

# **Women in Golf: The Players, the History, and the Future of the Sport**

*David L. Hudson, Jr.*

**Praeger**

# WOMEN IN GOLF

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THE PLAYERS, THE HISTORY, AND THE  
FUTURE OF THE SPORT

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DAVID L. HUDSON, JR.

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To the memory of my beloved grandmother,  
Rose Kostadin Krusa,  
who loved the great game of golf  
with all of her beautiful soul and spirit.



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— CHAPTER I —

GOLF'S ORIGINS

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It has been truthfully said that of all games, golf is the most beneficial and enjoyable for women.

—F.W. Crane<sup>1</sup>

Women can play golf and play it well. It does not impose any tax upon their systems, but provides them with a simple, healthful, open-air exercise.

—The *New York Times*<sup>2</sup>

It is, moreover, a picturesque game, and here it appeals to women, who have fallen victimization to its fascinations by the thousands.

—F. Johnston Roberts<sup>3</sup>

“It consists of putting little balls into little holes with instruments very ill adapted to this purpose.”<sup>4</sup> This popular adage beautifully describes the game of golf, a maddeningly frustrating but eminently rewarding game that is played by millions all over the world. Given the obsessive natures of many of its ardent admirers, one might think that the origins of golf would be settled historical fact. Such is not the case, as the origins of golf remain a mystery disputed by historians from different countries. The *Chicago Tribune* in 1892 reported that “the origin of golf is hazy and uncertain.”<sup>5</sup> Some say it comes from ancient Rome. Others say it comes from Japan, France, the Netherlands, China, or Scotland. “Like some complex jigsaw puzzle with many of the key pieces missing, its early history remains vague and incomplete,” writes Dale Concannon in his *Golf: The Early Days*.<sup>6</sup>

In Rome, soldiers often played a game called *paganica*, which involved hitting a leather ball with a bent stick. Others point to the English game

cambucca, or cambuc. This game involved a wooden ball hit with a curved club. King Edward III issued a proclamation in 1363 ordering “able-bodied men” on their days of rest to play sport with their bows and arrows and forbade “football” and “cambuc.” The French played a game called *jeu de mail*, which involved a wooden ball hit down “fairways.” Called pall mall in England, some historians claim it to be a progenitor of modern golf. Still others point to the Dutch game of *spel metten kolve*, or *kolf*. Traced back to 1297, the game involved hitting a ball over long distances, often icy canals, on 4-hole courses.<sup>7</sup>

Many historians claim the sport originated in Scotland, where many members of the royal family played the game regularly. The game spread rapidly in Scotland to the extent that several monarchs through the years issued bans on golf for fear that it would undermine the country’s defenses because soldiers were playing golf instead of patrolling and providing protection.<sup>8</sup>

King James II banned golf in 1457 when he thought that his subjects were foregoing their archery practice in favor of idly playing golf or football. His edict proclaimed: “futebaw and golf be utterly cryt done and not usyt.”<sup>9</sup> The royal edict ordered the men to practice on archery ranges. Instead, many ignored the edict and continued their obsession with golf—an addiction with which many in the twenty-first century can likely empathize.

The game was played by royalty and common folk on an increasing number of courses. Golf courses were built in Edinburgh, St. Andrews, Perth, Montrose, Leven, Dornoch, Banff, and Aberdeen.

King James IV of Scotland played golf even though he had issued an edict in 1491 banning the practice. Allegedly, some barons convinced James to give the game a try. Finally, the king relented and took a few swings in 1502. He could not believe his ineptness at this “ridiculous sport” but kept trying to improve his swing. Concannon writes: “Soon he was hooked—the golfing bug had bitten him and James IV became an enthusiastic convert.”<sup>10</sup>

James IV bought golfing clothes and spent an entire February one year playing the game and hunting. He introduced the game to England on his visits to the royal court of Henry VIII. One of Henry VIII’s wives, Catherine of Aragon, apparently had some connection to the game. She wrote: “I shall not so often hear from the King. . . . I thank God I am busy with the golfe.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately for her, Catherine could not give Henry a child and she was discarded for another wife, Anne Boleyn.

Most historians recognize Mary, Queen of Scots, as the first woman to have played golf regularly. She played both golf and pall mall. One historian writes that “she even played golf on the links close to the Fifth of Forth.”<sup>12</sup> Another writes that “she played at golf and pall-mall.”<sup>13</sup> A mysterious and tragic historical figure, Mary lost her life in part to her love of golf.

Mary learned the game at an early age and played it after she was moved to France as a young girl to marry the French Dauphin, Francois, at the age

of fifteen. While in France, Mary played the game regularly with French students called cadets who were forced to carry her clubs. This led to the term caddy. After the Dauphin died, Mary returned to Scotland. As she was the rightful heir to the throne of England, she was considered a threat to her cousin, Queen Elizabeth of England.

Mary married Lord Darnley, who later was murdered. Some speculated for years that Mary was involved in the murder of her husband. Years later, her cousin, the Earl of Moray, testified against her, saying that she had played golf only a few days after Lord Darnley's death. Historian Alison Weir writes: "Mary's enemies were later to make up all kinds of scurrilous tales about her visit to Seton. . . [including] playing golf and pall-mall."<sup>14</sup>

Nearly all accounts of golf history deal with men, not women. Elinor Nickerson notes in her book *Golf: A Women's History*: "All during the time from the days of Mary, Queen of Scots, to the close of the eighteenth century, a period of more than 200 years, women are not mentioned in connection with the history of the game of golf. The usual accounts of the development of golf make it appear as though no female ever placed a hand on a golf club to take a swing at a golf ball."<sup>15</sup> However, women have loved the game of golf as much as, if not more than, men have. One American newspaper reported near the end of the nineteenth century: "Golfing women are said to be more enthusiastic over their favorite game than half the men who play on the 'links.'"<sup>16</sup>

Scottish fishwives played golf at Musselburgh in 1810 in a tournament for a first prize of "creel and a skull"—a fish basket with handkerchiefs.<sup>17</sup> The women received a tournament only after they pointed out that the men had one and they did not. Nickerson reports that some women golfers were responsible in 1842 for a significant change to the official rules of golf—that a golfer could lift and drop a ball without penalty when it was not playable. She notes that "surely it is reasonable to assume that women's interest in the game and in this particular rule sprang from something more than mere spectator participation."<sup>18</sup>

British women formed their own golf clubs in the 1860s. The St. Andrews Ladies Golf Club formed in 1867, and other clubs formed a few years later. As more and more women played, they desired more formal competition—a chance to test their skills against others. Enter Issette Pearson. Rhonda Glenn writes: "It was Miss Pearson's dedication that launched women's golf down an often treacherous path to the glory and riches that await today's best players."<sup>19</sup>

Pearson, an excellent player in her own right, organized a meeting at the Grand Hotel on London's Trafalgar Square in April 1893 of several different ladies' golf clubs. The result was the LGU (Ladies Golf Union), which eventually established the first national championship. In June 1893 the women held the first championship at the Royal Lytham and St. Anne's Golf Course.

## LADY MARGARET SCOTT

The winner of the inaugural British championship was a young 18-year-old woman named Lady Margaret Scott. The daughter of John Scott, the third Earl of Eldon, or Lord Eldon, Margaret learned the game at a young age in Gloucester. Her father had “an almost perfect course” at Stowell Park.<sup>20</sup> She learned the game naturally, picking it up much better than her sister Louisa. Margaret was such a fine golfer that she had won a tournament at the Cheltenham club against men players.<sup>21</sup>

The tournament at Royal Lytham was played in a match-play format, which meant that players matched up one on one, advancing to successive rounds. In the final round Lady Margaret Scott faced Issette Pearson. Lady Margaret was simply too good for Pearson, winning by a score of 7 holes up with 5 to play, or 7 and 5. “Following Lady Margaret’s win, her father made her victory speech for her,” Glenn reports.<sup>22</sup> Lady Margaret won the next two British championships as well. In 1894, she faced Mrs. Ernest Catterall, an excellent player in her own right. Glenn reports that an unknown poet wrote the following poem about the encounter:

E. Catterall would scatter all,  
If in the fateful draw  
She had not got the champion Scott  
Who is a gowfer braw.<sup>23</sup>

Lady Margaret won the match 6 and 5 to advance to the finals for a rematch against Pearson. This time Pearson played tougher, but Lady Margaret still prevailed by a score of 3 and 2.

In 1895, Lady Margaret made it a three-peat by winning the championship—this time held in Ireland—over Miss Emma Lythgoe 5 and 4. Truly, no one could stop the “gowfer braw.” Lady Margaret never played another British championship. She married a Swiss gentleman and moved there. She won three Swiss Open championships as Lady Hamilton Russell.<sup>24</sup>

Some of the reported scores of Lady Margaret shooting in the 70s even with the more primitive equipment of those days compel the question of how she would compare to great golfers that came after her. Such comparisons are difficult, if not downright impossible. But there was no doubt that Lady Margaret was a superb golfer. Gillian Kirkwood, an executive council member of the LGU, says:

She could certainly hold her own in men’s company, and in 1892 she won a championship at Cheltenham where the rest her opponents were men, and made the best scratch score, a 70 at Bath in similar company. There would be no Ladies tees in those days. Famous golfers such as Cecil Leitch, Joyce Wethered, Glenna Collett, Jessie Valentine, Babe Zaharias, right up to the present day with Annika Sorenstam have all played more and won more. Lady Margaret’s era was very short-lived,

and the events that she played in were very few. However when she did play, she won everything, and was only ever once down in a match... against Mrs Ryder-Richardson in the semi-final at Portrush in 1895, and even then she turned it around and won, and went on to win the British Championship for the third consecutive time.<sup>25</sup>

Kirkwood explains further:

In those early days of ladies' golf, most men really did not believe that golf was a game for women, and it was Lady Margaret Scott who changed their minds. Her youth, beauty, flawless swing and winning results caught the imagination of the time. Women realized that they could leave the putting greens, play golf on long courses and aspire to the high standards of Lady Margaret Scott. In those early days of ladies' golf, Lady Margaret Scott was truly a champion.<sup>26</sup>

The golf craze continued in Britain among both sexes, as the sport grew in popularity. One report referred to the "death of lawn tennis" in England because more and more people were turning to golf instead.<sup>27</sup>

## GOLF IN AMERICA

Golf also took off in America—among both men and women. The *Washington Post* reported in 1890 that "some girls are anxious to learn golf, because they are really fond of sport and exercise; others, because it gives them a chance to show off a natty suit."<sup>28</sup> Early descriptions of the game focus more on the attire of female golfers than their actual prowess—or lack thereof—of the new game. Those in so-called high society found it fashionable to try their hand at this new and exciting game. The *New York Times* reported in 1891 that "an outdoor pastime which appears to be gaining favor in this country, and especially in the vicinity of New York, is the Scottish national game of golf."<sup>29</sup> Three golf clubs formed in New York—the Yonkers, the Meadowbrook, and the Shinnecock Hills Club. The reported members of the club were all males.<sup>30</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* reported the next year in 1892 that "golf is the coming game."<sup>31</sup> The paper noted that many young women had become "golf widows before their honeymoon was barely over" because of the addictiveness of this new sport or pastime.

The great English author and poet Rudyard Kipling introduced the game of golf in Vermont when he visited in 1893. "Mr. Kipling's introduction of the game into this country may possibly induce some of our American writers, many of whom are fond of sports, to take it up," wrote one newspaper.<sup>32</sup> Baltimore College considered introducing the game to its young women as part of a new physical education program after one of its directors saw the popularity of many sports, including golf, among young English women students.<sup>33</sup>

It became apparent that women were not to be denied the ability to play golf. Their passion for the game was equal to that of men. The *New York Times* explained in 1894: "Golf is not limited to any particular class of individuals. Ladies and children can play the game as well as men, and in nearly all the golf clubs which have been recently organized the women show as keen an interest as the men themselves."<sup>34</sup>

In 1894, a group of women in Morristown, New Jersey, organized for themselves a golf club—the first of its kind in the United States. The *New York Times* reported that it is "the only golf club in this country that has been completely organized and brought to a point of assured success by ladies."<sup>35</sup> The women were the members of the so-called Morris County Golf Club and were the officers of the club, with the men serving in advisor capacity. "It is offered and run exclusively by the gentler sex, who have proven liberal, discreet and sportsmanlike in all of the rulings."<sup>36</sup> Only when a woman agreed to "put up" a man was he allowed to enjoy the privileges of the club.

In October 1894 eight women at the Morris County Golf Club competed in the first tournament for the grand prize of a \$1,000 silver cup made by Tiffany & Co. The eight competitors played 7 holes. Miss Annie Howland Ford navigated the 7 holes with a score of 48 to capture the cup. The scores ranged from 48 to 72.<sup>37</sup> Probably the best player at the Morris County Club was Mrs. William Shippen, who set a club record with a 78 over 18 holes in September 1897.

A few days later, fifteen women competed at the Morris County Golf Club over the 7-hole course. Miss Ford did not play this time but served as the official scorer. This time the winning score was turned in by Mrs. William Shippen, who carded a 54 to win by one stroke over Mrs. Arthur Dean and Miss Lois Raymond. It was Raymond who brought laughter to those in attendance when she "was moved to express her mind freely and firmly by ejaculating 'Isn't it mean' when the club which ought to have sent the ball far out into the field merely grazed the top, moving it but a few inches along the teeing ground."<sup>38</sup>

Women also began playing at Southampton, Long Island, and at the Meadow Brooks Country Club in New York. At Shinnecock, Long Island, women played in a handicap tournament in late October 1894. Miss Sarah Livingstone won the event.<sup>39</sup> In May 1895, it was announced that a women's club tournament would be held in Staten Island. The game became very popular among men and women in Newport, Rhode Island. The *New York Times* reported that "golf is becoming a universal sport here this season."<sup>40</sup> Mrs. W. Butler Duncan, Jr., won the President's Cup at the Newport links in an 1895 tournament with a 9-hole score of 67.<sup>41</sup>

Still the game was often dominated by those in high society. "Golf has not become a favorite in America and is still taken up more or less as a fad among the ultra-fashionable."<sup>42</sup>

Slowly, the game spread across the country. The *Los Angeles Times* even ran a piece in 1895 entitled "Athletic Grandmamas," telling readers that many a grandmother had taken to the golf links and other athletic ventures.<sup>43</sup>

The continued interest in the game among women caused the United States Golf Association to hold its first national tournament. In 1896, twenty-five women competed at the Morris County Golf Club in Morristown, New Jersey, for the coveted prize. While Mrs. Charles S. Brown had won a similar event at Meadowbrook, that event was "hastily arranged" and had "barely a dozen competitors."<sup>44</sup> The 1896 championship was "really the first tournament for ladies managed on a genuine championship level."<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the sport had taken seize in America by 1896. In his piece "The Golf Season of 1896" F.W. Crane wrote for the *New York Times*:

The golf season which has just closed has been the most successful in more respects than one that America has ever seen. The growing popularity of the game would naturally lead to such a result, and it is not at all improbable that each succeeding year will exceed the other in the excellence of its golf and enthusiasm for the sport. In a wonderfully short space of time this ancient Scottish game has leaped into the front rank of America's outdoor achievements, and if any sport-loving individual still entertains doubt as to the solid hold already acquired by golf let him visit some of the clubs in the vicinity of New York on any legal holiday or Saturday afternoon and he will find the club course teeming with players, ladies enjoying the invigorating exercise as well men.<sup>46</sup>



## — CHAPTER 2 —

### EARLY GREATS OF THE GAME

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In the early days, the best golfers came from Great Britain—England, Scotland, and Ireland. Golf first took off in this part of the world. The best men and women players came from these countries.

“It’s similar to the development of men’s golf in Great Britain as compared to the development of men’s golf in the United States that a number of women in England, Ireland and Scotland began playing golf before it was popularized in the United States,” says Rhonda Glenn.

The British Open Ladies Amateur, in fact, began in 1893, two years before the United States Golf Association conducted the U.S. Women’s Amateur, the first national championship here for women. Women in Great Britain also founded the Ladies Golf Union, the governing body for women’s golf in that country, shortly before the 1893 British Ladies Open Amateur. This ruling body, although it first had men as officers, fostered women’s golf in that country and has conducted the British Ladies Open Amateur ever since.<sup>1</sup>

While the best players still resided in England and Scotland, Americans took to golf like fish to water. British champion Henry James Whigham ventured across the Atlantic Ocean in 1895 to observe America and its growing obsession with golf. He commented:

There is no question that the growth of golf here has been much more rapid than during a similar space of time in England, and some of the best players who have learned the game on their home links within the past three years have attained an excellent degree of perfection. . . . The American golfers take hold of the game with an energy and enthusiasm not noticeable on the other side, and quickly attain an able game, if not in all respects a finished game.<sup>2</sup>