

Female golfers still face boys' club attitudes

The winds of change barely ripple across the fairways for women seeking equal standing in golf.

Or would Ice Age be a better reference point?

"It's pretty gradual change, it seems, from the phone calls we get," says Kathryn Reith at the Women's Sports Foundation.

Why wouldn't '90s women recoil at the '50s notion that membership to golf clubs often remains open only to men?

Or that the prime tee times remain reserved for men only.

Or that the sanctity of the men's grill must not be violated by the presence of ladies.

Sounds pretty silly, doesn't it? Especially three years after Shoal Creek founder Hall Thompson unwittingly exposed the inequity of golf membership for anyone other than white males.

But those attitudes still circumscribe the boundaries for many women who dare to take up golf and become addicted to it as much as men.

"The attitudes for change perhaps are in the works, but the mechanics are taking a little longer," says Judy Thomp-



COMMENTARY

By Rachel Shuster

son, who tracks trends and the numbers at the National Golf Foundation.

One of the surprising numbers is that women's golf leveled off in 1992 after years of being hailed as the fastest-growing group. About a 2% dip.

Perhaps that's because of the uncertain economy — golf is not an inexpensive sport — although equipment/clothing sales still are booming.

And no doubt women can find golf a frustrating game.

But it's also true that when the welcome mat never appears, the new arrival gets the message: Stay out of the way.

Even women who have played for a while get that feeling, and not only at the fancy clubs where membership is exclusive in both the figurative and literal senses.

I joined a threesome of women at a public course this summer and found them unnerved by what the starter said: "You ladies are standing too near the first tee, and you're talking too loud."

Thing is, they weren't that loud, and they were a decent distance back off the tee. They

weren't angry, though. "That's the way we're always treated," the ladies said.

The same week I went to one of the huge golf discounters in the Washington, D.C., area, hoping to find a 5-wood. When I asked where the ladies' woods were, the clerk replied, "In with the left-handed clubs." I found exactly two, while men had about 200 to inspect.

When I asked where the ladies' irons were, the clerk, exasperated, said in hostile tones, "What is it that you want?" I only wanted to browse through the single irons the way the men were doing.

Nancy Oliver, in the golf industry for 13 years, has had the

Inverness accused of discrimination

Sharon Keil of the Ohio Women's Golf Association Wednesday charged the PGA of America skirts the spirit of its so-called non-discriminatory policy that governs which clubs will host its championship. Keil says only one woman at Inverness, host of this week's PGA Championship, has full golfing privileges and membership, but 300 other women who golf there "have restricted access to tee times/facilities" and can't participate in deciding policy.

The PGA of America could not be reached for comment.

"You keep thinking the men are going to grow up and realize this isn't their little treehouse in the backyard where only they can belong," says Keil, OWGA chairwoman of the Equal Access Committee. "In reality, they only grow up when the law comes in and makes them."

Legislation prohibiting discriminatory club membership practices has languished in Ohio House committees for five years.

Keil says an informal survey of private golf clubs in Ohio's major cities last year found that 98% of women with golf privileges also have restricted access to tee times/facilities and cannot participate in club decision-making.

— Rachel Shuster

same experience shopping for clubs and being taken seriously as a golfer.

That's why she founded the Executive Women's Golf League two years ago, with chapters forming around the country to educate women about the game and to provide golfing opportunities.

Oliver had 650 women join the first year. "And now we're averaging 600 a month."

Yet even Oliver acknowledges the women often are naive about the golf environment.

"It isn't until they polish their game enough that they say, 'Gee, I think I'm going to invest in joining a club.' And all of a sudden they find out they

can't. They'll call me and say, 'Did you know this happens? I'm appalled this would be the case in the '90s.'"

So how will the attitudes change so the policies change?

"When the wife of a member is restricted, that's one thing," Oliver says. "But when a man's daughter who he's put through law school is told she can't play, that's when you hit a nerve."

Still, that's relying on men to pave the way.

Women must be bold and insistent, which is tough in the conservative atmosphere of most clubs. But that's how the winds of change become more than a ripple.