Chivalry in golf?
Significant tee ratios

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Abstract This paper seeks an economic explanation for the fact that women’s tees in golf are closer to the pin than men’s tees, other things the same, in states of the old Confederacy. This is a robust empirical result that we explain as arising from a more courteous treatment of women in that part of the United States. We also note other explanations.

Keywords Golf · Tees · Chivalry · Sports and society

JEL Classification Z19 · L83

NCGA Women Competitors Net Competitions

Women will compete from the forward tees in all NCGA Events. Final course handicaps will be adjusted based on the difference between the men’s and women’s course ratings. Differences of 0.5 or greater will be rounded upward.

Scratch Competitions

When men and women compete in a NCGA scratch competition, they will play from separate tees. Whenever the prepared teeing grounds permit, the women’s yardage will be set at 88–92% of the men’s yardage. When setting the golf course, the men’s tees will be set at the yardage most appropriate for the competition. After the men’s tees are set, the committee will attempt to reach the 88–92% guideline for women’s tees while preserving similar shot values.¹


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1 Introduction

Golf is essentially unique among sports in its ability to allow people of various ages, genders, and skills to compete together simultaneously.2 This inclusive capacity is due to two golf standards, handicaps and multiple tee boxes. Our agenda here is to focus attention on the latter of these.

For some time, golf has had multiple tee boxes.3 The first widespread innovation was the creation of tees for women (as distinct from men). These are traditionally called the red tees, and they are shorter in distance to the pin than the original tees, normally called the men’s tees. The latter have historically been painted and called white tees. Tees subsequently have appeared for championship play, for highly skilled men players, for senior-aged men, and now there are even some courses with a shorter set of tees for senior-aged women.4

Over time the names of the various tee boxes have evolved, and the standards today are not uniform. However, it is common for the shortest tees to be red for women, white for men, blue for longer playing men, and gold for championship play. In addition, tee boxes have sufficient space so that the precise placement of tees can vary from day to day non-trivially.5 The course superintendent typically places the tee markers for play each morning on the teeing ground. The large area allows the tee makers to move about on the teeing green in order to protect and manage the grass there. This movement allows grass to rest and rejuvenate from play, especially on the par 3 holes where substantial damage is done by almost all golfers as they take divots using irons. Less damage is done on par 4 and 5 holes as golfers are less likely to take divots using metal drivers as they tee off (take the first shot of the hole), and hence the tee markers are not moved as often on par 4 and 5 holes as on the par 3s.

Figure 1 reveals that the ratio of red to white tee lengths varies across the states in the United States. Our chore here is to determine if economic analysis has anything to say about these differences. Regional clumps are obvious. Are other factors, income and price to name two, at play? Does the relative scarcity of woman impact this ratio? Do tastes matter? We explore such issues in this paper.

2 Background

Some background might be useful for context. Figure 2 depicts a typical tee box arrangement. In the foreground is one relatively large teeing area. In the background, looking down

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2Bowling would seem to be another sport that, except for the weight of the ball, is not gender-specific in its rules, and allows men and women to compete together. The average adult male usually bowls with a 15–16 lb. ball; the average adult female usually bowls with a 10–12 lb. ball; juniors use balls weighing about one lb. per year of child’s age, that is, 8 yrs old = 8-lb. ball (see http://www.dickssportinggoods.com/info/index.jsp?categoryId=1388131).

3To our knowledge, the first set of women’s tees was installed at Aiken Golf Club in Aiken, SC in the 1910s. The course was designed by golf architect great Donald Ross. It is reported that Babe Diedrich Zaharias and Patty Berg, two of the greatest women golfers of all time and pioneers for women’s golf, played at AGC.

4Championship tees are usually called gold tees, skilled men’s tees are usually blue, senior men’s tees typically are green or yellow and the same is so for the rare but increasingly prevalent senior women’s tees.

5See, for instance, this note from the Augusta National Golf Club concerning renovations there for the 2008 Masters golf tournament: “The changes for the 2008 Masters are: Hole No. 1: Ten yards were added to the front of the Masters tee providing more flexibility in the event of a strong northwest wind. Back of the tee was reduced to ease patron movement. Masters scoreboard remains 455 yards” (http://masters.org/en_US/news/splash/articles/2007-10-03/200710031191442457046.html).