‘I hope she doesn’t get hurt’: Empathetic Exclusion of Annika Sorenstam by Australian Sports Journalists and PGA Golfers

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Abstract:
In this article, we analyse the Australian print media coverage of Annika Sorenstam’s participation in the [male] Professional Golf Association Colonial tournament in May 2003. This event would provide a snapshot of the degree of overlap between the most dominant female golfer in the world at the time, and the male professionals of the PGA. How would golf journalists in Australia frame the coverage of Sorenstam- as a competition between golfers or as a novelty act? What we found was that a close alliance was formed between some golf journalists and some male professional golfers that enunciated stereotypical descriptions of female psychological frailty and male responsibilities for breadwinning, and so framed the event as a novelty that should not be repeated.

Introduction
In May 2003, the number one woman golfer in the world, Annika Sorenstam, competed against the men at the Professional Golf Association’s (PGA) Colonial tournament in Fort Worth, Texas. Sorenstam, who normally competes on the Ladies Professional Golf (LPGA) Tour, claimed that she needed a new challenge, and accepted a sponsor’s invitation to play in the tournament. The announcement of Sorenstam’s participation in the tournament provoked a call by some male golfers and journalists for changes to the PGA by-laws, which, at the time, did not formally exclude women golfers from playing in a men’s tournament.
Sorenstam would not be the first female golfer to play in a PGA event in 2003. Suzy Whaley played in July 2003 at the Greater Hartford Open where she qualified by winning a PGA sectional event (Ferguson, 2003a). But Sorenstam was different. Sorenstam had demonstrated over the previous two years of LPGA play that she was the best female golfer in the world by a long way. At the Colonial Tournament, the golfing world would be witness to one example of the degree of overlap between the female and male professional golfing tours.

Something important to some men is threatened by the inclusion of a woman in a men’s sporting competition to the point that some male athletes feel obliged to protest. Kane suggests that a major reason why men object to women’s integration into their sports is:

They are deeply afraid that many women can outperform them, even in those sports and physical skills/attributes that they have claimed as their own. What better way to deflect such fears than to create segregationist ideologies and practices that will ensure that these possibilities rarely (if ever) come to pass? (1995, p. 206).

The sports media has played a part in the perpetuation of the male standard in sport. Female participation and commentary on sport has normally been ignored, trivialised, minimized or presented in stereotypically feminine ways which result in objectification and sexualisation of the athlete (Daddario, 1994; Halbert and Latimer, 1994; Lenskyj, 1998; Bruce, 1998; Pederson, 2002).

The gendered marking of athletes becomes most distinct when men and women are competing in the same event. Halbert and Latimer’s (1994) investigation of the Battle of the Sexes tennis match between Navratilova and Connors revealed that, whilst overt mechanisms of sex marking were rare, more subtle methods of commentary demonstrated the male player as the standard with the female as the inferior other. All the previously mentioned forms of trivialisation were evident in the television commentary. But in addition in the case of a man playing against a woman, a new category of trivialisation is that which is dressed up as chivalry. A television commentator during the Navratilova-Connors expressed this in the following way:

it’s really hard when you play with men your whole life you don’t want to slam the ball at the girl. You’ve got to be a little gentlemanly (1994, p. 306).
This research sought to use the oddness of this event to analyse how golf journalists in Australia would approach their coverage of Sorenstam. Since traditional gender roles and relations remain strongly reinforced in golf (Crosset, 1995; Haig-Muir, 2000, 2002, 2004), it was expected that much of the golf media might adhere to these stereotypical ways of covering Sorenstam. An analysis of the content of newspaper articles that reported on Sorenstam’s participation revealed frequent utilisations of stereotypically gendered ways of describing Sorenstam.

Yet, this research extended the analysis of the treatment of women athletes by the sports media by investigating the journalists’ use of professional male golfers’ commentaries during the lead-up to the event to sustain a stereotypical description of Sorenstam, and reinforce the idea that female and male golfers should not mix. The symbiotic relationship between male sport and the mass media (Pederson, 2002) may be reflected in the uncritical endorsement of male golfers’ comments by golf journalists. Rowe (2004, p. 53), following Henningham, refers to this as sports journalists becoming cheerleaders for the sports they cover. This may be very important in a game such as golf that does not possess some of the physical characteristics of the more hegemonically masculine sports (Bryson, 1987; Crossett, 1995). Golf players may require the support of golf journalists to maintain the belief that women cannot play golf against men.

Methodology

Using textual analysis (McKee, 2001), we analysed more than 70 articles concerning Annika Sorenstam’s entry into the Colonial Tournament in 2004 published in Australian newspapers. The sample of newspaper reports was collected from eight days prior to the tournament starting to the morning of the first round. The selected newspaper reports were dated from the 16th of May through to the 24th of May 2003.

Articles were coded for both content and tone. The initial coding of the newspaper reports provided two areas for further analysis. Initially, articles were analysed for their framing of Sorenstam: At the poles of this continuum, was Sorenstam framed as a ‘competitive golfer’ worthy of a sponsor’s exemption in the tournament, or as a ‘female novelty act’ who would demonstrate that male and female golf competitions should be kept separate. We designated these articles as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’.
Secondly, we investigated the journalists’ use and criticism of statements by male professional golfers to support each framing of Sorenstam.

A preliminary assertion of this research study was that the traditional masculine hegemony of the specific environments of local club golf in Australia, the PGA tour and golf journalism would result in a frequent utilisation of stereotypical ways of describing Sorenstam. It was also believed that the comments of the journalists would uncritically utilise the supporting assertions of the male players, brought up in a golf world that is highly structured by gender.

Findings and Discussion

There was a numerical imbalance in the number of female and male sports journalists in Australia reporting on this event, with women sports reporters accounting for only 11 of the 70 newspaper reports that were written (written by five different journalists). This fits with Henningham’s (1995 cited by Rowe, 2004, p. 44) research on the gendered makeup of the profession of sports journalism in Australia, which reported that ninety percent of print sports journalists were male. Thirteen newspaper reports contained ‘positive’ themes, and out of these thirteen, six of them were written by female sports journalists. Given the under representation of female journalists in the golf media, this indicated a greater likelihood for female journalists to report on Sorenstam’s entry into the tournament more positively, when compared to male journalists.

Some of these ‘positive’ articles utilised the endorsing comments of the small number of male golf professionals who supported Sorenstam’s inclusion in the tournament. Tom Watson, a legend of the PGA Tour, when asked if he had a problem with Sorenstam's inclusion in the tournament, responded with “No, I champion it. It's wonderful to see how the best woman golfer will compete against the men” (“Norman ‘no’ to Annika”, 2003, p. 52). It was also reported that Sorenstam had the endorsement of the leading male golfer in the world, Tiger Woods.

However, there were many golfers who voiced their opposition to Sorenstam’s inclusion in the tournament, and these comments were widely reported. All fifteen articles that utilised male players’ comments to criticise Sorenstam’s position in the tournament were published in News Limited newspapers, and a female journalist wrote only one of the fifteen.
Some male golfers believed that Sorenstam's appearance compromised the integrity of the competition (Ferguson, 2003b, p. 43). Australian male professional golfer, Robert Allenby commented,

we're not allowed to play in the women's events, so why should she be allowed to play a men's event? What's she got to prove? (“Shark: Annika is out of her depth”, 2003, p. 103).

Those who were publicly vocal in their thoughts about Sorenstam's inclusion into 'their' event included well-known Australian golfer, Greg Norman. Norman stated:

For Annika's sake, I hope she doesn't get hurt (“Shark: Annika is out of her depth”, 2003, p. 103).

Similarly, the defending champion of the tournament, the Zimbabwean Nick Price, commented:

I just don't think that too much good can come out of it. If she doesn't play well, it not going to make the ladies look too good. It's an unnecessary pressure that she doesn't need to put on herself (Waddingham, 2003, p. 62).

Norman and Price appear to be emphasising the purported emotionally fragile state that accompanies being female, and the tone of their criticism becomes shrouded in apparent chivalry and empathy towards Sorenstam. It is rare that a golfer hurts themselves physically on the golf course. Assertions of biological ‘fragility’, often used in defending male contact sports from a female intrusion, are difficult to sustain on the golf course. So golfers, such as Norman and Price, turned to stereotypical notions of female psychological fragility. In doing so, they present themselves as sympathetic protectors of Sorenstam’s psyche.

The Fijian, Vijay Singh was probably the most vocal golfer who opposed Sorenstam's inclusion in the event. He felt no need to assert a sympathetic opposition. His opposition was based in hard-nose economics. Singh suggested

I hope she [Sorenstam] misses the cut. Why? Because she doesn't belong out there (Clifton, 2003, p. 21).

Singh went on to explain that Sorenstam’s, or any female golfer’s, participation in a PGA event meant that one less male player was able to participate, and earn a living. What Singh ignores is that Sorenstam received a sponsor's invitation to play in the tournament. By ignoring this, Singh’s comments reinforce naturalised notions of gender difference and fairness (and probably also gendered roles of breadwinning),
without attacking sponsors, or Singh’s and other golfers’ livelihoods, for making commercial decisions.¹

The analysis of the articles concerning Sorenstam revealed that some golf journalists used the male golfers’ comments to reinforce conservative notions of gendered roles and abilities. Again, the relationship between male athletes and journalists covering men’s sport seems reciprocal. As one of the sports journalists suggested in the Knoppers and Elling study, “[o]f course it’s a macho culture… It is a situation where men work with men: journalists and athletes” (2004, p. 65).

A few journalists did take issue with the comments of the male golfers, especially the comments by Singh and Norman (Anderson, 2003; Baum, 2003; Magnay, 2003; Barrass, 2003; Gauntlett, 2003). The latter two criticisms both appeared in the independent newspaper, The West Australian, which also carried an editorial that linked Sorenstam’s participation to the issue of equitable pay for women workers in Western Australian (“Sorenstam a model for equity”, 2003), whilst the other three articles all appeared in broadsheet papers. No article that utilised golfers’ arguments of opposition to Sorenstam’s participation in the tournament that appeared in a tabloid newspaper carried any criticism of the golfer’s positions. Anderson (2003) and Magnay (2003), both writing for the Sydney Morning Herald also linked Sorenstam’s participation to greater participation in public life by women. Yet, in response to Magnay’s article, the Sydney Morning Herald also carried an article by Pat O’Shane (2003), a feminist lawyer and magistrate, arguing that “the fact of life is that men are naturally more powerful than women are.” O’Shane has done many important things for women’s participation in public life in Australia, yet she does not have academic or popular expertise in either sporting or genetic analysis. Linking O’Shane’s position to her feminist background was as useful as having the top male golfers in the world suggesting that Sorenstam should not be allowed to play - it was the broadsheet equivalent of the use of Norman/Price/Singh’s comments.

Sorenstam completed her first round with a score of 71, one over par for the tournament. After the completion of that round, ten articles contained ‘positive’ themes, with six of these articles utilising the supportive comments of male golfers. No article contained ‘negative’ themes. Two other journalists used Sorenstam’s first round score to criticise the comments of those male golfers who had questioned her entry into the tournament prior to the tournament starting. In the second round of the
tournament, Sorenstam carded a 74, and missed the cut by five strokes. After that round, there were four more ‘positive’ commentaries all utilising supportive comments from male players in the field. However, there were also four articles in Australian newspapers that used the comments of former Australian PGA player, Wayne Grady, arguing that the whole event had ‘proved’ that female golfers could not compete on the PGA circuit, and the ‘novelty’ of mixed competitions had worn off.

**Conclusion**

Gender segregation in sport is sometimes the result of a set of cultural discourses that produce consent among women athletes for separate competitions, even in sports such as golf and lawn bowls where there is significant overlap between the genders, at least at the local club level (Boyle and McKay, 1995: Haig-Muir, 2000). Golf is one sport where women and men can readily compete together. In practice, the handicapping system in golf allows for players of different abilities, regardless of gender, to play against each other. However, golf is also a sport with a rich male hegemonic tradition (Haig-Muir, 2000, p.19).²

This research looked at how the occasion of Annika Sorenstam competing in a PGA tournament was presented in the Australian print media leading up to the event. The research examined the ways that some Australian journalists, enlisted the support of male golf professionals, to reassert the differences between male and female golfers and deny any overlap between male and female golf professionals. Or perhaps more accurately, this research looks at how male professional golfers were able to present assertions about the importance of separating golf by gender and rely on the uncritical support of some golf journalists.

The research also demonstrated the relationship between the media and male golfers as gatekeepers of the PGA. Comments from the male professional golfers in the tournament were included in the reports of the golf media without analysis. These comments reinforced the notion that many of the PGA Tour players only welcome male golfers. What our research also indicates is that golf, male golf professionals, and golf reporters all carry a lot of traditional patriarchal baggage.
Footnotes

1 Industry analysts estimated that Sorenstam’s golf-club maker received almost US$300,000 worth of media publicity from television shots during the first round of the Colonial tournament (Anderson, 2003).

2 Both Augusta National (United States) and the Royal and Ancient (Britain), golf’s two most senior bodies, refuse to admit women as members (Baum, 2003, p. 1).

Reference List


