

The Rise and Fall of Golfing Capital: A Qualitative Case Study of Former Tour Golfers

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Purpose: In recent years golf has become a popular area of scientific study. The majority of this research has been focussed on the physiological and psychological aspects of performance, with comparatively little attention paid to the sociological domain. Addressing this gap in the literature, this qualitative study aimed to explore the career experiences of seven former professional golfers using Bourdieu's frameworks of capital, habitus and field. The study addresses the habitus or social identity formation in the early years of participation and how this changes both during and after the participants playing careers. It is hoped the findings can help governing bodies, coaches and parents identify and promote positive aspects of the talent pathway in elite golf, but to also highlight potentially negative incidents that can affect the careers of young players.

Method: For this study, participants were selected from a region of England and through a purposive sampling process and all were contacted via email and telephone regarding participation. The ages of the participants ranged from 29-44 years ($M=35.4$, $SD=4.54$) and all had competed in full time professional golf on the Challenge or Euro Pro tours for between 4 and 10 years ($M=6.85$, $SD=2.19$). Following initial contact, the participants signed a consent form and participants information sheet detailing their involvement. The data collection was organised in two phases. In collaboration with each participant a trajectory chart of each performer's career was developed through the use of a career timeline. Using this method has been shown to improve the accuracy and veracity of retrospective interviews by focussing participants on objective critical incidents and episodes (Collins et al, 2016). A semi structured interview was then used to explore specific issues identified in the career timeline. The interviews were transcribed verbatim before being inductively analysed and thematically coded. This was chosen to allow the natural variation of patterns, themes and categories to emerge from the experiences of the participants.

Results: Findings of this case study revealed how the participants developed a bank of cultural and social capital during their formative years leading to the formation of a habitus or identity that was strongly defined by golf. The participants entered the game with a large volume of 'sporting capital' (Rowe, 2015) through participating in multiple sports before golf and having a family member already established within the game. Following initial participation, participants soon formulated strong social bonds with older and highly skilled peers which facilitated their assimilation with the game and developed their level of golfing capital. This gradually increased through county and national representation, with all of the participants expressing a desire to become a professional by the age of sixteen.

The habitus formulated during the early years impacted on the perception of and reaction to critical incidents during and after the participants' playing careers. This included the decision to turn professional, the quality of the coach-athlete relationship and the loss of golf club support. Following the decision to stop playing professionally, the players felt forced to reinvest their focus on accruing capital from different areas of the game to maintain their habitus and social standing within the game. For some this was through coaching, for others it was regaining their amateur status and playing at a lower level.

Discussion: Building on previous studies investigating the developmental activities of elite golfers (Hayman et al, 2014, Cafaro & Toms, 2015) the findings highlight the important role of the golf club and the social connections made through the club. The study uniquely highlights how enduring these developmental experiences are and the impact they can have later in the careers of a professional

golfer. The findings also highlight how developing a habitus strongly related to a single sport can limit the career options when the performance career comes to an end.

Practical Application: The evidence from this study highlights an opportunity for a mentoring / career advice service to guide aspiring players through mid-adolescence to turning professional. Within this role, a thorough understanding of a player's sociological background, may help to provide the most appropriate and individualised support.

References

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