



## Bagger Makes European Tour Golf Debut in Australia

By Dennis Passa, The Associated Press



Mianne Bagger eyes a tee during her debut on the Ladies European tour.

Photo by Steve Holland, AP

GOLD COAST, Australia — Mianne Bagger hopes that at some point in her golfing career, she'll be known for her prowess with a driver or putter. Right now, though, the attention Bagger receives is more about who she used to be.

Bagger, born a male in Copenhagen, Denmark, on Dec. 25, 1966, began playing golf as an 8-year-old — and became pretty good. *Golf World* magazine ran a photo of Bagger as a 14-year-old boy posing with Greg Norman at a golf clinic.

After getting down to a 4-handicap, Bagger stopped playing golf in 1992 to begin the transformation to a female with hormone therapy. Bagger had a sex-change operation three years later, then resumed playing in 1998.

The Adelaide, Australia resident made her European tour debut Thursday in the ANZ Ladies Masters at Royal Pines, shooting an even-par 72. Before her round, she said she was incredulous that some suggest she changed her sex so she could have an unfair advantage playing women's golf.

"That always infuriated me so much, to say 'What's to stop some guy from having a sex-change operation to play the women's tour?'" Bagger said Wednesday in an interview with The Associated Press. "It really exhibits the level of ignorance that exists."

Nonetheless, rules are being changed to allow her to compete.

In November, she secured a 2005 tour card by tying for ninth in qualifying school, just weeks after the circuit changed its "female at birth" policy to allow her to compete. The Australian tour and Britain's Ladies Golf Union have also changed their

bylaws, and the LPGA Tour is looking into its policy that would now prevent Bagger from competing.

Once she qualified for the tour, Bagger began thinking about how she would be accepted by Europe's leading female players. Another transsexual, Renee Richards, faced some opposition when she played on the women's tennis tour in the 1970s.

Turns out, Bagger didn't need to worry.

"They've all been wonderful. Now they say, 'Let's get over it, let's get past it.' I've been welcomed by all of them," Bagger said. "I hope I've broken the barriers down, and now I'm just one of the girls out there playing."

Germany's Elisabeth Esterl, a member of the European tour's player council, acknowledged that there were some initial concerns.

"There were a lot of questions about Mianne's situation, and some suggestions, yes, that perhaps anyone could have a sex-change operation and join our tour," Esterl said.

"But once we received her information, and read up on the case, we realized that it was a compelling issue. We realized that as a tour, we could lead the way in saying that Mianne's situation was something we needed to accept and we changed our rules accordingly.

"She has been great. She is very welcome by all the players."

While Annika Sorenstam and Michelle Wie have made headlines for competing in men's events, Bagger became the first known transsexual to play in a women's professional golf tournament. She missed the cut with rounds of 84 and 74 at the Australian Open last year.

Her early career as a pro hasn't been lucrative, earning just over \$1,200. She missed the cut in her last two secondary tour events in Australia.

"I'm working on my swing," said Bagger, who is 5-foot-10 and 150 pounds. "I don't want to make excuses, but I've just played bad golf the past couple of weeks. I just have to work through a bad patch until I come good. A lot of players go through it."

What's unique, of course, is Bagger's life experience outside the lines, something she is willing to discuss.

She spoke Wednesday about contemplating suicide before deciding to become a woman.

"There are so many hurdles you face, and this is an option of life. For me, it was a life-and-death thing. I couldn't go on living the way I was before," Bagger said.

"People are unaware of the anguish and anxiety that we go through in childhood, and the pain, to reach this decision. But we also know that once we make the decision,

we face a society of discrimination, of hardships, of abuse, of sometime violent abuse, and in some places of not being able to adopt children. We have difficulty finding relationships, and some are completely disowned by their families and friends."

She figures that at some point she might have to deal with spectators saying less-than-kind things. There might be bumps in the road, but Bagger is determined to deal with them.

And, someday, to have others focus squarely on her game.

"I'd like to be in here talking about my golf," Bagger said. "If I go out and play badly, I'll be treated like anyone else who plays badly — I won't be in here. I hope it will become old news."

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