

Drawing the Line

By: Nathan Crace Date: February 25, 2005

"...you've got to be kidding me! You've been playing from the ladies' tees this whole time!" Most golf joke enthusiasts know the precursor to this infamous punch line, but few thought there would come a time when the story behind the story would become a part of reality on a real professional golf tour. And thus begins the story of Mianne Bagger.

Looking back, we should have all seen it coming. Not that it's good, bad, or indifferent; but why would the women get upset over a man-turned-woman wanting to play with the women when everyone heralded Annika Sorenstam like she was the second coming for playing in the MasterCard Colonial two years ago? Is that hypocritical? You decide. Sorenstam was and is undoubtedly the best female golfer in the world, so why not let her tee it up with the big guys to see if she could compete? You may recall, my problem was that she did not have to qualify to play and, by doing so, stole Suzy Whaley's thunder when she had already qualified to play in a PGA Tour event by winning her PGA Section's Championship the previous year. Now, we have a female teenager playing the Tour every time it swings through the Aloha state and the same people who can't get enough of this are quietly questioning the trans-gender issue. "Hey Pot! This is the Kettle. You're black."

For those who do not yet know the story, Mianne Bagger is a transsexual woman who is a talented player, but has been fighting against the "female at birth" clauses in most major professional women's tours around the world—leaving her for a time as a golfer without a tour. The native of Denmark is currently fighting the LPGA and the USGA in this respect, although she earned her 2005 Ladies' European Tour card by qualifying through their Q school. The Ladies' Golf Union and the Australian Ladies Professional Tour dropped their female at birth statutes—opening the door for Bagger to play in the Weetabix Women's British Open, the Evian Masters, and, if she qualifies, the Solheim Cup where she would compete against American members of the LPGA Tour.

If you are waiting for me to question Bagger's objectives, you're reading the wrong column. From all the information I can find, she just wants to play golf for a living. I also refuse to use my bully pulpit on golf as a public forum on cultural issues that are no one's business other than those making the decisions for themselves. Despite the obvious benefit of not being forced to wear slacks while playing golf in the middle of summer, her decision to play professional golf as a female after undergoing "gender reassignment surgery" in 1995 will leave her facing enough critics and finger wagglers—I don't care to get into someone's personal life.

Instead, my goal is to look at the issue from both sides and let you, the public, decide for yourselves if it's wrong or right or if—in light of everything going on in the world—it really doesn't matter. Bagger says she has no unfair physical advantage over the professional women who meet the female-at-birth standard of the LPGA and the USGA. Anyone who has seen photos of her and contrasted with the photos of Laura Davies would be inclined to agree—and four other LPGA players outdistanced Davies for average driving distance in 2004! So if she has no advantage in driving the ball, what advantage would she have over the others on Tour?

As I said, I'm not going to judge someone for a private and personal decision they make about their own life. I may have my opinion about the issue of gender modification, but that's not the issue here. But I don't think men will begin to flock to clinics for sex changes just so they can compete with the ladies if the LPGA changes its mind. Personally, I think members of the LPGA should have the right to make their own rules. It's their Tour!

But what is Bagger to do if she wants to play for the bigger purses in the United States? If the women do not want her on their Tour, she could turn to the PGA Tour where all of the members violate the "female-at-birth" clause. Then we once again raise the specter of women on the men's Tour, but with a twist. If Vijay didn't want Annika at the Colonial, how would he feel about a woman who used to be a man playing the PGA Tour? I smell a made-for-TV movie for *Lifetime!* Or at least a FOX reality series.

As more people pick up the game of golf, it naturally changes and adapts to reflect the wider spectrum of cultures of those who enjoy the game. Such is human nature and thus the nature of the activities in which we participate. The game of golf may never be the same and the coming years may find a woman playing the PGA Tour fulltime—and Brian Kontak qualifying for the US Women's Open and playing the LPGA Tour!

And in the middle is Mianne Bagger. I would imagine her success on the European circuit would influence the decision-makers in the U.S. If she can't win and can't perform, it may become a moot point. If she wins an event or two—or something like the Weetabix Women's British Open—then the heat in the LPGA's kitchen will be considerably more noticeable. There are no easy answers and the permutations of various scenarios quickly become mind numbing to even the savviest of conspiracy theorists. As with other issues, only time will tell what decisions were made, which lines were drawn, and whether they altered the course of history.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2005.