Entry type: Concept
Entry ID: AWE4907

Women’s Golf in Canberra

Summary

The history of golf in Canberra is as old as the history of the city itself and women’s involvement features almost from the outset.

Details

When the Royal Canberra, Federal and Queanbeyan Golf Clubs were established in the 1920s, Canberra was a small country town with a population between five and six thousand. There was only one picture theatre in town, restaurants and café’s were virtually non-existent and social and ethnic clubs a generation away. Much of the pleasure of playing golf, then and now, came from the social interaction of playing a round and then talking about it afterwards, in the club house. In a town like Canberra, women were as much attracted to golf as were men. Little wonder that they were very keen to form associate relationships with the clubs as early as possible.

In 1926, the Federal Capital Commission constructed a new golf course on a site at Acton and this is where the Canberra Golf Club had its first real home. (The focus of this entry on women’s golf in Canberra will be on their association with this club.) Built on the banks of the Molonglo River and with the river as a constant threat to wayward shots, the course soon earned a reputation as a superb and challenging test of golf. With minor changes only to the layout, but major changes to the clubhouse, it remained the home of Royal Canberra Golf Club (RCGC) until 1962, the “Royal” status having been granted by King George V in 1933. The Walter Burley Griffin plan for Canberra called for the damming of the Molonglo River to form a lake and so it was that, in 1962, with its Acton site due to be submerged in that plan, the Club moved to its present site at Westbourne Woods.

Women have been associates of the RCGC since 1927. Until a new constitution was adopted in 1993, they have been almost entirely self-supporting within the club structure. They had control over their own finances; provided trophies for events and ensured supplies were available for their use in the clubhouse. Very importantly, they were responsible for the club house flower arrangements that were admired by all who visited. The RCGC associates were trailblazers who provided advice and guidance to their sister associates at the Federal Gold Club. Three months after that club formed in May 1933, the Captain and Secretary of the RCGC Miss Eila Fisher and Mrs O’Loughlin, attended a meeting to help women at the Federal Golf Club form their own association. Miss Fisher, who was associate champion for four years running (1929-1933) was dynamic, enthusiastic and fully appraised of all the administrative concerns that needed to be considered. Women golfers in Canberra were excellent fund raisers and administrators. They were also quick to join. In 1927 the total membership of the RCGC was 95, forty of which were associates. In 1930 the number had grown to 322 of whom 117 were associates. In 1962, when the course moved to Westbourne Woods, there were 367 playing associates.

Of course, equal enthusiasm for the game did not equate to equal access to facilities at any of Canberra’s courses until very recently. In 1936 at RCGC associate members had full playing rights and priority over men only on Thursdays. On Saturday mornings they could not play competition and they had to give way to members. Similar rules applied on Saturday afternoons. Attempts to further restrict access were madea at Westbourne Woods in 1970 when the ordinary members passed a motion that on days other than official competition days associates would not be permitted to hit off after 11 am unless accompanied by a member. The associates had been accused of ‘hacking up’ the green and this was their punishment. The women protested strenuously, especially since their subscriptions, at nearly two thirds the cost of the men’s would give them little value if the motion was passed. A compromise was reached but the attitudes reflected the subservient position of the associates, a feature of most, if not all golf clubs at the time. In July 1986 associate members at the RCGC were able to join as ordinary members and permitted to play a women’s competition on Saturdays, which represented a dramatic shift in attitudes. How much of that attitudinal change was enforced as a result of changes in equal opportunity legislation is difficult to gauge. But the fact remained that in 1986, women were no longer ‘associates’ but ‘lady members’. After 1993 all categories of membership were open to both men and women, and all categories of membership have voting rights.

Women who played the course when it was in Acton remembered it fondly. Former champion Fay Gray, loved the sight of the eighteenth hole:

As you came up the rise there was the Albert Hall and the little weatherboard clubhouse waiting to welcome you, The green was almost surrounded by bunkers but there was one clear spot in front. One day I found it with two woods and played a full 7 iron which bounced in front and rolled across the green for me only ever eagle. That is the kind of memory one treasures.

It was clearly a vision of Canberra that the early founders were keen to broadcast. In 1932, the first talking films to promote Canberra were made. The Minister for the Interior of the day recommended a good place to start creating a visual record of Canberra was on women's day at the Canberra links.

The course's location on a flood plane did create problems. Flooding would sometimes make the suspension walking bridge across the river unusable, and so players would have to jump in a car a drive around the other side to finish the course. And the fact that the river has beaches that attracted local sunbathing youths was a problem at times. In the 1940s, a request was made for a plain clothes policeman to be stationed nearby 'to deal with the obscene language of the youths swimming below the 15th tee'.

Outside interference from rowdy youths wasn't the only source of controversy to the RCGC in the early days. An incident that took place in 1932 received national press coverage and was still remembered four years later. The story of a player who appeared on course wearing shorts was read in newspapers as far away as Kalgoorlie and created much local furore. One report stated that after the woman involved vowed never to be so indiscrete again, 'the associates regarded the matter as closed, although the controversy on the subject of women's golfing attire is still raging in Canberra.' When writing about Lady Gowrie's admiration for the uniforms of the Women's League of Health and Beauty in the Australian Women's Weekly some four years later, a journalist observed:

Her Excellency will doubtless encourage and inculcate the principles of the league in Canberra. Any similar exhibitions on the banks of the Molonglo, however, should be beyond sight of the committee of the Royal Canberra Golf Club. A distinguished lady resident of the capital once wore shorts on the links and thereafter sackcloth and ashes.

The move from the Acton site in 1962 was enforced but the links to the history after the move were preserved in the names of the various trophies. The Lady Isaacs Cup donated on 1932 was played for at club championships, as was the Mary Horan Cup, in honour of Mary Horan a long time member of the club who served as honorary secretary for ten years. The Glory Lightly Trophy was named in honour of a member warded life membership herself in 1986. Numerous other trophies have been played for and named in honour of women who have played a significant role in the creation of community in Canberra. Many past players and champions have had careers that indicate their diverse range of skills beyond playing golf. Fay Gray, for instance, was an Oxford graduate who worked with British intelligence during the war. Dr Charlotte Allen, who was club champion in 1993, was a research fellow in Geology at the Australian National University.

As well as serving its members, the RCGC has served elite international competition and is a regular on the ladies circuit. Most recently, it hosted the 2013 Australian Women's Open, and the beauty of the Westbourne Woods site was appreciated by anyone who caught the coverage. And how times have changed; shorts were to be seen in abundance, with no sackcloth or ashes in sight!

Published resources

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Book
Recollections of Women's Golf: GCGC 1926 to 1993, Royal Canberra Golf Club, 1996

The Federal Golf Club story, 1933-1983, Clues, D. S., 1983

Newspaper Article
Talkie Films to Boost Canberra, 1932

Shorts For Women Golfers, 1932

Points of View, 1936

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Created 14 February 2013
Last modified 20 February 2013