

“The Wild Women”: Female Violence against Male Sport

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Although few historians now believe that the average Victorian woman was a delicate creature in need of male protection, subservient to the needs of the family and “cramped by custom, corset and crinoline”, many would still agree that femininity, ladylike attributes and dutiful behaviour were expected from the female half of the population¹. As the issue of votes for women began to polarise opinion at the end of the nineteenth century, the vast majority of suffrage activists took care to present a womanly appearance, with traditional hats, gloves and elaborate hairstyles, as they attempted to persuade hostile politicians and a largely sceptical public that they deserved the franchise. But the Edwardian era saw elements within the movement increasingly resort to violent acts to publicise their case, calling forth all manner of derogatory terms. Winston Churchill referred to them as “a band of silly, neurotic, hysterical women”². The weekly magazine *The Gentlewoman* branded them “a collection of wildly irresponsible females”³. Even the term “suffragette”, first used by the populist newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, in 1906 is a diminutive of “suffragist”, and was used to distinguish the new breed of militant from the law-abiding supporter of political reform. “The wild women” was another phrase frequently used to describe the unladylike creatures who burst on to the political scene. A press report during the Newcastle by-election of 1908 described suffragettes as “hysterical wild women” while the weekly golfing magazine *Golf Illustrated* noted on 13 March 1914 that “Bath has lately been visited by the wild women”⁴. How and why sport became one of their targets is the subject of this paper.

The campaign for women’s suffrage in Britain gathered pace in the decade before 1914 after years of conventional speech-making, petitions and genteel pressure on successive governments had failed to deliver the vote. Until then the methods and demeanour of activists within the movement was labelled “all very polite and very tame” by Sylvia Pankhurst⁵, one of the members of a family who were soon to galvanise the political landscape. But with the formation by her mother Emmeline of a new organisation, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), in 1903, tactics began to change. A strategy of disorderly behaviour was launched in 1905 when Christabel, the eldest of the Pankhurst sisters, disrupted a party political meeting, assaulted a policeman who tried to evict her and thus became the first suffragette to be imprisoned. The next seven years saw marches, demonstrations and stunts to publicise the crusade, and politicians who were against female suffrage were regularly heckled and harassed. It was unfortunate for members of the government that many of them were keen golfers: the golf course was to become a battleground in the women’s fight for the vote.

Initially violence was committed against the men themselves. The first incident took place in 1909 when three young women cornered the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and his Home Secretary while they were playing a round of golf in Kent⁶. When he next appeared on a golf course he was accompanied by five local plain clothes policemen and a detective from Scotland Yard, a much larger bodyguard than that employed to protect the Chief Secretary for Ireland during the most recent Irish troubles⁷. It would seem from this that the suffragettes were considered to be more dangerous than Irish Nationalists! Most events, however, occurred on the links of north-east Scotland, where Asquith passed many hours of his summer holiday. He was verbally assaulted by a Mrs Cruikshank while playing near Balmoral in August 1912⁸. A few weeks later he and Home Secretary Reginald McKenna were set upon

by two women at the Royal Dornoch course, an episode that was apparently kept from the press to avoid publicity⁹. The following year, according to the historian of that club, a further incident involved a woman who appeared from nearby houses and attacked the Prime Minister, knocking off his hat. She was escorted from the course by the club captain and secretary¹⁰.

The most publicised assault took place in August 1913 when Asquith was playing with his daughter at the Moray Golf Club, Lossiemouth. Two “well-dressed young ladies” allegedly rushed on to the 17th green, seized his arms, tugged at his clothes, knocked his hat off and hit him over the head with a magazine¹¹. Press reports state that they also shouted abuse and pulled his hair before he was rescued by his detectives who had been discreetly following him round the course¹². The women were arrested and charged with assault and breach of the peace while Asquith apparently holed out and continued his round. The charges were later dropped to spare the Prime Minister from a court appearance.

It was not a golf course, however, but a racecourse that saw the most infamous act of violence. During the 1913 Epsom Derby a woman emerged from the crowd at Tattenham Corner as the horses rounded the bend and appeared to lunge at one of the backmarkers. The horse crashed to the ground, throwing his jockey and bringing down his assailant. The jockey Herbert Jones recovered but the woman, Emily Davison, a member of the WSPU, later died from her injuries. These are the bare facts of an event that shocked the Edwardian public, immortalised the victim and still remains a partially unresolved mystery. Did Emily Davison intend to kill herself? Probably not, for although she had already attempted suicide while in Holloway Prison, she had a return rail ticket to London in her purse and a pass for a WSPU event later that afternoon. Was it a tragic accident? She may have been trying to cross the racecourse thinking the horses had all passed but the bend would unfortunately have obscured her view of the stragglers: the runner she collided with was near the back of the field. Was it a publicity stunt that went wrong? The issue here is further complicated by the ownership of the horse: Anmer belonged to King George V. Although many commentators were convinced that she could not have singled out a particular animal racing at 50kph, her biographers believe that she was specifically trying to bring down the King’s horse or attempting to pin the suffragette colours of purple, white and green to its bridle in a gesture of protest to the royal family¹³. Queen Alexandra was not amused, referring to Davison in a letter of condolence to the injured jockey as a “brutal, lunatic woman”¹⁴.

Attacks against the person were relatively uncommon. Instead the weeks before Christmas 1912 saw pillar boxes targeted as suffragettes dropped burning objects into the waiting mail and sent inflammable chemicals through the post. However, in a speech that October Emmeline Pankhurst had already identified the main object of militant action: “the secret idol of property!”¹⁵ With the failure of the latest bill to enfranchise women in January 1913, the WSPU began an arson campaign targeted at buildings which was to last until the outbreak of World War I. During this period railway stations, churches, schools, private houses and industrial premises were bombed or set on fire. Orchids were destroyed at Kew Gardens, works of art in Manchester and London galleries were slashed and Lloyd George’s partly completed new house near Walton Heath was blown up.

Many other attacks took place but no-one seems to have noted that a significant number were on sports venues. Reports from *The Times* suggest that 64 major incidents occurred between March and December 1913 and, of these, sports premises accounted for roughly one-sixth. The figure of 64 probably underestimates attacks that were carried out away from London and the South East of England and obviously does not include unsuccessful efforts at fire-raising. A larger though not comprehensive list may be found in *The Suffragette*, the WSPU journal,