

# Golf and the New Women: America 1880- 1929

Richard Moss  
Colby College, ME

Countless historians and commentators have tried to make sense of the rise of the “New Woman” in the late nineteenth century. While the focus has been on a number of issues, sport and leisure

life have been seen as important aspects of any definition of the “New Woman.” Often the focus has been on changing general attitudes and on the prescriptive literature (fiction and non-fiction) read by American and English women.

This paper makes a contribution to this on-going debate. The paper describes the ways in which golf became a popular sport among middle and upper-class women. It highlights the important role women played in establishing the game in the 1980s. It also traces the growth of resistance to women’s participation in golf and their presence at the country clubs and public courses.

Most centrally, the paper explores the attitudes of women themselves. What did they actually say about their new hobby? What role did golf play in their lives? Why was golf important? My answers to these questions are based on research in the journalism of the era (1890-1929) and a reading of the few extended statements by women golfers. Most important, my paper contains an analysis of Glenna Collette’s autobiography *Ladies in the Rough* (1929).

We cannot understand increased interest by women in sports solely as the product of changing attitudes in the general culture or by reference to increased freedom in the upper class, rooted in rapid increases in wealth and discretionary time. While all these factors played a role, golf, like other sports, fulfilled a number of often contradictory needs. In the end, however, golf was particularly important in providing new models of behaviour for American women.