

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Chester		
Unit of Assessment: 24 Sport and Exercise Science, Leisure and Tourism		
Title of case study: Improving professional golfers' mental health and wellbeing		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2008 – 2014		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Daniel Bloyce Ian Pritchard	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Associate Professor Senior Lecturer	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 1995 – ongoing 2010 – ongoing
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 – ongoing		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Research has been used by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for the PGA European Tour and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for the PGA European Tour to take steps in developing various mental health and wellbeing programmes that support professional golfers.

Specifically, the research has:

- Equipped European Professional Golfers' Association (EPGA) medical staff with the skills to identify and support athletes who are experiencing the negative effects of pressures associated with being away 'on tour'. Based on our research, staff are now better able to tailor their support and advice appropriately during consultations.
- Alerted both the CMO and CEO of the issues facing professional golfers, prompting them to instigate the development and roll-out of a mental health support hotline, which operates 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. This service offers confidential counselling for players whenever they might require it.
- Equipped EPGA staff working across various roles (such as tournament administrators, operational staff, and rules officials) knowledge to recognise and deal with mental health and wellbeing issues that arise during their work. The research underpinned the content of a workshop delivered to more than 100 EPGA staff attending online mental health awareness workshops during 2020.
- Encouraged several national newspapers and golf-specific publications to cover the issues of mental health in professional golfers, thus raising awareness.
- Had direct impact of improving professional golfers' mental health and wellbeing, across various tiers of the PGA European Tour, by enabling an understanding of how players can make sense of the realities of their lives.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Professional sport is typically considered a glamorous, care-free occupation characterized by large financial rewards, international schedules, and celebrity lifestyles. Such views are compounded by various elements of the media who have tended to portray athletes' lives in glorified and idealized ways. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a career in elite sport is considered an attractive occupation and many people dream of being a professional athlete.

While certain aspects of the above may be true for some elite sportspeople, this research reveals the personal struggles and challenges that, in reality, characterize the lives of many professional golfers. The result is that careers in golf tend to feature a number of stresses and insecurities which can impact negatively on golfers' mental health and well-being.

The research underpinning this impact-case study was conducted between 2008 and 2014 through a research collaboration between the University of Chester and Myerscough College. The research team comprised two academic members of staff at the University of Chester (Associate Professor Daniel Bloyce [employed since 1995], Dr Ian Pritchard [employed since 2010]) and a former PhD student and now academic staff member at Myerscough College (Dr John Fry). The team worked directly with the European PGA Tour, including staff and players. The research examined the effects of globalization on the mental health and well-being of migrant professional

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athletes. Interviews with 20 touring professional golfers, ranging from former world ranked players and winners of major championships, to those starting out on their career in professional golf, provided the first empirically grounded analysis of sports migrants' lives of its kind.

The first study contributing to the impact [R1] revealed that players experience many of the personal problems—such as loneliness, isolation, low decision latitude, low social support, and effort-reward imbalance—which have been identified as “strong predictors of mental ill-health”. Interviews with the golfers identified feelings of loneliness and isolation developed as players were regularly apart from family and friends, and spent most of their time with other golfers with whom they tended to have what they viewed as somewhat superficial relationships. These feelings – coupled with, for many, inconsistent and uncertain income generated through golf – added further to their work-related anxieties. Overall, results of the study highlighted the effect of workplace anxieties and vulnerabilities on athlete migrants' mental health and well-being.

A further study [R2] generated research evidence suggesting that the financial rewards available for top golfers continues to increase. However, these returns are only available to a small minority of professional players while the vast majority fare poorly in comparison. The growing financial inequalities on tour for most players fosters specific internalized constraints relating to behaviour, referred to as “habitus”, whereby many players “gamble” on pursuing golf as their main source of income despite the odds against them. Furthermore, professional golfers are increasingly required to develop a network of corporate sponsors to help pay the costs of playing on tour, which has left some players with the added uncertainty of conflicting choices between regular money, and adhering to restrictive contractual agreements, or the freedom to choose between different brands (of golfing equipment, for example).

The final underpinning study [R3] provided a detailed examination of the relationships between professional golfers while away on tour. Results revealed a workplace culture where many begin to adopt the attitudes and behaviours that encourage the development of networks of temporary ‘we-group’ alliances. The ‘touring’ aspects of professional golf means many players strive to forge these alliances to help reduce feelings of loneliness, isolation, and homesickness while away for long periods of time. Such stresses are intensified by the increasingly globalized nature of professional sport and the associated increases in labour market migration that have become commonplace. The urge to develop friendship networks constrains players to behave in a manner expected of them rather than in a way that reflects their actual emotions, such as maintaining a positive attitude during difficult times – such as spells of poor performance and time away from their families – thus leading players to internalise some of the mental health issues they might be harbouring. This is further complicated by the fact that relationships between players are non-permanent and/or partially changeable. Players are ‘friends’, characterized by togetherness and camaraderie, while, at the same time, showing evidence of tensions and conflict as they are ultimately in direct competition with each other for a share of the overall prize money. This served to exacerbate feelings of loneliness and the attendant mental health problems.

Overall, this research [R1-R3] offers an analysis of the effects of globalization on the mental health and wellbeing of athletes as migrants in professional sport. In doing so, the body of work has revealed, for the very first time, why golfers come to feel lonely and isolated, and how they attempt to address and make sense of such feelings and their life circumstances. The touring nature of professional golf means many players experience these intense feelings of loneliness and isolation which, coupled with the fact they often felt they could not talk openly about their concerns, generated even more stress and impacted further on their overall mental health and well-being.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[R1] Fry, J., & Bloyce, D. (2017). ‘Life in the Travelling Circus’: A study of loneliness, work stress, and money issues in touring professional golf, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 34, 148 -159, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2017-0002>

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[R2] Fry, J., **Bloyce, D.**, & **Pritchard, I.** (2015). Professional golf—A license to spend money? Issues of money in the lives of touring professional golfers, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 39(3) 179–201, doi:10.1177/0193723514557819

[R3] Fry, J., & **Bloyce, D.** (2015). 'Friends as enemies': A sociological analysis of the relationship among touring professional golfers, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 1–25, doi:10.1177/1012690215597659

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)**Informing professional work and practice**

This research has enabled the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Executive Officer for the PGA European Tour to take steps in developing various mental health and wellbeing programmes that support professional golfers.

"This seminal research is an important and useful feature in the European Tour's role in protecting player welfare while out on tour, as well as our overall strategy to develop the tour around the world by enhancing its appeal and 'Driving Golf Further'" (Chief Medical Officer, PGA European Tour, [S1]).

Professional players have openly spoken about their wellbeing while out on tour.

'We like to travel as a family and it's just been very difficult to get my head around being stuck in those two places and then coming out and trying to compete. It just doesn't feel right. I tried to come up here but I was leaving it later and later. I came up Tuesday morning to try to be away as small a time as possible, but it's not good prep for a tournament and it shows I don't really want to be here.' (Professional European Tour golfer, [S2]).

This research has directly enabled the European Tour to offer their assistance to these professional players. Specifically, this includes equipping EPGA medical staff with the skills to identify and support athletes who are experiencing the negative effects of pressures associated with being away 'on tour'. Staff are now better able to tailor their support and advice appropriately during consultations.

'Importantly, the research has helped take steps in developing various mental health and wellbeing programmes that support professional golfers, including: Informing the day-to-day practice of European Tour medical staff some of the negative effects and pressures of being away 'on tour'. Staff are now better able to tailor their support and advice appropriately during individual consultations, as well as recognising the early signs of players struggling, and offer the appropriate assistance.' (Chief Medical Officer, PGA European Tour, [S1]).

It has also helped highlight that golfers across all parts of the spectrum, from multimillionaires to those struggling to get by, are as vulnerable and conflicted to the pressures of 'life on tour'. This is becoming more important as players on tour become younger and do not have the life experiences to realise what exactly is happening and recognise the appropriate warning flags.

Mental health emergency support telephone hotline

The development of mental health support hotline [S3], which operates 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year offers confidential counselling for players whenever they might require it. Specifically, this research has equipped the psychiatrists, psychologists, and counsellors who staff the helpline [S3] with relevant knowledge about the pressures of the golf workplace.

"We offer all of our players a comprehensive programme to support their mental health and wellbeing. This includes a mental health support hotline, which operates 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. We are also aware that everyone has their own unique circumstances at the moment, which is why the 2020 season is an optional one for our players.' (Chief Medical Officer, PGA European Tour, [S1] [S2]).

Mental health awareness training workshops

This research has helped equip EPGA staff working across various roles (such as tournament administrators, operational staff, and rules officials) with appropriate knowledge to recognise and deal with mental health and wellbeing issues that arise during their work. The research was delivered to more than 100 EPGA staff attending online mental health awareness workshops during 2020 [S4]. Based on the research, EPGA staff are now armed with a detailed understanding of the mental health and wellbeing stresses associated with life on tour, how to recognise and deal with these problems, and the impact this has on both players' lives and their overall performance. The workshop provided, in conjunction with world-leading mental health organisation Cognacity, a bespoke toolkit of skills that practitioners can implement to deal with the specific challenges faced by professional golfers on the tour [S3-S5]. This toolkit was informed by the research underpinning this case study.

'The research formed part of a mental health awareness training workshop delivered in March 2020. This workshop helped to arm staff with a detailed understanding of the mental health and wellbeing stresses associated with life on tour, how to recognise and deal with these problems, and the impact this might have on both players' lives and their overall performance.' (Chief Medical Officer, PGA European Tour, [S1]).

Increased awareness of realities of life as a professional sports person

The research has helped inform people, both within the professional golf sphere and wider public more generally, about the realities of life as a professional golfer. Several national newspaper articles and golfing publications have published articles informed by the research. For example, the following headlines have emerged, all referring directly to the research:

'Why globe-trotting professional golfers can wind up in the bunker of despair' (i-Newspaper, 2015, [S6]).

'It's a lonely business and golfers need friends to lean on' (Women & Golf magazine, 2016, [S7]).

'In touch but losing touch: how the 'connected' generation are getting lonelier'. The Telegraph Newspaper, 2015, [S8]).

These articles have helped to overcome some of the traditional over romanticised accounts often portrayed by the media.

A further consequence of greater awareness of the challenges faced by professional golfers is that they are now much more likely to talk openly and honestly about their lives which helps to combat such issues.

'I've been on-off saying I'm going to play, I'm not going to play, for months.....I kept changing my mind. But being here and being confined to the hotel, confined to the course and not being able to bring my family is ultimately not what I want and not how I want to live my lifeWe like to travel as a family and it's just been very difficult to get my head around being stuck in those two places and then coming out and trying to compete. It just doesn't feel right. I tried to come up here but I was leaving it later and later. I came up Tuesday morning to try to be away as small a time as possible, but it's not good prep for a tournament and it shows I don't really want to be here.' (Professional European Tour golfer speaking in national newspaper, [S2]).

'I've been through financial ruin as a result of continuing to play. It's cost me my marriage as well. So that's the price I've paid.' (Professional European Tour golfer speaking in national newspaper, [S8]).

'I've learned to be honest about it, whereas in the past I might have just swallowed it up. I'm not going to do that anymore. If I'm not happy, I'm not going to be here. That's the golden rule for me'

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now. If I'm not in a good place, or I haven't got the right set up around me, then it's not right for me.' (Professional European Tour golfer, [S2]).

Alongside helping to prepare aspiring professional golfers for their transition from being an elite amateur through to being a professional, this research has had a direct impact of improving professional golfers' mental health and wellbeing, across various tiers of the PGA European Tour, by enabling an understanding of how players can make sense of the realities of their lives.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[S1] Chief Medical Officer, European PGA

[S2] (Thursday July 23, 2020). Andrew Johnston explains why he quit British Masters after nine holes. The Guardian,

[S3] Helpline details and toolkit

[S4] European Tour Mental Health & Well-being Training workshop

[S5] Golf mental health intervention programme and practical implementation

[S6] (Friday April 17, 2015). Why globe-trotting professional golfers can wind up in the bunker of despair. The 'i' Newspaper.

[S7] (2016, January/February). It's a lonely business and golfers need friends to lean on. Women & Golf. January / February issue.

[S8] (Friday April 17, 2015). In touch but losing touch: how the 'connected' generation are getting lonelier. The Telegraph Newspaper.