

Preview

A Missing Link In History: The Journey of African Americans in Golf

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Preface

*A memorable portrait of a sport endured
by diverse ages, genders, and cultures.*

I was inspired to write this book after receiving, from visitors at my traveling exhibit—*Epochs of Courage: African Americans in Golf*, numerous requests for hands-on information about African American golf history. Parents wanted to share it with their children and grandchildren, teachers wanted to introduce it to their students and colleagues, and others just wanted to know more. From those requests, this book evolved—a reference guide, but one of passion and joy.

This book is divided into six parts. Several features, including a timeline and two indexes (a general index and an index to parts one to four), will help you navigate your way through a rich history that spans over 125 years.

Part One focuses on black caddies, the first African American professional golfer, the first recipient of a United States Patent for a wooden golf tee invention, and African American golf course builders and designers.

Part Two focuses on prejudices, injustices, defeats, and triumphs that are described through court cases, personal experiences, historical accomplishments, and landmark decisions.

Part Three gives you biographical information on amateur and professional golfers, and highlights industry and golf professionals. It is written to create lively individual portraits of those players and their activities. Part three also includes two graphs that compare the total number of African American to non-African American—(1) Tour players, and (2) LPGA and PGA Members.

Part Four provides a resource of detailed information about past and current developments that are not player-related—such as inventions, publications, and events.

Part Five is a timeline that chronicles African American golf history from 1879–2009.

Part Six includes 225 quiz statements. Test your knowledge of African American golf history. Take this as a pretest and then redo it after you read *A Missing Link In History*.

I am confident that you will gain a greater understanding of the African American role, and effect—on the growth and development of golf. I hope, then, that you will fashion a fresh respect and relevance—to a history that matters.

The following are excerpts.

Introduction

*A legacy of dreams, progress, tribulations,
and triumphs...but where are the accolades?*

As recently as the late fifties and early sixties, I remember segregated schools, theaters, hospitals, and “Colored Only” signs for water fountains and public restrooms.

I remember coming home one night and seeing a Ku Klux Klan cross burning in our front yard. I remember standing on our front porch seeing hooded white robes and burning crosses at Ku Klux Klan rallies less than a mile away. I remember...!

While engulfed by these flames of bigotry, I did not know that a similar injustice occurred at a golf course less than two miles away from our family home. Bide-A-Wee Golf Club, a private “whites only” facility, was leased property on public land owned by the city of Portsmouth, Virginia—my hometown—rooted in the racism of golf.

An October 4, 1992 article in *The Virginian Pilot* titled, *Goodbye to Bide-A-Wee*, plainly told the Bide-A-Wee story— “...one of pain and frustration...”—a story too common to African American Golf History....

In 2001, I traveled to my hometown—excited to finally do hands-on research of Bide-A-Wee Golf Club; but I quickly discovered this to be a challenging task. When I attempted to interview persons at Bide-A-Wee, one longtime white member told me flatly, “Don’t come around here digging up old bad stuff. Yeah, I was there. I know exactly what happened. But I’m not gonna tell you.”

The longer I researched this extraordinary history, the clearer it became that African American golf history is like the civil rights history of the United States—rife with suppression and rejection. Charlie Sifford, George Simkins, and many others who worked tirelessly to break the color barriers in golf, had countless Jim Crow experiences. Such racist actions created color lines of economical, physical, and social separations. Now in this new millennium, many of those same separations—generated by elements such as hostility, fear, and ignorance—still exist.

I return to the question posed in the beginning of this introduction: “*Where are the accolades?*”

Although the history of African Americans in golf spans over 100 years, only a few museums display—even a small— collection of African American golf memorabilia, and only a handful of African Americans have been honored by major golf organizations.

The same is true of the World Golf Hall of Fame. Within a 35-year span, from 1974 to 2009 (originating with the Pinehurst Hall of Fame), there were 130 inductees—but only one African American inductee—Charlie Sifford, who was inducted on November 15, 2004.

In November 2009, The PGA of America granted posthumous honorary membership to Joe Louis Barrow Sr. (better known as Joe Louis, heavyweight boxing champion), and posthumous memberships to Theodore “Ted” Rhodes, John Shippen Jr., and William “Bill” Spiller.

I ponder. Are these benevolent gestures grounds for optimism...?

To put things in perspective, African Americans— collectively, have not received their rightful place in the history of golf. Therefore, I hope that after you read this book, you will applaud and acknowledge the historical contributions, and help give this rich history—the accolades it so well deserves.

—*Ramona Harriet*

Part One Old Customs—New Ground

*From my life experiences, I have many stories to tell.
As long as you are black, you will always have a story to tell.*
—William Powell

In the 1700s, slaves were the labor force of America. Even after lawmakers, in the 1860s, adopted the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, civil liberties and equal protection under the law for blacks were not enforced. The color of America's labor force did not change.

This injustice was as real in the sport of golf, as it was anywhere else. In the late 1800s, when golf emerged on the United States as a sport for white Americans, slavery was at its peak. Slaves worked tilling fields and toting crop sacks, and many toted golf bags and toiled on fairways and greens.

In the early 1900s, golf continued to be as segregated as America's schools, theaters, churches, neighborhoods, and public transportation. Known as a gentlemen's sport—white men were considered the only ones who had the finesse to play golf or work in the golf industry.

In spite of these prejudices, African Americans began to carve a place for themselves in golf history. Even though they rarely received recognition for their accomplishments, nor given equal opportunities to use their talents on or off America's public and private golf courses, African Americans became great caddies, inventors, players, and course architects.

From this vantage point, was the birth of a history that would later impact golf—not only in America—but also around the world.

Rooted By the Bondage of Slavery: Black Caddies

For decades, the vast responsibilities of a caddie were considered demeaning tasks. Caddies carried two or more golf bags per round, assisted players with club selection and reading greens, estimated yardage, searched for golf balls, maintained golf courses, and cleaned shoes, clubs, and balls. Generally classified as a position of servitude—black caddies were disrespected and received subaverage wages— or no wages.

There were more African American caddies than Caucasian caddies. Scorned as a job of humiliation, white men were considered too good to caddie. This racial imbalance is an example of how society generally deemed the two races—Whites superior—Blacks inferior.

Caddies were primarily identified by numbers—not by their names. Their supervisor, known as caddie master, assigned work in numerical order or upon player request. For example—a caddie master sent out caddie number 41 before caddie number 42, but if a player requested a specific caddie whose identification number was 42 or higher, the caddie master usually honored that request.

Many white caddie masters were known for being verbally and physically abusive toward black caddies.

In 1927, at Highland Park Golf Course in Birmingham, Alabama, a white caddie master shot and killed a Negro caddie. According to a June 4, 1927 article titled, *Caddy Slain At Municipal Links* on page 2 in the *The Birmingham News*:

W.H. Derrick, a caddie master, accused 24-year-old Eugene Harris of going out to caddie when it was not his turn. Derrick confronted Harris on the first hole and ordered him to give the golf bag to the caddie who he was accused of jumping ahead of. Harris denied that he caddied out of turn because his player, David Stevens, had personally asked him to caddie. Investigative reports indicated that Stevens confirmed that—he did ask Harris to caddie for him.

Derrick claimed that the one shot that he fired was in self-defense because he felt threatened by the way Harris took a golf club out of the bag. The single bullet entered Harris's neck below the larynx. Harris died within minutes. It was an hour or more before the coroner arrived. During that wait, Harris's body remained on the first tee.

As a result of an investigation by Coroner Russum, and motor scouts Norrell and Allen, it was reported that Derrick acted hastily; and he should be charged for unjustifiable homicide.

Derrick was arrested and denied bail.

(Documentation of legal actions that occurred after Derrick's arrest was not found under this research.)

Part Two Changing the Color Line

I will not take "but" for an answer.
—Langston Hughes

In 1896, John Shippen became the first African American to play in a U.S. Open; in that same year, a Supreme Court ruling, in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, upheld the legalization of segregation. Homer Ferguson, a 30-year old shoemaker from Louisiana, challenged the constitutionality of “Whites Only” and “Coloreds Only” segregated railroad coaches.

On June 7, 1892, Ferguson purchased a train ticket to travel from New Orleans, Louisiana to Covington, Louisiana. Ferguson, who was biracial (African American and Caucasian), boarded the train and sat in the “Whites Only” section. A train employee informed Ferguson that he had to move to the “Coloreds Only” coach because the coach that he was sitting in was for whites only.... Ferguson refused to move to the “Coloreds Only” coach. He was arrested.

In the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the courts referred to the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and concluded that the separate railroad coaches provided equal services. A Supreme Court ruling upheld the lower courts ruling—the *Separate But Equal* clause was withheld.

This ruling by the United States Supreme Court provided a constitutional basis for segregation. The separate-but-equal standard became the foundation of many lawsuits filed by African Americans seeking unrestricted access to public golf courses.

The following sections are focused on: acts and symbols of racism; municipal, state, and federal rulings; and landmark accomplishments.

Resent and Rebuff

Fort Worth, Texas

Desegregation policies were very quiet and not really advertised to the public, according to Shirley Apley, Senior Librarian, Fort Worth Public Library. “Usually someone from the City of Fort Worth told the African American ministers who would then—tell their congregations.”

There were four city-owned and operated “whites only” golf courses—Meadowbrook, Rockwood, Worth Hills, and Z. Boaz. During the 1940s, black golfers set up their own course at Greenway Park, a city park set aside for blacks. “It...lacked restrooms. There were no greens, no fairways, no fancy stuff, just a couple of coffee cups and a rag with a stick on it for a flag. The makeshift course at Greenway was the hand-me-down of hand-me-downs,” members of the Fort Worth Negro Golf Association and the Golden Tee Golf Club recalled. (*Angel Beck, Fort Worth Star-Telegram*)

On November 16, 1950, the City Manager received a letter (addressed to the City Council) from the Fort Worth Negro Golf Association:

We the members of the Fort Worth Negro Golf Association, in view of the dissent in the Tyler case of *Park v. People*, do not plan any court action because of the promises of the Park Department and Recreation Department to give our association the honor of defending the parks of Fort Worth by providing adequate golf facilities for the year of 1951. However, we are, by no means, using this federal ruling as a “big stick” in contending for what we have asked for for 13, or more years.

...Consequently, we are withholding any action until such time as we may hear from the facilities named herein. —Lawrence B. Sanders, Secretary

(*Courtesy Fort Worth Public Library Archives*)

The City Council held a special closed session and later announced that Negroes were granted access to play one city golf course—one day a year. That designated day was June 19 (known as Juneteenth, Black Liberation Day in Texas).

In 1954, Harmon Field Golf Course, a “blacks only” city course, was built at Greenway Park in East Fort Worth. Harmon Field was opened for about four years—June 13, 1954 to April 1, 1958. Compared to the “whites only courses”, Harmon Field was underserved....

Clubhouse Thoughts

*...the colour of the skin is no way connected
with the strength of mind or intellectual powers.*

—Benjamin Banneker

Some may ponder and try to speculate what the future in golf will be for African Americans and persons of African American ancestry. I suggest that we first grasp the contributions and conflicts of this rich history—beginning with John Shippen Jr. and continuing up to Eldrick “Tiger” Woods. But, don’t become complacent after the Tiger Woods era—because African Americans will continue to impact golf (in business, competitive play, and socially) throughout this new millennium.

Let not these bitter-sweet turn of events give you a false sense of the symbolic transformations of American racism. The longevity of African Americans involvement in the game of golf—does not mean that all is well and that racism is no longer a problem. Here is a true example....

In February 2000 at Dunes Golf Club at Seville (Brooksville, Florida), Gordon Fleming and three other men were playing a practice round for a tournament hosted by the African American Golf Club of Hernando County. (Fleming is the founder of the club.) While playing, they were verbally and physically attacked by Huston Hill, a white male. Gordon Fleming recalled the incident:

Two white guys on the golf course were saying some really nasty things to us. We told the ranger, but he said that there was nothing that he could do. At the 17th hole, the white guys tried to run over us with their golf cart, but instead they ran over my uncle’s foot. When they drove by again, I hit one of them, Huston Hill, in the jaw. I hit him with my fist and I broke his jaw.

When we finished playing the 18th hole, we saw the parking lot full of police cars. Hill had called the police. But after the police investigated, they didn’t arrest me— they arrested Hill. He got out on bond the same day.

The incident received a lot of attention. As a matter of fact, the trial was scheduled to be on *Court TV*. Before the trial, I got a telephone call from the State’s Attorney. He asked me if I would agree to a *first time offender intervention* for Hill. I told him that I had no problem agreeing to that, and that I carried no vengeance—and no hate. My only stipulation was that Hill apologize to my friends, family, and Hernando County. Hill was not from Hernando County.

At the preliminary hearing, Hill initially refused to apologize. After he stepped outside with his attorney, he came back into the courtroom, and he apologized. The judge asked me if I accepted Hill’s apology. I said yes— and, that was the end of it.

(Gordon Fleming interviewed by the author, August 2007)

Some may have blinders and take Fleming’s encounter as an isolated incident. While others, who still honor the “good old boys cultural traditions”, may view it as just another incident of common occurrences. Whatever you conclude, the fact remains that even though golf’s color line for African Americans has been broken in different areas, that line of separation still exist. Will this color line always be a collage of scattered broken pieces? Will African Americans ever receive fair and equal opportunities to fill in the missing link? Take an unbiased view of the other side of golf’s color line. Remove your blinders.

—Ramona Harriet