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WOMEN IN sport get a raw deal, which – let’s be honest – is nothing new. As far back as the days when Pierre de Coubertin introduced the Olympic movement to the world, the Baron had a rider which went along the lines of, “no matter how toughened a sportswoman may be, her organism is not cut out to sustain certain shocks.” As a sport, golf – which to this day has its share of gender discrimination from Augusta to Portmarnock – was not deemed unworthy of women by de Coubertin: along with tennis and croquet, golf was one of only three sports in which women participated in the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris. Although, on a wider scale, such stereotypes as those propagated by the Olympics’ founding father still fuelled gender-based discrimination in competitive sport for many years.

The strides made by women can be viewed by the statistic from the 2004 Olympic Games which showed women’s participation levels had increased to the point where 24 of the 26 sports featured female athletes and women comprised 40.7 per cent of the total number of athletes. Things are headed in the right direction, even if the media – print, radio and television – are playing catch-up in terms of coverage and the global plight for greater recognition can be gauged by the need for an international conference on women and sport, which this year will take place in Sydney, Australia, in May.

Still, next year’s Solheim Cup at Killeen Castle in Dunsany, Co Meath, will provide evidence of just how equal things are here at home. It only seems like yesterday the Ryder Cup was staged at The K Club, with all of the insatiable appetites it brought: from the worldwide media, Corporate Ireland and record-breaking crowds. What does next year’s Solheim Cup, the women’s equivalent of the Ryder Cup, hold? Can we expect the same media frenzy for Michelle Wie and Co. as we had for, ahem, Tiger Woods and Co?

Can we expect Corporate Ireland – nowadays a starved animal compared to the fattened days of the Celtic Tiger – to get behind it in any shape or form? Will the crowds descend on this corner of Co Meath in the same way as they did to Straffan just over three years ago? The answers to all three questions should be – as much as they can be in these days of credit crunching – in the affirmative.

In the fairness to the Government, it has backed the Solheim Cup cent for cent in terms of marketing and funding when compared with its efforts in the run-up to the Ryder Cup . . . and, if there were ever a case for positive discrimination in terms of advancing the cause of women’s sport by ensuring comparable finances were made available, then this is it.

The Solheim Cup doesn’t have the same history as the Ryder Cup, having only started in 1990. Yet, in that short time-frame, it has produced many memorable matches and developed a rivalry between Europe and the United States that has given players like Annika Sorenstam, Laura Davies, Alison Nicholas, Nancy Lopez, Meg Mallon and Rosie Jones to put alongside their individual accomplishments in major championships.

Speaking on the phone to the newly appointed US captain during the week, I was struck by the passion that Rosie Jones – who spent 25 years on the LPGA Tour – exudes, both for her sport and for her elevation to the captaincy. Her expectation is the Irish sporting public will get fully and completely behind this great event, augmented by large travelling armies of supporters from the European mainland (the Swedes, especially, are expected to travel in numbers) and the United States.

The irony is the Solheim Cup may have been awarded to Ireland a little too soon: before the teenage Maguire twins – Lisa and Leona – have served an apprenticeship in the amateur game that will surely lead to professional careers, and before economic recovery (fingers-crossed!) sets in. Unlike the K Club where we had three home players (Pádraig Harrington, Paul McGinley and, of course, the whole emotion of Darren Clarke’s involvement), there is the real possibility no Irish player will make the European team, although prospects have been boosted by the fact that Galway-born Alison Walshe, a star of the US Curtis Cup team in 2008, has committed to Europe since turning professional.

Walshe left these shores at a young age and was raised in Massachusetts but the eligibility requirements for the Solheim Cup are that players must be born in the USA or in Europe – so, Walshe has been forced to switch sides, so to speak.

Earlier this week, Walshe – a rookie on the LPGA Tour and on the LET in Europe – received funding from the Team Ireland Golf Trust to the tune of €20,000 as she embarks on a professional career that could conceivably see her gatecrash her way on to the European team. It would be great if she did . . . but it would be even better if the Solheim Cup here was given the same treatment as the Ryder Cup received. Let’s have some gender balance on this one, please.



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