

Professional golfers live a lonely isolated life in the midst of intense rivalries and on a meagre income, research says

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Many professional golfers live a lonely isolated life in the midst of intense rivalries and on a meagre income, new research shows.

Dr John Fry told the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Glasgow today [Friday 17 April] that he interviewed 20 professionals, including Ryder Cup players and a former world number one, to reveal the "particular stresses" behind the glamour of the game.

Dr Fry, of Myerscough College, said that the number of tournaments held abroad had increased over recent years. "The impact of the increasingly global nature of professional golf tournaments means that players spend long periods of time away from home and many experience intense feelings of loneliness, isolation and perceptions of being cut off from the 'real world' during travel time and even at the tournament itself."

He said that although players formed superficial friendships to help ease the boredom and loneliness from being away from their families, "players would avoid confiding in other players at all costs. Emotional support was something of a closed shop and the general consensus was if players were struggling on or off the course then generally their colleagues would be happy they were having a hard time.

"The result is that players tended to keep their personal problems to themselves, particularly within the golfing fraternity, in order not to give others an advantage and to also guard against being viewed as a moaner. Such attitudes can also serve to increase and reinforce the perceived levels of loneliness that particular players may harbour."

One golfer told him: "One thing is no one's going to care. The majority of people that you tell your woes, half of them will be happy and the other half don't care". Another golfer, said that when playing poorly, players should offer "no excuses because no one's interested. No one cares about you. No one is interested, nobody cares."

One player on the second-level Challenge Tour said that golf was "a very selfish sport and a very individual sport. Very selfish. Be in it for yourself. Don't really care what anybody thinks, what anybody else does. You've got to be very disciplined and not led astray or anything – find what works for you and do your own thing, don't be a sheep or anything."

A Challenge series player told Dr Fry: "I wouldn't say I had many friends. I know a lot of them now and they are all good guys and you see them in the hotel at night and maybe have dinner with them and play practice rounds with them but I wouldn't say they were my friends."

This isolation was increased by lack of contact with their families. One golfer who had won six of the elite European tour events told Dr Fry: "I don't see my kids that much – they are too old to travel now, to be able to skip school. I miss my wife, my kids, my parents. I don't see them enough, and that's what is difficult."

The former world number one said that "the hardest part of tour life is being away from the family".

Another European tour winner said: "As I got more kids it got harder to say cheerio at the airport. I made sacrifices in terms of family life – I missed out on a lot of family barbecue type of stuff, and a

few school events. It affected my kids in the school – I think they missed out on me being there, school sports days and stuff like that.”

Being apart for long periods of time also put a strain on marriages – one Challenge tour golfer said: “It’s tough on the other half. It’s very difficult to have a relationship in the game – it’s your single-minded pursuit of your golf game. Not many women want to be shared with anything that you love as much as them. You know any sportsman has a passion to the game which stems far beyond the relationship.”

Dr Fry also found that most professional golfers outside of the main European tour were struggling financially. Although those at the top earned millions of pounds each year, “the reality is that the vast majority fare comparatively poorly,” he said.

While top-level golfers who played well enough to stay on the European Tour circuit could make a good living, for those in the lower level Challenge and EuroPro tours it was difficult to break even. To earn £60,000 at the Challenge tour, with tax and touring £30,000 expenses to pay, a player needed to finish in the top 20 of the rankings list, out of around 400 players – most earned much less and many lost money. Those on the EuroPro tour were even less likely to break even.

One Challenge tour player said: “I’ve been through financial ruin as a result of my commitment to continuing to play, and how I was, and still am, unwilling to give up my dream. It’s cost me my marriage as well. So that’s the price that I’ve paid to continue playing golf. But when I was 10 years old at school I was looking out of the window daydreaming about having an opportunity to play – I’m not prepared to give up on it yet. I wouldn’t change it for anything, I really wouldn’t. It’s upsetting that it led to, in fact drastically led to, the breakdown of my marriage, but, would I do it all again? Yes, I’d always planned to be a golfer or die in the process.”

Dr Fry said: “The significance of this point is that the perceptions many people have of the lives of professional sportspeople and their families is one of leading a life of luxury with very few cares, however the reality, it appears, is that in many ways this is not the case and many have particular stresses.

“The work presented here moves beyond the often glamorised celebrity media portrayals of professional sportspeople’s families to detail the reality of their lives. Not only are the golfers themselves often presented in a glorified, romanticised way, so too are their apparently ‘perfect’ family lives. More specifically professional golfers, who are out on tour, and their partners, who are back at home, experience intense feelings of isolation and loneliness given the time they spend apart”.

“The take home message from this research is that it clearly takes a particular type of person to cope with the lifestyle of touring professional golf”.

Of the interviewees, 17 were British, one was from another European country and two were from outside Europe.

- Dr Fry is Research Lead at the International Institute for Golf Education at Myerscough College. His co-researcher on the research was Dr Daniel Bloyce [correct], Head of Sport at the University of Chester.

Further quotes:

Loneliness

An EPGA tour player for 12 years said of his life: “The word that jumps in my head is lonely”.

Another golfer said: “One of the biggest things you give up, and I suppose you do in a lot of professional sports, is your friends – your best friends and the people you were at college with – one of the things you miss really. I’ve got some good friends out there [on tour] but I have found it hard – a lonely place. For example when you are travelling with four guys and they’re playing well and you’re playing awful, you’re missing cuts and they’re winning. They’ve got the highs and the good emotions of that and you’ve got the lows. You’re like one of a kind in that sense.”

An EPGA tour player for over 10 years said: “I am not surprised that many professional golfers get divorced because it can put a lot of pressure on partners. I have been divorced and my current wife, I am not sure she would have coped with me being away [on tour] ... At first there is no problem but then over time it will grind on them.”

One golfer, who won main tour events and a major championship, said golf “can be the most wonderful life in the world but it can also be the most difficult. If you play poorly it is the loneliest game because it is really all up to you. It can just be a lonely game. It can be gut wrenching, furious at times. It can get to a point where you don’t like who you are because you play poorly. Then when you play great golf or good golf and you’re successful and can make a living and win championships, win majors even ... it’s the most glorious thing and you’re revered by everyone but there is a grand canyon of differences between each emotions.”

Competitiveness

One Challenge series golfer told Dr Fry: “Guys come up to me and they want a lesson on putting – what advantage to me is my giving you a lesson on putting? They all want to know how I putt well, but I’m not going to give them everything, it’s not in my interest to. They’re not going to pay me for the lesson. If I said, right, give me a percentage of your winnings this week but they’re never going to do that – at the end of the day I’m not going to give away my advantage, just not a chance.”

Income

One Challenge series golfer said: “Unless you’re winning or in the top five or perhaps top 10 every week you’re not really making a huge amount of money. Almost definitely there are some people which it has cost them money. I would say that more than half the players who are playing, it has cost them money.”

Another said: “I think professional golfers need a certain gambling mentality because it’s effectively what you’re doing. You’re risking your expenses for the week on your golf game. And if you’re prepared to deal with that, and the consequences of that, then you’ll be better off. If you’re a ‘fly by the seats of your pants’ type person, it helps. If you’re a safe planner, I think you might struggle.”

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Notes

1. The British Sociological Association’s annual conference takes place at Glasgow Caledonian University from 15 to 17 April 2015. Around 800 research presentations are given.
2. The British Sociological Association’s charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk