THE BIG SHOT

Women are driving golf's growth since the pandemic

More than 900,000 American women started playing golf and the multibillion-dollar golf industry is responding.

By Emma Date
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Photo by Jessica Rinaldi/The Washington Post

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When Cindy Miller was a teenager, women's golf appeared one no-score she decided to track herself to zero.

"I made skirts and collared shirts," said Miller, 67, who was the only girl in her Pittsburgh-area high school golf team. Her parents, both friends who questioned why she wanted to play a sport advertised to boys and men, Miller persevered, eventually competing professionally on the LPGA Tour from 1979 to 1985.

More than one-third of junior players today are girls and Miller, now a golf coach in Buffalo and a member of the Legends of the LPGA Tour, has watched the number of women she instructs soar. "I think they've finally realized that women want to play as much as men do," Miller said of golf industry leaders, noting that, particularly since the pandemic, more women than ever are keen to learn golf — whether it's for business or pleasure.

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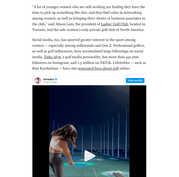
Indeed, the pandemic spurred a stunning surge in interest in the sport among women. According to the National Golf Foundation, from 2020 to 2021, more than 800,000 American women took up the sport to participate in golf, golf lessons or golf-related activities. The number of female golfers rose about 5 percent, the male golf pool increased by 4 percent in the same time frame. As a result, the sport's traditionally male-dominated, multibillion-dollar golf industry — including elite courses, equipment companies and clothing brands — is responding accordingly.

It's a point of pride at events for female participation right now," said Joe Beditz, executive chairman of the National Golf Foundation.



Cindy M. Jones (Miller), in Buffalo, New York, in the mid-1980s, when she was a member of the Ladies Professional Golf Association Tour. Jones (Miller) was the only girl on her high school golf team. (Courtesy of the Legends of the LPGA Tour, via The Washington Post)

Why more women are taking up golf — on and off the course

Before the pandemic, Tanya Oliveira, 39, a grocery store manager in Woodbridge, Va., had little interest in golf. Being a front-line worker, however, was hard on her mental health, "and golf ended up being what saved me," the friend herself golfing four days a week, mostly at public courses in Fairfax County. Before long, she was hooked on the sport.

Many women have similar stories about how and why they got into golf. Golf was deemed one of the safest sports in the early days of the covid-19 crisis, and the increase in remote work allowed people additional time to hone new hobbies. One study found Wednesday rounds (a typically slow day) increased 40 percent from 2019 to 2020.

The Big Shot

In the coming decade, women will lead the growth of the American golf industry. This series captures the transformation underway in the sport, from the American financial landscape. Read the series.

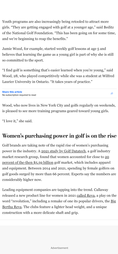
"A lot of younger women who are still working are finding they have the time to pick up something like this, and they find value in networking among women, as well as bringing their clients or business associates to the club," said Alison Lam, the president of Ladies Golf Club, hosted in Toronto, and the sole woman's only private golf club in North America.

Social media, too, has spurred greater interest in the sport among women — especially among millennials and Gen Z. Professional golfers, as well as golf influencers with a combined Instagram following on social media, Tiktok, Twitch and Twitter, personally, have more than quintuplet the number of followers they had before the pandemic, such as Kim Kardashian — have also generated buzz about golf online.

"Golf has kind of been cracked open. This whole world is now discoverable," said Jim McGehee, the co-founder of Topgolf Golf Collective, a talent management firm and brand consulting company in the golf industry. "Social has really played a part in making golf cool."

[Tiger Woods's best golfer ever? and? that's he's in one]

Off-course golf entertainment venues — such as indoor simulators and stand-alone driving ranges — have drawn a lot of women to the sport, according to the National Golf Foundation, as percent of all course golfers are women. These golf venues, namely Topgolf, offer a less intimidating, more social and less time-consuming course. Plus, people can off-course venues not as time-consuming as a full round of golf — which typically takes more than four hours.



"Historically, the narrative around golf has been that it's expensive, it's exclusive, and it takes a long time to play a round of golf," said Eric Gray, the chief operating officer of Topgolf. On average, players spend between one and a half to two hours at Topgolf venues, Gray said, depending on the day and time, but a group of six people can play at the location in Ashburn, Va., for a total of 45 per hour. "We're flipping that narrative and encouraging everyone to have a good time."

In general, off-course options serve as a welcoming first foray into the sport. About 40 percent of green grass golfers prefer Topgolf with getting them into the game.

The establishment is embracing the new

Historically, golf has been broadly regarded as a "man's game," according to a 2015 study at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln entitled "A Foot Wedge in Play: Women, Sexism, and Persistence in Golf."

That includes private country clubs, which are traditionally seen as rustic attractions and exclusive. Many clubs have moved away from widespread male-centric ostensive and discriminatory policies — including prohibiting women from participating in tournaments, or limited people's ability to participate in the sport. The Olympic Club in San Francisco, for instance, is one of the last holdouts in the United States and, until 1990, did not accept women as members.

Joe Traynor, the president and chief executive of the National Club Association, said the majority of private golf and country clubs are shedding stringent rules. "It's been a general shift to be more inclusive and encourage women to use the club," he said. "I think it's an important shift, and hopefully that will continue. I have every reason to believe it will."

Youth programs are also increasingly being stocked to attract more girls. "They are getting engaged with golf at a younger age," said Beditz of the National Golf Foundation. "This has been going on for some time, and we're beginning to reap the benefits."

Annie Wood, for example, started swiling golf lessons at age 5 and believes that learning the game as a young girl is part of why she is still so committed to the sport.

"I find golf is something that's easier learned when you're young," said Wood, 28, who played competitively while she was a student at Wilfred Laurier University in Ontario. "It takes years of practice."

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Wood, who now lives in New York City and golfs regularly on weekends, is pleased to see more training programs geared toward young girls.

"I love it," she said.

Women's purchasing power in golf is on the rise

Golf brands are taking note of the rapid rise of women's purchasing power in the industry. A 2021 study by Golf Digest, a golf industry publication, found women spend an average of $1,000 a year on apparel of the clock for golfing and nearly $500 on golf which includes apparel and equipment. Between 2014 and 2021, spending by female golfers on golf goods surged by more than 200 percent. Experts say the numbers are considerably higher now.

Leading equipment companies are tapping into the trend. Callaway released a new product line for women in mint-inked Rova, a play on the word "revolution," including a remake of one its popular drivers, the Big Bertha Reva. The video features a lighter head weight, and a unique construction with a more delicate shaft and grip.

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Women are "the fastest growing segment in the marketplace," said Kim Johnson, leader of Callaway's internal Women's Task Force team.

Big athletic wear brands are also catering to female golfers. Nike, Adidas and Lululemon have golf collections for women, and popular boutique brands such as Ivy Park, Tory Burch and Vineyard Vines are releasing golf apparel that's intended to be worn on and off the course.

"We've major excited about where the industry is going and how it's thinking about women more," said Erica Mallon, the chief executive and co-founder of Mallon Golf, a Los Angeles-based brand. In 2017, the company released a line of men's apparel and noticed a number of women were buying men's styles in small sizes.

"We understood that there was definitely a demand," said Mallon. In July Mallon Golf launched its first collection for women, featuring classic and sleek styles in bold, playful and feminine colors.

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Sticking together in the sport

Despite the golf industry's recent evolution to be more welcoming toward women, many female players are sticking together in the sport.

There are countless groups on social media intended for female golfers, through which members could offer advice and ask each other questions. They also share details for events and meetups.

Uji Langley, 38, belongs to several such groups.

"It's just such a supportive community, all these women coming together," said Langley, who lives in Canadian, Ohio. "It's beautiful to see."

Other organizations have popped up, too, including Women Golf in Alabama — which teaches businesswomen how to use golf as a networking tool — and Free the Ladies, a nonprofit aimed at making golf more accessible to women.

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Younger generations are also launching golf initiatives. Eleanor Lee, an Austin-based photographer and content creator, started a group called Hot Girl Golf Club about one year ago.

"My grandmother loved to play golf, and she gifted me her clubs when she passed away," said Lee, 28. "I really wanted to play, but I didn't know a lot of women who did."

She created the club in the hope of meeting local women to learn the sport with. She hosts monthly events, most often at public courses, and through the club, women can find friends to play with more frequently. Some of the events have participated in at least twice, and they range in age from 21 to 45, though all ages are welcome to participate. Lee created a group chat for female golfers that has nearly 500 members.

[Bitter rivals, Beloved Friends, Harrisons.]

"I really try to be as inclusive as possible to all ways," said Lee, noting that she wants to ensure events are always accessible. "I hope that more and more people feel comfortable coming to play golf."

Given the success of the club, Lee is planning to expand her initiative to other cities across the country.

"I really believe in the future of golf for women," she said. "We are just getting started."

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