

**SPORT  
AND GEOPOLITICS  
PROGRAMME**

**GOLF POLITICS:  
THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE GAME  
IN THE UNITED STATES AND BEYOND**

**Interview with Orin STARN /**

**Professor of cultural anthropology and history at Duke University and author of  
*The Passion of Tiger Woods : an anthropologist reports on golf, race,  
and celebrity scandal (2011)***

Conducted by Estelle BRUN / Research Assistant at IRIS

APRIL 2020

**GEOSTRATEGIC SPORTS OBSERVATORY**



**ON GOLF, SEXISM AND RACISM**

**IRIS:** In your blog on golf and politics<sup>1</sup>, you mentioned the comments of Hank Haney – Tiger Wood’s former coach – which sparked controversy as he seemed to ignore that a major tournament in women’s golf was going to occur and guessed that a “Lee” would win it. This anecdote tackles two important themes in sports and politics: racism and sexism. How is the state of gender equality in golf, compared to other sports? Have you witnessed any particular improvements within the last one or two decades?

**ORIN STARN:** Golf has a peculiar history in relation to gender equality. It was one of the first sports that women were allowed to play, along with tennis, croquet and other more "lady-like" games, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when women were still banned from more "manly" sports, like football and wrestling. It was mostly upper-class white women, to be sure, and yet it was still a change from the past, when sports were viewed entirely as the province of men. The Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) was the first women's professional league in any sport, decades ahead of the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA) or women's soccer leagues. It featured great stars like Babe Didriksen Zaharia, one of the first celebrity female athletes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a precursor to modern figures like Serena Williams and Marta.

But golf has also been full of sexism and discrimination. Augusta National did not allow female members until about ten years ago, despite protests by women's groups. What many experts view as the top course in the United States (US), Pine Valley, still doesn't allow female members, today, in 2020. There is still a boy's club flavour to groups, like the United States Golf Association (USGA), and prize money is far higher on the PGA than the LPGA. When Hank Haney, a very influential figure in the golf world, joked about not even knowing that the U.S. Women's Open was coming up, it threw into relief the failure still to take the women's game seriously. There's still a long way to go in golf, as in virtually all sports, to anything like real gender equality.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://golfpolitics.blogspot.com>

**IRIS: Is the feminisation of golf a specific strategy adopted by the USGA? Why or why not?**

**ORIN STARN:** The USGA has tried to grow the game, with some outreach to people of colour and women. You see commercials with smiling African American girls or Latino boys, learning the game in USGA youth programs. But the USGA has limited influence and the reality is that it is a male-dominated organisation, that has never had a female president and has a kind of old-boy, blue-blooded boardroom mentality.

**IRIS: In your course entitled Sport and Society<sup>2</sup>, you explain that there has been an explosion of Asian golf over the past two or three decades. What explains such surge?**

**ORIN STARN:** Asia has been golf's biggest growth area in recent decades. Japan and Taiwan have golf traditions, dating back to the mid and even early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As far as China, a key reason for this is the way Chinese society has changed. Mao banned golf, and promoted table tennis as the sport of the people. But, with the market-oriented reforms, golf is now a legitimate sport, and the country is producing top players. Learning to play golf is even taught in some Chinese business schools because it's viewed as part of the cultural literacy for doing global business. Thailand is an interesting case, now producing some top golfers. The Tiger Woods factor is in play there, since, of course, his mother is Thai. He has made several trips there to promote his brand and the game.

It's no coincidence that the growth of golf in Asia has paralleled the rapid growth of capitalist market economies since World War II. Golf and business are fellow travellers. Businesspeople have the money to play – for the expensive clubs, golf club memberships. And it's a key in social networking everywhere. You will see Korean executives playing courses like Pinehurst, here, in North Carolina.

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<sup>2</sup> Orin Starn set up an online course centered around the role of sport in society using principles from anthropology and sociology, among other disciplines. The course is free and available to all on Coursera, a global online learning platform. For more information, see <https://www.coursera.org/learn/sports-society#about>.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of golf in Asia is that there is an explosion of South Korean female golf excellence, for a relatively small country of whatever it is – 40, 50 million people – is producing over a third of the top golfer female golfers in the world, and now a lot of top male players have started playing too. There is a whole set of questions. How does one understand the mystery of South Korean golf excellence? South Korean men and women have also excelled in archery and marksmanship, also in games involving aiming. Less than anything genetic, however, it is clear that women's golf has a special cultural history in South Korea. It began in the 1990s, with surprising success of the great Korean star Se Ri Pak. That was a time of economic crisis in Asia. Her success became a kind of model of national resilience and pride. Her example inspired many other young women to take up the game. She is the godmother of Korean women's golf.

**IRIS:** In your book, *The Passion of Tiger Woods: An Anthropologist Reports on Golf, Race, and Celebrity Scandal* (2011), you explored the ‘Tigergate’<sup>3</sup>. How did Tiger Woods’ sex scandal reflect broader American anxieties over race and sex?

**ORIN STARN:** Tiger Woods became a kind of god in US culture, notably at an interesting time with Barack Obama as president. There is a kind of idea – more precisely, a fantasy – in contemporary American culture that racism and evils of discrimination are a thing of the past, that America has entered a new “post-racial” era where everybody has the same opportunities and skin colour does not matter. The idea is like “Hey we’re not racist anymore, we elected a black president” and “hey we’re a racially egalitarian society, look we have a golfer who’s African American”. In reality - and it doesn’t take a lot to see this - America is still a racially divided society, and African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans face enduring structural inequalities. We still live in a racially divided society, no matter of the success of the likes of Obama and Tiger Woods.

What happened with the sex scandal though was that a lot of the reactions – especially the reactions of internet chat rooms and the dark sides of the internet – were racist backlashes against Tiger. In these internet chat rooms, you would see the “n-word” and

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<sup>3</sup> In 2009, Tiger Wood’s nocturnal car crash erupted into a massive sex scandal when the press published stories on his various extra-marital love affairs, despite Tiger being married to Elin Nordegren at the time. The stories made international headlines and badly impacted the player’s reputation and career.

the worst kind of ugly racist stereotypes on Black sexuality and Black masculinity getting thrown at Tiger. And it's impossible, after you went on the internet following the sex scandal, to say that racial stereotypes and racism have disappeared. This really opened up a kind of view of how persisting bigotry and stereotyping remain in this country.

On the face of it, the coverage of Tiger of the sex scandal was very neutral, it did not say a lot about race, for instance that Tiger was African American, that his wife was white. But on the internet, it was a different story, people using the cover of anonymity to vent ugly racial views. If you read what was going on in 2010, you could have guessed that someone like Donald Trump might get elected eight years by taking advantage of latent white resentments and feelings of victimisation. There's a line from racial slurs and hatred in response to Tiger and white supremacist ugliness in Charlottesville and elsewhere. The Tiger Woods scandal really showed us America hasn't put its racial demons to rest.

### ***ON SPORT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION***

**IRIS:** Some scholars argue that golf can be an effective tool for social inclusion. Golf, however, is often perceived as a sport for 'rich white men' and has a long history of exclusion based on race and gender in the United States. As you mentioned in your Coursera course, some clubs did not allow African American players until the 1990s and others are still closed to women today. What do you think about the concept of sport as a tool for social inclusion? Considering golf's history of racism and sexism, how do you situate this sport within this broader concept?

**ORIN STARN:** Golf is, in many ways, behind the curves on racism and sexism. But I think you can back up and question the whole idea that sports are necessarily a tool for social inclusion in the first place.

For team sports, in particular, you see cross-racial friendship bonding, with the idea that players of different backgrounds will come together with a common goal. In the United States in the 50s and 60s, you certainly have examples of teams seeming to model an idea of racial justice and racial diversity, and to model an ideal for the country. And it's true that team sports can bring people from different backgrounds together, but often, there are still issues of division and inclusion and mistrust within team sports, racial divides in team locker rooms. It's interesting, thinking about racial divides, that in prominent cases

like the NBA and Premier League, that the spectators are more likely to be white, the players more diverse in background. If you go to a Chelsea game, you will see a sort of 'we are the world' people coming from everywhere, a lot of African players, Asians, Arabs or mixed-race players, and you will see a stadium full of wealthy white people. Another example of persisting racial inequities and segmentation is again in football, where the small number of managers of colour is astonishingly small in global football right now. So even if the spaces of the team are sometimes integrated, the biggest structure of racial divisions is often still operating in sports.

**IRIS: By football, do you mean soccer?**

**ORIN STARN:** Yes. But that's true for American football as well. There are hardly any American football coaches of colour, especially in the professional league. The point is just that it is not just golf but all sports which have an issue of social inclusion, about money and about sexism.

And I think certainly golf, as I said, has been behind some other sports. For example, the Professional Golf Association (PGA) only allowed black players in 1961. It had a so-called Caucasian-only until then, more than a decade after baseball had integrated. Golf is one of the last sports to embrace this idea that people of all backgrounds should be able to play it. The first black golfer was not allowed to play in the Masters until the 1970s.

In general, I should add that sports reproduce a kind of gender division of society because we still organise sports according to men sports and women sports. They are separate and unequal, with women's sports less rewarded. It is kind of naturalising the idea that men and women are different in ways that are problematic, even if there may also be reasons for it to allow everyone a chance to win. Cases like that of the South African runner Caster Semenya as well as trans people wishing to compete have prompted a lot of debate about how we draw gender lines in sport.

***ON THE POPULARITY AND GLOBALISATION OF GOLF***

**IRIS: The NBA, like other sport leagues, has internationalised basketball by organising games outside the US and developing programs such as NBA Cares or**

**NBA Academy. The first NBA game held in France, in January 2020, was notably a huge success, with tickets selling out within minutes. Golf is, of course, not as popular as football and basketball. Can we, at least, state that golf is increasingly popular? Have you witnessed an increase in golf practice, whether as a professional career or as a hobby?**

**ORIN STARN:** Certainly, the number of golfers is bigger now than it has ever been before, but that has to do especially with the growth of the game in Asia. There will always be limits to golf's popularity, due to the amount of time and money it takes... But golf does have a real presence in international sports right now.

I think one thing that has changed is the perception that golf is a kind of Anglo-Saxon sport – starting in Scotland, then being dominated by the United States. Now, we have world-class golfers from all over the world, and, of course, Tiger Woods broke the mould of the white champion golfer. You certainly have prominent golfers of colour way before Tiger Woods, Lee Trevino among others, yet they were not superstars with international visibility like him.

Still, when I travel in Latin America and Africa, the most basic and unchanging perceptions of golf as a sport for the elite and a sport for the wealthy people. So, golf still has a very real public relations problem in a sense that it is viewed as an undemocratic sport and a playground for the rich.

This is only partly true. In the United States, there are a lot of working-class golfers, retired senior citizens, and golf doesn't have to be expensive here. It can be if you buy a \$500 TaylorMade driver along to a \$100,000 inscription fee country club, but you can play golf very cheaply in the United States with used clubs and playing on courses that are not expensive at all. It actually can be cheaper than many other sports. This is not so true in the other parts of the world, for example in Latin America, in Japan, where there is not really a kind of people's democratic access to golf. In Latin America, with a majority of brown people and mestizos, it is overwhelmingly rich white people who play golf.

Football is a game for anybody, the ultimate democracy, where any child anywhere can be the next Pelé or Messi... Golf is kind of at the opposite end of spectrum with a kind of public profile as something only for the privileged. And it's part of the truth of global golf and certainly the reputation of the game.

**IRIS: You mentioned how Tiger Woods helped to democratise golf. Do you know if the USGA has also tried to do so? And if so, what public have they been targeting?**

**ORIN STARN:** You see these commercials which promote various youth programs that are especially targeted at minority children and children from families with less money. The USGA also has this program called the First Tee, introducing kids to golf but also helping them with their schoolwork. These programs promote the very old-fashioned idea that golf is about honesty and hard work and how to be a good person. We have a local course here, a public course that has very active programs, partly financed by the USGA, that are teaching kids from all backgrounds how to play, which is great. These programs are also a kind of public relations project, because the USGA is very conscious of this idea that golf is an elitist sport, so they came up with commercials featuring smiling African American kids, Latina girls, etc., wanting to put more multicultural spin on the game's image.

But the realities of golf are different if you live in an inter-city area of the United States, very far from a golf course, it's unlikely that your parents are going to play golf, you may not have the money for golf equipment and top training. The number of children from less privileged backgrounds undertaking the game is not insignificant, but remains small.

Especially at professional levels, there are very few players from poor backgrounds. To excel, you need parents with money who are going to take you to all the special tournaments and trainings, to hire a swing coach, to pay for these high-class camps, and to afford top clubs. So you can play on good courses. Consequently, there's a huge disadvantage in pursuing a professional career. In US colleges, it is all middle-class kids and above, usually upper middle class and above. I think golf is sort of haunted by the smell of racism and sexism, and the governing bodies are always trying to kind of do some pro-active things and create a sort of "we are the world's image of a sport, but you know the realities are still differing.

**IRIS: How do you think Tiger Wood's global fame has impacted the popularity of golf?**

**ORIN STARN :** When you think of the most famous athlete globally over the last 30, 40 years, there are, of course, Pelé and Muhammad Ali ; they were perhaps the two best-known men in the world in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, maybe along Bob Marley and Che Guevara. And Tiger Woods was really the first golfer to kind of have a global celebrity presence. But I don't think the impact of his presence was that powerful of growing the game. Because, if you saw what Tiger Woods as a slum kid in Lima, Peru or in Rio, it's not like you can tell yourself, "oh, there is a golf course nearby and I'll buy clubs to play". Definitely in the United States, when Tiger rose to super-fame in the early 2000s, it leads to more people playing the game. But I don't think that was so true globally.

### ***ON GOLF AND US COLLEGE ATHLETICS***

**IRIS:** In France and the European Union, a major policy regarding sports is the promotion of a dual career for athletes. The situation here is very different from the US, especially compared to American universities where sport is a complete part of American education and culture. How do you explain this special relationship between American universities and sports?

**ORIN STARN:** The US is unique among any country in the world in the sense that universities are running what are effectively their own semi-professional or professional sports teams. College sports in the US is a multi-billion-dollar industry, like nowhere else in the world. You'll never see the soccer team in the University of Bologna or the Sorbonne on national television playing championship! The US is very different in the sense that these teams are big money makers and the sort of multi-billion sports industry in the university athletic complex.

The roots of all this go back to almost 100 years ago, with the growth of college football as a sort of national obsession and national passion. In the 1920s, Americans were building stadiums like Ohio State or Michigan for 100,000 persons. What has happened over the last 80 to 100 years is a steady growth in the "businessification" of college sports. Television was crucial, with universities getting giant contracts, and now streaming. US college basketball is also a big money entertainment venture now, of course. And what you have seen, in the last few years, is that there is such an appetite among sports networks, like ESPN and others, for programming that there are now paying to show

men's lacrosse or women's volleyball, in a way that college sports are being broadcast on commercial networks across the United States.

Financially, the bottom line of all this is that there are two sports making a ton of money, men's basketball and men's football. Almost all other programs – whether men's or women's -- lose money because it is expensive for players to travel around the country, to play games, to buy equipment, and there's little income from ticket sales or television contracts. But nonetheless, our universities in the United States are now running highly elaborate, costly programs for a whole range of sports, with athletes expected to be playing 30 or 40 hours a week. It's not just football and basketball anymore, it's sports of all kinds. It puts huge pressure on the students, to be both full-time students and spend so much time on their sports.

Regarding golf, American universities have always been a training ground for professional players. In the last 10 or 15 years, however, college golf has grown in its budget, in its ability and intensity of the training and quality of the coaching. Like a lot of other college sports, the competition in the NCAA is extremely high. Its close the equivalent of mini-tour level, both men's and women's golf. Now, some college golfers, like Matthew Wolf and Colin Murakawa, have gone straight from college to winning PGA tournaments.

### ***ON GOLF AND CLIMATE CHANGE***

**IRIS:** In your Coursera course, you explain that golf courses are an example of “nature/culture”, a concept invented by French sociologist Bruno Latour. In a context of climate change, golf courses are increasingly controversial notably because of the use of fertilisers and pesticides. Some environmentalists argue that golf courses are harmful to ecosystems, while others believe there are beneficial. Additionally, climate change causing extreme weather conditions will most likely complexify golf courses' overall management and golf practice. What do you think the medium and long-term impacts of climate change on golf will be? What are the current steps taken in the golf industry to brace for climate change and environmentalists' pressure?

**ORIN STARN:** That's a great question, and I haven't thought as much as I should about this question about golf and climate change. The question of golf and the relationship to the environment has long been a matter of debate, but often quite knee-jerk and superficial.

On the one hand, there is this sort of idea that golf courses are bad for the environment, with chemical fertilisers and pesticides, that they involved cutting down forests to make golf courses, and that they involve wasteful use of water. And I think that all of these images are basically a metaphor for this sort of idea of people who tend to be more politically to the left who perceive playing golf is a kind of evil sport, linked to capitalism and business, and necessarily destructive of the environment. And on the other end, there has sometimes been a kind of superficial defense of golf and its relationship to the environment by golf industries and superintendents of golf that are saying, "no, it's a green space, it's a good thing". What I haven't seen, and I'm not an environmental scientist, is more serious research about the ecological impact of golf.

My overall understanding of this, from a non-scientist view, is that golf courses are not among the most serious of our problems in the age of climate change. For one thing, golf courses do not involve or very rarely cutting down forest or wilderness any longer. Most golf courses are built on landfills, or in areas that have already been used for one purpose or another. There are areas typically where, if there wasn't a golf course, then a shopping mall or subdivision might well be built. So usually, it's not a choice between a golf course and virgin forest. It is a choice between golf courses and more pavement, more cars. There's certainly research that shows, and any golfer knows this, that golf courses participate in cooling the environment, as air temperature is lower in such areas due to the shade, grass, and trees, which have some effect in mitigating Co2 emissions. And in general, the golf course industry has become a lot more sensitive to some of these environmental issues. Still, there is also obvious negative consequences of golf courses, among other things that you have to drive to get there for most people, but compared to some issues such as coal-burning power plants. I don't see golf up there, although it is certainly worthwhile to think more about their effects. ■

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Conducted by Estelle BRUN / Research Assistant at IRIS

APRIL 2020

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