

Barred From Men's-Only Event, Woman Sues Public Golf Club

By **MARCIA CHAMBERS**
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Elaine Joyce, a champion amateur golfer, and her father were looking forward to a weekend tournament last May at the respected public course on Cape Cod where they hold full memberships. But their names were not listed when officials posted the tee times for the event at the Dennis Pines course.



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

Elaine Joyce filed a federal lawsuit after she was denied access to an event at her golf club.

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men's tournaments.

On Friday, Joyce, 43, filed a federal lawsuit in United States District Court in Boston to challenge the town and the golf officials. Her case confronts the tradition of men's tournaments on morning weekends, events that are woven into the fabric of golf life at private and public courses.

The 25-page federal complaint says that by denying Joyce the same "full citizenship status" as men at a public golf course is as unlawful as operating a men's-only bar or a whites-only drinking fountain. Joyce is "entitled to the equal opportunity to aspire, to achieve and to participate based upon her individual talents and capacities regardless of

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her gender," her lawyer, Laura R. Studen, said.

The lawsuit names the Town of Dennis, Canevazzi and the top three golf officials — Dennis Penner, the golf director; Michael Cummings, the head golf course superintendent; and Champoux. The claim said the three golf officials set the rules and eligibility for the May tournament. The suit seeks damages, including punitive damages, and legal fees. It also seeks an injunction to stop the practice.

Neither Canevazzi nor Harris returned telephone calls seeking comment Monday.

Joyce said she hoped the case would send a message to municipal golf courses nationwide. The National Golf Foundation lists 2,361 municipal courses and 9,105 daily fee courses, those opened to the public but owned privately.

The Dennis Pines case is unusual because it centers on a municipal course. Exclusion based on race, gender, religion or age is rarely confronted because towns know their courses are open to the public and come under state laws involving public accommodations. At many public and private clubs, women have sought change from within, seeking to undo the entrenched weekend tee times that come with men's tournament play. Many argue that they, like the men, work during the week.

Although Elaine Joyce is a member, Champoux, the head pro, did not inform her of the decision to bar her from playing. Instead, he called her father.

In separate interviews, Joyce and her father said they were astonished by the club's actions because they considered the issue settled. This close-knit golf community straddles two towns, Dennis and Yarmouth. After a brutal fight a decade ago, Joyce succeeded in playing with men on weekends at Bayberry Hill and Bass River, the public courses in nearby Yarmouth.

In her complaint, Joyce said the latest experience at Dennis Pines left her feeling "ostracized, marginalized, humiliated, embarrassed and denounced." She said many men played in tournaments in each town and knew about her case in Yarmouth. There, Joyce wanted to become a member of the so-called Forty Thieves men's group so she could play on weekend mornings and play competitively.

Eventually, the Yarmouth town administrator found that Bayberry Hill and Bass River were subject to the state's antidiscrimination laws. He told the Forty Thieves to accept her or lose their block of preferential weekend tee times. They reluctantly accepted her.

In the past two decades, many women have taken private golf clubs to court, suing over weekend tee times, membership, divorce issues and access to men's-only dining rooms.

Joyce said she began to feel hostility after she filed the state discrimination complaint in July. One Saturday, after a match-play club championship, she walked into the clubhouse after the first round.

"There were 20 to 25 guys in there," she said. "And as soon I walked in the door, everything stopped. Silence. 'There she is. That's the woman. That's the problem.' Stupid stuff like that."

Joyce compared the experience to her fight to play with the Forty Thieves. After the town acted in that case, it took 18 months for her to be admitted as a member. Joyce said some members of the group were appalled and let her know it. One said he would play only if she played naked. Others walked off the course when paired with her. Some refused to speak to her during rounds.

"In any sport I have ever played, the only way you get better is if you play with people

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who are at least as good if not better than you," Joyce said. "That is how you get better in basketball. That's how you get better in baseball, any sport out there."

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