Xu, A. (2026) Beyond the Fairway: Access, Equity, and Inclusion in the New Golf Economy. *The Journal of Young Innovators, 2*(1). 50-76

Abstract

In the past decade alone, golf has become a multi-billion-dollar global industry. Despite its expansion in estimated value and entrance into more countries and regions throughout the world, the sport continues to be plagued by a history of exclusionary practices. This article therefore examines multiple barriers to golf along the lines of socioeconomic status, race, gender, and ability. By analyzing literature from sports psychology, disability studies, sociology, and labor economics, this article explores how a lack of social and financial capital, geographic location, dress codes, representation, and accessibility issues all render the contemporary audience for golf rather narrow. This discussion, however, is not just characterized by problems, but also possibilities. It considers how new innovations in entertainment golf venues, adaptive technologies, and the more widespread appearance of public courses have functioned to make golf more inclusive along these lines. The article concludes by considering how these intervention points may be further leveraged to make the sport inclusive in both name and action.

Introduction: Golf's Mixed History of Growth and Exclusion

The golf industry has undergone a significant transformation since the game was invented in 1457. Back then, the game consisted of nothing more than clunky wooden clubs and makeshift balls on the rolling greenery of the Scottish Lowlands. This sport, which back then, was called "gowf," gained subsequent traction, especially among the Scottish nobility, as King James IV became a golfer in the 16th century (Flannery & Leech, 2004). In the centuries that followed, the

rules of the game became more standardized, allowing it to be played in a variety of settings and to extend well beyond the borders of Scotland (Keiser University College of Golf, 2021). Today, golf has become a multi-billion-dollar industry currently valued at $88 billion (Beresford, 2024). Part of the driving force behind the recent uptick in these figures stems from the increased popularity it witnessed during COVID-19-related lockdowns. During this time, many people searched for an outlet to occupy their time in a way that was still considered safe amidst social distancing protocols. Golf appeared to meet this need, and that is why there was a 13.9 increase in the number of rounds played nationwide during the period spanning from 2019 to 2020–at the onset of the pandemic (Rogers, 2023).

Yet, while golf proved an attractive outlet for some, it was not accessible to all. Golf's early associations as the preferred pastime of the elite have, in many ways, endured throughout the ages, as the sport has largely catered to the wealthy. Exclusive courses accompanied by high annual membership fees and extensive waitlists placed golf financially out of reach for many. In addition to the associated cost, there was also the matter of inclusivity and representation to consider. Historically, the average golfer was a White, upper-class man. In fact, statistics prove that this golf archetype prevails, as 2015 data shows that 80% of golfers identified as White and 77% identified as male (Rosselli & Singer, 2015). This demographic becomes even further narrowed when one considers that the vast majority of these individuals are able-bodied, despite the fact that people with disabilities comprise nearly 20% of the U.S. population (Shorulski, 2018).

Concerns for the sports accessibility to people from diverse backgrounds is the focus of this article. By reviewing scholarly literature on the topic, this article explores the primary barriers to making the sport more inclusive. The next section outlines the methodological

approach for this article, including a detailed description of the selection process for inclusion. The discussion that follows is composed of four interdependent sections dedicated to exploring how the dimensions of socioeconomic status, race, gender, and ability have historically contributed to golf's exclusionary status. Embedded within these discussions, however, is an examination of how new technology and data-driven innovations are changing the social landscape of the sport. Identifying such innovations as promising new mechanisms for making the sport more universally accessible has both financial and social implications. This article therefore concludes by considering how these innovations may be scaled up through concerted efforts to render golf more broadly inclusive to all.

Materials & Methods

This article employs a comprehensive literature review to examine four types of structural barriers that have historically precluded access to golf: socioeconomic status, race, gender, and ability. A literature review allowed for drawing interdisciplinary connections across the disciplines of sports sociology, disability studies, and labor economics. The focus here was on the connections between these areas of study rather than on outcomes or numerical results, as would be consistent with other forms of reviews, like systematic reviews or meta-analytic reviews.

Sources were identified through targeted searches in multiple academic databases, such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and PubMed. To perform this search, the researcher used keywords like *golf, sport, accessibility, exclusion, race,* and *disability*. Additional sources were gathered from backward citation tracking of foundational texts and forward citation tracking of frequently cited works. In addition to articles from peer-reviewed journals, this study also

included government documents, legal mandates, and industry data from national associations and organizations to supply context for the findings from the academic literature.

For a source to be included in this review, it needed to meet the following criteria: (1) it provided insights into barriers to participation in golf; (2) it explored issues of access, representation, or policy; (3) it examined new technologies geared towards promoting inclusion. As for exclusion criteria, articles were typically excluded from consideration (1) if their scope lay with coaching or strategy; (2) if the content qualified as an opinion piece or promotional materials; (3) or if the article was outdated or no longer applicable to the current state of the sport.

Discussion

The Financial Toll of Inclusion

At present, golf is largely inaccessible to the average person. With the median household income in 2021 reported to be around $70,784 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), becoming a member of a private golf club is unfeasible for many families. The average private golf club in the United States costs $16,000 in initiation fees to join and $7,680 in annual dues, meaning that for many Americans, golf-related expenses would constitute approximately 30% of their annual household income (Club Management Association of America, 2021). These figures do not even reflect the high-priced equipment necessary for participation in the sport. Golf equipment retailers like Next Round, for instance, estimate that a new full set of golf clubs and bag can range anywhere from $1500 to $3500 (2025), with used sets still costing anywhere from $600 to $1800. The golf equipment market is only growing, with current valuation placed at $17.2 billion and the projected market to be valued at $23 billion by 2032 (Persistence Market Research, n.d.). While some of this growth may be attributed to growing numbers of new players, a modest amount is

nonetheless attributed to rising prices–prices that continue to edge out many low- to middle-income families.

While the clubs alone can be enough to bar participation in the sport, many golf clubs have a strict dress code policy, which may exclude individuals from certain socioeconomic positions from participating. Many clubs require collared shirts, Bermuda shorts, and other non-casual forms of attire, which the average person would not typically already have stocked in their wardrobe. This means buying golf-appropriate attire, thus creating an added expense for participation in the sport. Such dress codes have been the focus of scrutiny for scholars like Drs. Paul Widdop and Dan Parnell (2016), who argue that they serve as an implicit mechanism of exclusion, quietly preempting participation for some individuals. The authors write that golf clubs' "firmly enforced attire and etiquette, which are hard to decipher for those lacking in the prerequisite cultural credentials," creates "symbolic boundaries of exclusion." With regard to the codes of conduct and rules of etiquette within these spaces, the authors touch on how such exclusion may span generations. For instance, if one grew up with little exposure to these spaces and their behavioral norms, they would have no way of knowing how to comport themselves in this exclusive club. In many instances, this lack of knowledge and the social transgressions that resulted would create the symbolic boundaries of exclusion that Waddop and Purnell describe.

The multi-generational aspect of exclusion from the sport on financial grounds is also evident in the fact that many country clubs operate on legacy-based and referral systems. With legacy membership systems, existing members are able to "pass down" or extend their membership to family members. This practice therefore gatekeeps club access from "outsiders," and quite literally keeps membership within the family (Kendall, 2008). Similarly, referral systems work to

screen or filter out external applicants to the club by requiring that existing members nominate, vet, and vouch for prospective ones. In this way, the membership selection system for many country clubs mixes financial capital (i.e., possessing sufficient disposable income) with social capital (i.e., access to social networks that provide opportunities and legitimacy) (Bourdieu, 1986), as it requires that one have an extensive network of connections to gain entree into the club.

The financial toll of golf has only compounded in recent years, particularly following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As people searched for alternative outlets for recreational activities–specifically, ones that allowed them to adhere to social distancing protocols–they frequently found themselves turning to golf. In fact, the latter half of 2020 saw a 12% increase in the number of rounds played and 2.5% increase in the number of new players to the game. This, in turn, translated to anywhere from a 10-20% increase in the number of new country club memberships (National Golf Foundation, 2025). To respond to this growing demand while maintaining their exclusive status, many of these country clubs made significant changes to pricing and access. As Sullivan (2025) has observed, during this time period, many clubs in the northeastern U.S. increased annual dues and extended their waitlist by three to five years to account for the influx of new players. Consequently, even families that could have afforded memberships prior to the pandemic were now excluded from accessing such spaces.

Outside of the material cost of playing golf in the form of equipment expenses and membership fees, there are immaterial costs as well. Free time represents one of the greatest immaterial costs associated with the sport. As studies have shown, many low-income jobs are often typified by an irregular work schedule, making planning for recreational activity over

multiple hours unfeasible (Enchautegui, 2013). For these individuals, it becomes increasingly implausible for one to find five to six consecutive hours in their day to play a full round of golf.

Furthermore, by not participating in this activity, individuals with low socioeconomic status are potentially precluding opportunities for upward mobility and solidifying their current position. Golf has been well-established as a site for business deal brokering. From CEOs of Fortune 500 companies to national leaders, evidence of the golf course as a site for deal-making is plentiful. In an article published in the journal *Labour Economics*, Izumi et al. (2024) found that male CEOs who play golf engage in more business with other male CEOs who also play golf. The problem with this, however, is that using golf as a networking channel like this concentrates advantages within a very small group. If one is unable to enter these spaces due to financial or time constraints, they inferably miss out on such advantages, which in turn lessens their future prospects.

However, many new companies on the golf scene are disrupting the sport's historically exclusionary dynamic. With the rise of outdoor social driving ranges and indoor bars with new golf simulation technology, entertainment golf venues like Topgolf and Drive Shack have made golf more accessible to a broader audience (Soulé, 2022). These outlets, which provide a low-cost entry point into the sport, were made possible as a result of the first radar launch monitor in the mid-2000s. While the traditional golf experience revolves around skill, exclusivity, and time, entertainment golf can better reach newcomers to the sport and expand participation for those of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Topgolf's own reports substantiate this claim: Topgolf sees approximately 30 million customers annually, with around half being new to golf. It furthermore works to convert these new players into loyal followers of the sport. Out of the 15 million new

players, around 12 million express interest in playing out on the course (Topgolf Callaway Brands, 2024).

Undoubtedly, these alternative golf venues have made the sport more financially tenable, yet there remain other significant barriers to access, primarily along the lines of race and gender.

Race, Gender & the Reproduction of Privilege

In its over-500-year history, the individuals playing golf have, in many ways, remained the same: they are primarily affluent, White, and male. It is important, however, that one considers how race and gender intersect with other variables, such as the socioeconomic status described previously. As discussed above, some of the most exclusive private golf courses and country clubs are accompanied by high membership fees. U.S. Census data (2023) shows, however, that the average incomes for Hispanic households was $57, 981 as of 2023, and for Black Americans it was even lower, at $48, 297. When compared to the median incomes for Asian households ($101,418) and White ones ($77, 999), one can see how both race and SES function to make many golf spaces accessible to only a select few.

From the standpoint of gender, one can also see how this affects income and thus the amount of money available to spend on hobbies like golf. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, for the 2024-2025 fiscal year, women only earned 84-85 cents for every dollar that men did. When one considers race and gender in relation to socioeconomic status, these discrepancies become even more pronounced. The Economic Policy Institute (2025), for instance, reports that Black women only earned 70 cents for every dollar earned by White men. In thinking about how race, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect, it becomes clear why a costly sport such as golf is dominated by players who are generally both male and White.

Even if one possessed sufficient financial capital to enter this space, the lack of diversity inherent within may prevent their retention within the sport. If one does not see themselves reflected in the other golfers on the fairways, they—as a racial or ethnic minority—may perceive that they do not belong in this arena. This is why Sherwood (2012) identifies country clubs as symbolically demarcating this line between who belongs and who does not. For the author, they are a symbol of racial privilege—of Whiteness. For much of the 20th century, these boundaries were explicitly enforced through legal mechanisms. For instance, Jim Crow laws prevented Black Americans from utilizing the same public spaces as White Americans, golf courses included. Yet, even after the Jim Crow laws were struck down with the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the referral-only nature of many of these programs informally policed who could participate and who could not (Cussmano, 2017). So, even in the absence of formal prohibitions against who could enter these clubs, different golf institutions had developed means for retaining a primarily White athlete base.

One can cite anomalies or exceptions to this rule, however. Tiger Woods, who is both Black and Asian American, is a high-profile case in point. Additionally, golf's increasingly global reach has enabled it to develop an ever-growing fanbase in many Asian countries, particularly Korea, Japan, and China (Asian Golf Industry Federation, n.d.). A noteworthy point from the household income totals presented above, however, is that Asian Americans were at the top of this SES stratification (even about White households), and they constitute the largest group of non-White participants in golf in the United States (Rosselli, 2011). These two points of consideration, when taken together, would seem to suggest that there is more diversity within golf institutions than previously assumed, as this particular demographic can presumably afford the high costs of annual fees, equipment, and so on. However, as Rosselli (2011) notes,

representation at the level of participation, that is, within local country clubs and golf courses, does not necessarily translate to a pronounced influence over the sport's operations and overall culture. The author goes on to point out that because the leadership and management for these private clubs, its tournament organizers, and professional commentators are by and large White, this maintains the concentration of power within a small network of individuals. The presence of Asian or other non-White athletes in the sport does not significantly undermine the existing structures and norms that shape the sport. The inclusion of non-White players thus becomes what some scholars refer to as tokenism, where diversity is more symbolic than functional (Kanter, 1977).

In sum, throughout its more than 500-year history, golf has not been available to people of color, women, Jewish people, and several other minority groups. In fact, the Professional Golf Association (PGA) of America had a "Caucasian-only" clause in place until 1961, which limited who could compete and coach (Anicich et al., 2021). The good news is that many professional golf organizations are fully acknowledging the sport's complicated past. The United Golfer's Association, for instance, states that "The game of golf has long been celebrated for its tradition—but buried in that tradition is a painful legacy of exclusion." But acknowledgment alone is not enough; such recognition must translate into measurable action. That is why many golf course planners are reconsidering how location continues to segregate the sport. Since golf courses require large amounts of land and water, they are often located in affluent, suburban, predominantly White areas, where these resources are plentiful and where housing tends to be less dense than urban centers. Clubs that are located in areas with higher percentages of people of color incur the same costs, but pass them on to the end consumer. As Fitzgerald (2021) notes, these clubs tend to have "more barriers to entry—such as high greens fees and dress codes—than

clubs in less diverse areas." What this means is that the presence of a club in a certain area does not equate to accessibility, as financial and normative barriers still serve to exclude certain groups.

One method for overcoming such barriers involves creating public outlets. By using public government funds to create golf courses in areas with diverse resident populations, more individuals can access the sport, as government subsidies can ensure that the associated fees for play remain minimal. Further measures may be taken to introduce the sport to a new subset of players by partnering with municipal governments' parks and recreations departments, many of which are already engaged in community outreach programs. Additionally, golf can be introduced into the physical education curriculum within public schools. When golf is reserved for an after-school extracurricular activity, it may attract only those already familiar with the sport. However, by embedding it into existing public school physical education, educators can help to ensure that the sport is accessible to students who may have otherwise never come into contact with it. Doing this will disrupt the legacy-based nature of the sport and destabilize the formation of in-groups that pass down from generation to generation.

To target discriminatory practices in the private sector, several changes could also be made. Firstly, confusing invitation-only membership policies must be replaced with transparent application processes. By making these policies open-access and straightforward, one family's historical involvement in the sport will not preclude others from joining. Less formal or explicit exclusionary measures should also be investigated, starting with dress codes. While dress codes themselves are not inherently discriminatory, they work to inadvertently reinforce class-based and racialized notions of professionalism. Given that 71% of the general public believe dress codes are a problem for those looking to take up the game (National Golf Foundation, 2023), this

makes for a clear, actionable intervention point. By leveraging these intervention points, golf can be reconceptualized as a method for altering–rather than perpetuating–racial and gender inequities.

Issues of Ability, Access & Reasonable Accommodations

There is a final consideration that might exclude some individuals from participating in the sport: the physical demands necessitated by swinging or putting a club and then walking long distances to retrieve a ball. Regardless of one's race, gender, or socioeconomic status, golf requires that one perform certain motions, which often hinder people with disabilities' inclusion in the sport. When one considers how many people worldwide have some sort of disability, it becomes clear that the group of individuals potentially prevented from accessing the sport is sizable. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 1.3 billion people worldwide are living with a disability, suggesting that disability is not only common but a key part of human diversity. From mobility issues that affect one's ability to balance or stand, to chronic or neurological conditions that hasten fatigue, to vision impairments that impede ball tracking or distance gauging, extensive walking, long hours of play, and constant sun exposure often make the game impractical for people with a wide range of disabilities.

Disabled golfers may experience many different barriers that inhibit their ability to participate. Inaccessible tees, which require frequently bending over and fine motor control for placement, greens, bunkers, and pathways that are not wheelchair friendly, and steep and uneven terrain that prevent the use of walkers, canes, and arm braces make the course and rules of play difficult to navigate from these individuals (Barbookles, 2003). In responding to the mobility constraints accompanying golf, many critics argue that most, if not all, clubs have motorized golf carts available (Barbookles, 2003). Even though these may assist persons with disabilities in

covering long distances, they still require control over one's arms and legs to safely operate the vehicle, and sufficient sensory awareness (i.e., adequate vision and hearing) to detect pedestrians and other vehicles. These requirements alone may exclude a large group of persons with disabilities.

Others point to the increasing availability of adaptive or assistive technology as evidence of the sport's move towards including people with disabilities. Examples of such technologies include single-rider golf carts that allow players to remain seated while swinging, modified clubs of various shaft lengths, grips, or weights, and prosthetic devices designed to support the player's posture or balance (Rimmer & Marques, 2012; Sherrill, 2004). Other technological innovations geared catering towards persons with differing abilities include ball-placement devices and the use of simulated or computer-assisted visual guides (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). Adaptive technologies such as these represent a step in the right direction, but they alone do not amount to true inclusivity. To begin, just because these technologies exist does not mean they will be available on all courses, nor does it guarantee they will be properly advertised so players are aware of them.

Outside of the physical barriers that exist, similar to the case of women and people of color, social barriers in the form of a lack of representation may deter people with disabilities from attempting to enter the sport. As discussed in the previous section, golf has historically been associated with wealth, masculinity, and able bodies–all of which create powerful symbolic signals as to the "type" of person who belongs in this space. The archetype of the ideal golfer is further reinforced through media representations, which similarly portray them as young, male, athletic, and able-bodied. In light of the narrative that has been constructed for the sport, "Disabled golfers often feel that they have to justify and defend their right to play when

attending golf courses, particularly when playing at courses they have not previously visited" (Robb, 1999). This begs the question, "What can, or is, being done to create a space that is physically and symbolically accessible to people with disabilities?"

Formally, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 prohibited the exclusion of disabled people on the basis of tradition, convenience, or aesthetics, and it made it illegal to fail to make reasonable accommodations. Additionally, the ADA prompted changes to the physical design and layout of golf courses like accessible clubhouses and improved cart paths. Lastly, the ADA requires golf courses to allow service dogs on the course and in the clubhouse, greatly increasing accessibility for individuals with visual impairments, PTSD, epilepsy, and other conditions requiring service animals.

Another formal intervention involves dedicated training programs for golf coaches and staff. Studies show that "physical educators are unsure how to teach golf to disabled people" (Fry et al., 2017). Respectful language has been a key part of the disability rights movements within the United States. Coaches and staff should be familiarized with the harmful effects of words like "handicapped," "cripple," and so on. Instead, they should be introduced to person-first language like "golfer with a disability" or "person with a disability" that places the person first and their disability second (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Therefore, these individuals are not defined by their disabilities and offered an alternative means of identification, such as through their affinity for golf.

As for promoting diversity through representation, tournaments like the United States Adaptive Open provide a global platform for demonstrating the potential of golfers with disabilities, while also combating the social stigma that comes with assumptions of what an average golfer should look like. Disability and sports scholars argue that this visibility is critical

for challenging a deficit-based view of athletes with disabilities that focuses on what they cannot do rather than what they can accomplish as legitimate competitors. Brittain (2004), for example, claims that spotlighting performance over impairment through tournaments like this reframe disability as compatible with the sport and redefines current cultural understandings of athleticism.

The Future of Golf: From Diverse Venues to Increased Representation

When considering the different sections of this review side-by-side, it becomes clear that there is no single barrier that has led to golf's exclusionary practices; rather, the sport's current reputation as such is the result of several intersecting financial, racial, gendered, and able-bodied norms. Although progress has been made regarding the emergence of affordable entertainment golf venues like Topgolf and Drive Shack, private golf clubs still boast high fees and preclude membership through the use of legacy-based programs. Creating more public golf courses would help to alleviate some of these income-driven barriers, and would work towards undermining the racial exclusion of the sport as well, provided that these golf courses were established in more diverse urban centers.

Expanding notions of representation with respect to race, gender, and ability will also be key to realizing inclusion initiatives. It is not enough to showcase a single athlete of color or female player; these individuals need to be invited to participate in decision-making processes across all levels of the sport. Extending leadership roles to diverse athletes will prevent these gestures from being seen as mere tokenism. As for representation, highly publicized platforms like the U.S. Adaptive Open have ideally highlighted what golfers of differing abilities can do within the sport, as opposed to what they cannot do. However, such tournaments are few and far between or do not receive commensurate media coverage, both of which represent two areas for

improvement. Additionally, using inclusive language from the greenways to press conferences will mirror this commitment to inclusivity so that players, organizers, and commentators are both "walking the walk and talking the talk."

Once these changes are implemented, the fairways may look a bit different and so might the people who traverse them. This transformation, however, should not be regarded as a departure from golf's centuries-old traditions, but an evolution of them–an evolution that better aligns the sport with contemporary commitments to access, equity, and inclusion. By overcoming the structural barriers outlined in this review, and reconsidering who can help alter the trajectory of the sport from here on, golf's commitment to broader participation can move from symbolic inclusion to meaningful and genuine inclusion.

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