies' Golf Union Annual Handbooks, 1925-1939*.⁹

This growth continued into the interwar years. By 1914 419 clubs had joined the LGU and by the early 1920s this had almost doubled to 922 and by 1939 there were 1417 affiliated clubs. So, in the interwar years the number of clubs affiliated to the LGU almost tripled. If we consider that each club represented anything between a handful to a couple of hundred members each, we can get a sense of just how quickly women were taking up the opportunity to formally register their participation.

This growth and development needs to be seen within the wider trends of the period. The late Victorian period is often considered to be the birthplace of modern sport. It was during this time that many sports, for both men and women, established governing bodies to draw complex networks of clubs and individuals together, to formalize their rules and regulations and set up regular events. Indeed, several other sports which were popular with women had formal organizations established during the last two decades of the Nineteenth Century; sports such as tennis and hockey. The Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) was established in 1888 with organisations in the other UK nations following in the decade or so thereafter.¹⁰ While the All-England Women's Field Hockey Association (AEWFHA) was set up in 1895 and national associations established quickly thereafter.¹¹ These sports, fitting as they did within established notions of femininity and gentility combined with their increasing role in middleclass female education, gained ground fast. From their foundation through to the end of the interwar years the growth of formal participation, that is playing through formal membership, increased significantly across several sports. The AEWFHA began in 1895 with just ten clubs but by 1919 that had grown to 89 and by the end of the interwar period over 2000 clubs were affiliated to the Association in England.¹² The LTA experienced a similar growth, beginning in 1888 with only a handful of clubs, by 1920 1,830 clubs had affiliated and 1938 2,874 were part of the organization.¹³

Not all women's sports experienced positive growth in this period, activities such as mountaineering, and football had more challenging births and faced significant public opposition. We do see women taking part in these sports in small numbers during the 1880s and 1890s, but their participation is actively discouraged by the established male organizations in these areas, and they faced a backlash from the public and media for pursuing activities which are outside of the accepted notions of femininity and physical capabilities. As a result, it took much longer, well into the Twentieth Century, for these sports to become established and pursued in significant numbers.

Women's Golf Wear: The Early Years

Until the late nineteenth century, no specialist golf clothing existed for men or women. Regulations regarding golf dress were dictated by society and the conventions and gender ideals of the period, ensuring that clothing worn on the golf course was merely an extension of general day-to-day wear.

'One has a brown serge skirt, with a double hem, which reaches only to the ankles. The full blouse is of buff covered cambric, with white spots, and is made with comfortable bishop sleeves, drawn into turn-back cuffs, a deep turn-down collar, with brown silk tie, and a draped silk wide waistband, sailor hat of buff straw with brown band. If particular colours are worn by the golf club, it is easy to have the dress made in such colours. A golfing costume like one from tennis or cricket, should allow plenty of room for freedom of action; the skirt and blouse form is, therefore, best. An extra coat or cape is a necessity. Many of the newest Golf capes are excessively neat looking; check tweeds are chiefly employed, and the linings in plaid silk harmonise with the colour of the tweed. A good make of cape is a covert coating, or box cloth, unlined; it has two capes, the upper one cut up the centre of the back; the collar is of velvet, edged with cloth, and the seams are strapped.'¹⁴

Image 1: Golf cape advert, *Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion*, April 1st1895, p3.

Golfing jackets were also compulsory for lady golfers during this period at the most exclusive clubs.¹⁵ Red coats were popular in England as golf was played on common land and the red colour was worn to warn pedestrians.¹⁶ These jackets closely resembled those worn

for the hunt, being a similar style of cut and red in colour, they differed in that they were pleated at the back to enable women to drive more easily from the tee.¹⁷ However, May Hezlet argues that this fashion passed and by the early twentieth century, these were ‘very seldom seen on the links’¹⁸¹⁹

IMAGE 2: Golf outfit of Mabel Stringer, 1904, featuring red tailored jacket and long leather-trimmed skirt, courtesy of the R&A World Golf Museum.

Men also took to the links in attire typical of the period, including ‘Tight coats, buttoned high, waistcoats and broad hats...A thick tweed jacket and strong working trousers...Heavy- nailed boots with²⁰. As these clothes were not the most practical for golf, especially in all weathers, women began inventing modifications such as the ‘Miss Higgins Hoop’, an elastic band worn around the knees to prevent skirts from blowing up in the wind, pioneered by Chicago golfer Mabel Higgins who competed in the 1904 British Ladies Amateur Open Championship at Troon.²¹ The ‘Miss Higgins Hoop’ was such a significant accessory that when the women’s golf museum opened in London in 1938 it was noted as an important item on display which demonstrated how far women’s golf clothing had come since its early days.

‘the kind of armour worn by the champion lady golfers of forty or fifty years ago will be on view. Skirts which contravened the rules (of golf) by trailing along the ground ... worn, underneath which contracted the body into such contortions that swinging a golf club must have been physically torture; to say nothing of the elastic-band which was worn by every modest lady golfer, who slipped this around her ankles when the wind was blowing.’²²

Image 3: Miss Higgins Hoop, elastic band worn around the knees to prevent skirt from blowing in the wind, courtesy of the R&A World Golf Museum. Unfortunately, no image of the band being worn exists.

Similarly, the ‘New Forrest’ skirt was developed which allowed the wearer to alter its length by adding or removing extra inches of fabric around the bottom hem using a button system.²³

Up to twelve inches could be removed for playing in long grass and gorse on the Links, and three inches for routine use. This method provided a more practical way for women to deal with variable wet and muddy terrain of the golf course while protecting their modesty and their clothing. As there were no shoes designed specifically for the golf course, women could either buy Scaife’s Patent shoes with India rubber soles or were encouraged to wear plain good quality leather day-wear shoes or boots, but to modify them by adding aluminum nails to the soles.²⁴

It is important to note that during this period, golf attire for women was dictated by societal conventions, and what was considered appropriate dress for women, rather than golf governing bodies and authorities. The Ladies Golf Union (LGU) did not publish regulations on what women should wear on the course, instead they led by example, with Issette Pearson, the founder of the organisation epitomising the Victorian lady golfer as depicted in Image 2. Lady Margaret Scott, winner of the first Ladies Amateur Championship, established by the LGU in 1893, was praised for her elegance, demonstrating that women could play golf well whilst remaining feminine.

IMAGE 4: Issette Pearson (Front Left) and Lady Margaret Scott (Front Right), Ladies Amateur Championship 1893, courtesy of The R&A World Golf Museum. Miss Pearson and Lady Scott are wearing typical Victorian attire, a long ankle length skirt (with visible mud on the edges of Lady Scott’s). Lady Margaret Scott is wearing a blouse with bishop sleeves and gloves and Issette Pearson is wearing a tight fitted jacket with a stiff collar. Both ladies are wearing straw boater hats.

Despite appearing highly impractical by today's standards, these fashions were viewed as necessary in Victorian society. For women, the absence of a corset, or as little as an ankle on show, would have been unacceptable during the late nineteenth century, raising concerns regarding loose morality.²⁵ Women were expected to always look feminine and ladylike, in keeping with their role within the private sphere as wife, mother and homemaker. This view is promoted in the fashion pages of *Golf Illustrated*, which provided fashion and beauty advice to women, the styles promoted placed a primary emphasis on femininity rather than practicality.²⁶ In her golf memoirs, published in 1904, May Hezlet demonstrates the pressure that society put on sporting women when they played games, including golf, to ensure that they remained feminine, neat and tidy, in keeping with the gender ideals and societal conventions of the day.²⁷ Hezlet portrays society's reaction to women's fashion noting that,

‘When anyone is outrageously dressed in the effort to attain comfort... it casts a slur on the whole society of lady golfers and gives occasion for slighting remarks about the “athletic woman”. It is the duty of all to prevent these opportunities arising and to prove, to the best of their ability, that there is no foundation for the remarks which are too apt to be made after a large ladies’ golf meeting.’²⁸

She also argues that non-golfers stereotype women who play golf ‘as a weird and terrible creature clad in the most extraordinary garments, striding along with self-possessed walk, and oblivious to everything but her beloved game’ and asserts that ‘it should be the aim of all lady golfers of the present day to abolish this prejudice.’²⁹ It is evident that a woman's choice of dress was viewed with the same importance as her comportment, and that dressing inappropriately would result in negative assumptions being made of women golfers.

It has been argued that by the early twentieth century, there had been a shift in the design and production of sports clothing generally to the extent that they had become a recognized

specialist area of manufacture.³⁰ As part of this shift there was a demand for increasingly specialized products which reflected the unique demands of each sport. Golf clothing and equipment was a part of this process. The trend is reflected in the increase in specialised golf clothing being advertised in golf magazines of the period. Sport manufacturers began producing waterproof materials for skirts and jackets, along with shoes and boots specifically designed for sports, removing the need to add nails or heel guards to everyday leather boots and leather strips and weights to the hems of skirts.³¹ *Kenneth Durward's Golfing Garment's* created the 'Allendale skirt' and coat which 'successfully solves the feminine problem of how to look smart and feel comfortable when playing golf.'³² The 'Allendale Skirt' was specially designed to 'allow plenty of freedom to the hips and knees without that fullness or bagginess which look so unbecoming and is such a handicap to a lady golfer on a windy day'. As hats remained a necessity for women during this period, hats specifically designed for sports were also appearing in popular golf magazines.³³

Image 5: The Allendale skirt and coat, *Golf Illustrated*, May 27th 1910, p.206.

Advertisements however demonstrate that upper class 'Ladies' were the first to have access to these more bespoke items of clothing, which would not have been affordable for the masses at the time.³⁴ Popular manufacturers of elite sportswear during this period include *Egerton Burnett's*, *Debenham and Freebody* and *Peter Robinson's*, producing clothing including ladies' jacket and skirt suits made from 'special waterproof khaki serge', knitted sports coats, and hats.³⁵ The prices of these specialist clothes ensured that they remained the exclusive upper-class golfer during the early twentieth century.

Fashions were slowly changing in the decade leading up to the outbreak of war. The most significant development of the period was the widespread availability of the ladies sporting boot. The boot, with a small heel, made from toughened brown or black leather with small

grips on the sole is the amongst the earliest known purpose-made sports shoe for women in Britain.³⁶ In the first few years of the century the fashion remained long full skirts, with long sleeved blouses and hats held in place by scarves or netting tied below the chin. By 1910 the skirts had lost their volume and were still ankle length but narrower in shape. Jackets worn over long sleeved blouses had changed too, becoming tight-shouldered and narrow around the waist. Brimmed hats continued to be worn but held in place by a myriad of hatpins.³⁷

IMAGE 6: The Irish Team at the British Amateur Championship 1910, courtesy of the R&A World Golf Museum. The ladies are wearing a wide brimmed hat, and a shirt and tie underneath a narrow-fitted jacket, as described above.

Attitudes towards women's fashion began to change with the onset of the First World War in 1914. As women began taking on men's jobs in their absence, they started wearing clothes that were more practical, and by comparison to previous fashions more masculine in style. Crane argues that 'Tweed suits with long skirts, shirts and ties became almost a uniform for the new breed of women.'³⁸ Whilst women began wearing more masculine attire from the waist up, such as a stiff collar, tie and 'jackets which sported their club insignia', '...women were only prepared to sacrifice their feminine appearance above the waist'.³⁹ 'The retention of a skirt safeguarded their femininity and was the dominating image of the female golfer for several more decades.'⁴⁰ This change in fashion trends from the First World War further demonstrates that golf dress was dictated by wider changes in society, as can be seen in the interwar period with the development of the 'modern woman'.

Women's changing golf wear

The interwar years are often regarded as a significant period for women's sport.⁴¹ It was during this time that a range of sports opened up to women across Britain in a way previously unseen. There were a number of factors which stimulated this development, women's role in World War One had shifted societal expectations of what women were capable of whilst simultaneously empowering women themselves to pursue their interests and push back against established roles.⁴² Municipal and commercial provisions of sports facilities also increased considerably in these years, thereby opening up sporting experiences to those of all classes, not just able to afford private club memberships or those with the right social connections. Experience was of course still mediated by class, gender, and age. Each of these factors influenced how often, where and with whom individuals could play the sports which interested them, but the range of facilities available, particular in urban settings, ensured that many more people were able to access sport than before.⁴³

A significant part of this development was the role of modernity. As discussed by both Skillen and Pyper, sport was an intrinsic aspect of interwar modernity, this was perhaps best typified by the Prince of Wales, whose social calendar seemed to revolve around sporting events.⁴⁴ Playing sports, socialising at sports venues, and wearing sports clothing were all ways in which a woman could signal her modernity. As *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* in 1924 highlighted sport was fashionable, 'It is certainly a distinct advantage to any firm that wishes to achieve and maintain its reputation for being absolutely *au courant* with affairs in the dress world to have its own (sports) designer.'⁴⁵ The interwar years were also marked by a new widespread consumerism, where mass production methods across a range of industries meant that the cost of products were lowered ensuring that a range of goods, including sports clothing was accessible to a range of consumers.⁴⁶ As one fashion page noted that sport specific clothing had, by the early 1920s, become an intrinsic element of mainstream fashion, 'Mannequin parades, or parades of fashion, call them what you will, are in full swing, and a fact that cannot

be too widely disseminated is that great attention has been given to the requirements of the sportswoman.⁴⁷ Sportswear became a fashionable for men in this period too. The Prince of Wales is often credited with popularising sportswear as informal day wear. While his love of golf clothing, especially knickerbockers became synonymous with fashionable clothing in 1920s.⁴⁸ In an article entitled 'H.R.H Started It', *Vogue* explained the Duke's far reaching influence,

There are people with personal influence and following who unconsciously, even unwillingly, alter the modes and manners of clothes. Chief amongst such is the Prince of Wales. (...) The smart sportswoman follows devotedly what the Prince is wearing. When he changes the pattern of his tweed or his worsted, women want the new pattern which he has chosen. (...) The influence is felt not only in tweeds in plus fours, worsteds and woollens in suits and overcoats, but also in sweaters, scarfs, stockings, shoes, even saddlery, umbrellas and golf bags.⁴⁹

The pages of women's magazines followed this developing trend of sportswear as fashionable attire, by regularly featuring stories about sport and the fashion pages, often included sports clothing such as *Vogue*, *Women's Weekly*, *Modern Woman* and *Cinema Girl*.⁵⁰

⁵¹⁵² However, both mainstream and feminist magazines carried advertisements for women's fashions, including sportswear. For those of the upper classes bespoke garments were still the norm for this period, but even here there was a shift. As *Vogue* noted, 'Men's and women's sportswear runs so much on similar lines in Great Britain that, if a woman can persuade her husband's tailor to make for her, she is on sure lines of fashion, as well as perfect lines of tailoring.'⁵³ While the development of mass-produced specific sports clothing for women in the interwar period, meant that women were no longer expected to simply modify everyday wear for their sports participation, but instead there was an expectation that the serious golfer would invest in clothing and footwear designed and manufactured specifically for the sport being played.⁵⁴ The sports magazines and newspapers of the period featured a significant coverage of women's sports fashions and discussion round those developments. Golf magazines such as *Golfing Illustrated* and *Golfing*, published standalone features on women's

golf fashion and included regular discussions on their women's pages, something which was not mirrored in relation to their coverage of men's golf clothing during this time.

The changes in women's fashions generally during the 1920s were revolutionary; hemlines were raised. The wider trends of women's fashion slowly began to influence the types of clothing worn on golf courses across Britain.

'The apparel may not always proclaim the golfer, in nine times out of ten, however, it proclaims the season of the year. This is just as it should be. It is no more reasonable to expect a sports girl to be indifferent to her personal appearance'⁵⁵

Women golfers continued to wear skirts, blouses with long sleeves and hats and gloves, however the styles of these garments changed significantly. Hats continued to be an expected accessory on the golf course. Millinery became smaller, more closely shaped to the head, the most popular styles were cloche hats made from materials such as camel hair tweed or felt in natural muted colours, often with small turned-out brims to frame the wearer's face.⁵⁶ In the later years, sports hats, berets, and bandeaux made from materials such as silk jersey and crepe de Chine were pioneered by the likes of Debenham and Freebody in a range of bright colours and patterns. There was also a move away from fitted jackets, they were replaced by knitted jumpers and longline cardigans featuring practical pockets.

Image 7: Joyce Wethered (left) wearing a long line cardigan with pockets and Glenna Collett (right) wearing a knitted jumper with geometric pattern design, Ladies Amateur Championship at Troon, 1925, courtesy of the R&A World Golf Museum.

These forms of sporting knitwear became so associated with the Links that they were referred to as a 'Golfer' in fashion circles. These knitted garments came in natural colours often matched to the wearer's stockings or tie, but there was a fashion from the 1920s, influenced by the Prince of Wales, for textured patterns such as Fair Isle on jumpers and geometric shapes and prints on

accessories such as scarves to bring colour and interest to otherwise monotone outfits.⁵⁷ Such was the popularity of patterned material that W.K Haselden, cartoonist for the Daily Mirror, dedicated a satirical image to the phenomenon. In his cartoon titled, 'Woman's golf costume, man's extra handicap' he depicts a woman in a highly patterned skirt and jumper played off a tee followed by a man who is too disorientated by the colours and patterns swirling before his eyes after her swing that he is unable to focus on his own ball to play.⁵⁸

Skirts became shorter, usually on or just below the knee, rather than ankle-length and featured a dropped waist. Skirts continued to be made predominantly from heavy knitted wool and tweed materials in winter and flannel cloth for summer in natural hues.⁵⁹ Material was similar to that of men's golf wear in this period, with tweeds and worsteds, amongst the most popular. Munro, the tweed makers, reported a run on their 'herring-bone tweed' fabric after the Prince of Wales was pictured playing golf in the pattern.⁶⁰ Skirts also became a simpler, allowing greater movement around the knees and ankles straighter, where earlier skirts had been voluminous and multi-layered, enveloping, restricting, and concealing the body within. This development was arguably slightly more functional than previous styles, but none the less still restricted the stride and stance of the wearer significantly. One-piece dresses were also introduced for the first time in this period. Skirts and dresses remained the dominant clothing worn on the golf course during the interwar years, unlike in other sports such as skiing, and hiking. Trousers became popular attire for women during the mid-1920s and women began wearing trousers under skirts for hiking as early as 1914, removing the skirt when out of the public eye.⁶¹ However, this was challenged in 1933 when Gloria Minoprio became the first lady in Britain to wear trousers on the golf course.

The Greta Garbo of Golf: Gloria Minoprio

In October 1933, Gloria Minoprio caused a media sensation when she competed in the English Close Championship at Westward Ho!, wearing tight fitting 'peg-top' slacks.⁶² Minoprio arrived late to the first tee, in a 'large grey saloon car' and had a soon gained a reputation for suddenly appearing, just before a match and disappearing afterwards.⁶³ After the event, the LGU issued a public apology condemning the wearing of trousers on the golf course.⁶⁴ This is the first time the LGU explicitly spoke publicly regarding dress regulations for women's golf. This decision not only demonstrates the LGU's reaction to women wearing trousers, but more significantly, society's attitude as a whole. This was the first time that a woman had been reported wearing trousers on the golf course and it was so shocking, it was widely covered in mainstream British newspapers including *The Daily Mirror*, *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, *The Northern Daily Mail* and *The Tatler*.⁶⁵ In an article titled, 'Opponent Upset by 'Fancy Dress'', the Daily Mail gave a detailed account of the 'tight fitting, beautifully creased dark blue trousers, strapped under suede shoes to match: a pullover; close-fitting blue hat; and gloves.'⁶⁶ Her appearance was so starkly different to conventional golf wear her opponent later noted that 'It was like playing a supernatural being.'⁶⁷

Minoprio's unusual dress and playing style, dressed all in dark clothing with tight fitting trousers and playing with only one club rather than a selection, caused unprecedented press presence at a women's golf tournament. Prior to 1933, Gloria Minoprio had been unheard of in the golfing world, only playing in 'the two big championships of the year.'⁶⁸ Despite causing a media sensation in 1933 and 1934, Gloria Minoprio remains a mysterious character. Whilst her motivations for wearing trousers are unclear, with no evidence to suggest that Minoprio was trying to raise her profile, her unique playing style and tendency to disappear suggests an air of eccentricity and showmanship. Editors of *Scottish Golf History* have argued that 'Virtually everything Gloria did was for show, and she is the first modern reality star... Apart from playing golf she was also a conjuror and magician of considerable skill and repute.'⁶⁹

Whilst it could be argued that Minoprio deliberately set out to become a cause célèbre, the fact that she only played in 'the two big championships of the year' and disappeared straight after completing her rounds for going to the social and press events associated with the competitions, suggests otherwise. Regardless of whether she had an ulterior motive for courting controversy, she made it clear that her motive was one of practicality, defending her decision to wear trousers by arguing that she found 'such attire more suitable for golf than skirts. They help the swing of the club, are more comfortable and certainly modest.'⁷⁰

Image 9: Gloria Minoprio at the English Ladies Close Championship 1933, LGU Photograph Album 1933-1935, courtesy of The R&A World Golf Museum. Gloria is wearing her iconic outfit consisting of 'tight fitting, beautifully creased dark blue trousers, strapped under suede shoes to match: a pullover; close-fitting blue hat; and gloves.'⁷¹

Newspaper reports of this event are invaluable in demonstrating society's attitude towards Miss Minoprio and women wearing trousers in general. A reporter from the *Yorkshire Evening Post* asked women of varying ages to share their thoughts on women wearing trousers on the golf course.⁷² The responses varied with older ladies acknowledging the impracticalities of skirts, with some arguing that plus-fours, only worn by men for golf during this period, would even be preferable to the introduction of trousers for young women golfers, whilst at the same time emphasizing that 'Miss Minoprio's costume is amusing, but not...at all suitable for a golf course' and 'rather ridiculous.'⁷³ One young girl however could not understand why there was so much fuss being made about 'one girl golfer in black trousers.'⁷⁴ Despite having no desire to wear them herself, she believed that it was down to individual preference. This suggests that younger women and girls growing up in the twenties and thirties, exposed to discourses surrounding modernity, were more open to changes in women's fashion, whereas older women remained reluctant to change. It is however paradoxical that a *Northern Daily Mail* reporter should argue that Minoprio had 'the most remarkable feminine figure ever seen at a golf

meeting', when wearing trousers which were viewed by society at the time as masculine and inappropriate for women.⁷⁵ A similar idea was echoed in *Tatler* which ran a discussion piece on women's golf in 1934 which noted, in the opinion of the author Henry Longhurst, that trousers for women were preferable to the prospect of shorts, a fashion which was growing in popularity amongst lady golfers in America at the time.

'I cannot help think they would do better to follow Miss Minoprio's example and play in trousers. More admirable garments for use on a windy seaside links can scarcely be imagined and the appearance, once the initial shock has been survived, is far superior. For myself, I make so bold as to say that Miss Minoprio, if convention be set aside for a moment, was not only the best looking but also the best dressed player in this tournament.'⁷⁶

It is surprising however that this extensive media coverage was not reciprocated in the popular British golf periodicals, *Golf Illustrated* and *Fairway and Hazard*, it perhaps gives some indication of just how far beyond the acceptable boundaries of course dress Miss Minoprio had stepped. Perhaps the LGU were afraid that publicising the event in this way would encourage more women to follow Minoprio's lead and did not want to draw more attention to the event? If this was the case it can be argued to have been to some extent in vain as Minoprio not only wore trousers in 1933 but did so the following two years at the English Close Championship, and Ladies Golf Union photograph albums demonstrate that other women began to follow her lead and can be seen to be competing wearing trousers.⁷⁷ In 1938 a secretary of a golf club in Manchester questioned the ability of the club to enforce a ban on women's trousers arguing that '...wearing trousers is common amongst women golfers...especially in wet weather.'⁷⁸ This suggests that society's attitude towards women wearing trousers to play golf, were beginning to change by the late 1930s, and that whilst opposition remained, women felt they had more freedom to wear trousers on the golf course if they wished. It should be noted

however that these women remained in the minority, with LGU photographs demonstrating that many women were still competing in skirts rather than trousers.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Gloria Minoprio's ability to challenge the status quo and influence women's golf fashion during the mid-1930's, must not be overlooked. Her bold choice of attire started an important conversation amongst official organisations and female golfers themselves about what was both practical, fashionable to wear on the course, in the years after many women adopted her style, including Helen Holm who wore an almost identical outfit when she won the Ladies Championship at Porthcawl in 1934.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Golf clothing has been given little consideration by academics, yet as we have demonstrated here, the development of women's sports clothing during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries offers a greater understanding of the challenges women faced in their participation. The types of clothing they chose to wear to play sport, in this case golf, had to walk the fine line between what was practical and what was socially acceptable, two things which were often apparently incompatible. Yet, as we have seen here women had autonomy to modify their clothes even within these perceived narrow confines to ensure that they could play more effectively and in time styles developed which focused on the practical demands of the sport as much as the needs of fashion. As specialist mass-produced sportswear for golf developed in the twentieth century, the variety of designs, textiles, patterns, and colours available to women increased their options. As we have seen during the interwar years sports clothing became fashionable, and for some women became a way of signalling their own modernity.

Women's sports clothing is often representative of wider issues and concerns in society around female bodies. Indeed, the issue of what women can or should wear to participate in several

sports remains a contentious issue now, almost 100 years after the period we are discussing in this article.

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