

**Blacks, Golf, and the Emerging Civil Rights Movement,  
1947-1954**

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## Introduction

Blacks have played an integral role in the development and increase in popularity of sports in America. However, it is not without great strife that African Americans and other blacks achieved success in the sporting world. Jim Crow laws enforcing segregation extended beyond typical public facilities and onto playing fields. The story of baseball's Negro Leagues documents how black athletes of equal or greater talent to their white counterparts were restricted from playing in the Major Leagues for much more money, and instead played in the all-black but arguably equally competitive leagues in response.

Still, even in a time of widespread intolerance, there existed some important exceptions to the tradition of racial isolation and separation in American sports. A decade before Jackie Robinson, the renowned Negro Leaguer, broke down the color barrier in baseball, heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis became an American icon when he soundly defeated Nazi Germany's Max Schemling in 1938.

In spite of Louis's foreshadowing victory in the years before World War II, the paradox was evident of black athletes succeeding but being restricted from access to the better-maintained white facilities of the time, and competing at the highest level of their respective games. This example of inequity was fully evident in the history of golf, as black golfers had constantly to overcome obstacles in order to participate in the game.

Black golfers, like other black athletes, not only had to overcome these hurdles, but often they had to do so as individuals with little help. Additionally, the efforts for desegregation in golf happened at a much slower pace than compared to more mainstream sports such as baseball and boxing.<sup>1</sup> Louis himself became an avid golfer and advocate for equal rights in the game, helping

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<sup>1</sup> George B. Kirsch. *Golf In America*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009, 147.

the likes of Ted Rhodes, Bill Spiller, and Charlie Sifford become nationally-renowned figures within the African-American community.

A significant period of development for black golfers was the immediate post-World War II era, 1947-1954. Black golfers, many of whom were military veterans, struggled to play in white golf tournaments and on white courses, claiming that Jim Crow facilities under the “separate but equal” doctrine were inherently unequal. Ironically, in the context of the emerging post-war civil rights movement, black golfers thrived in some regards. The United Golfers Association, formed in 1925 as the United States Colored Golf Association, persisted and arguably reached its highest point of development in the post-World War II years as the black alternative to the Professional Golfers’ Association of America, until the latter removed its exclusionary “Caucasian Clause” in 1961.<sup>2</sup>

Journalistic coverage of black golfers by leading African American newspapers in the post-World War II era was fairly extensive. The principal data bases for this research project -- the city edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the national edition of the *Chicago Defender*, two papers with large readerships -- had regular golf columns and player profiles. Both newspapers rigorously covered UGA events as well as efforts by black golfers around the country to challenge segregationist policies and play on white golf courses. At a time when civil rights issues in general were coming to the nation’s political forefront, the experience of black golfers, and the coverage of golf by the black media, highlight how blacks continuously fought for equal rights in golf, while demonstrating, simultaneously, how they flourished in their own leagues in spite of Jim Crow restraints.

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*, 101.

## **Golf in the African American Community, 1947-1954: Some Brief Comments on the Secondary Literature**

Coverage by secondary sources on the 1947-1954 era is limited in some regards, but in many aspects key stories have been adequately covered. Golf enthusiasts and historians working with sources from the time have isolated key events such as the 1952 San Diego and Phoenix Opens, while highlighting actions of some of the leading figures of the time, including Joe Louis and Ted Rhodes. Yet, compared to events that happened before World War II and events after 1954, not much secondary literature discusses this period in detail.

Scholars have used autobiographical accounts by golfers such as Sifford and Spiller fairly frequently, but systematic investigation of the black media's attitudes towards golfers during this time remains at a preliminary state. Scholarship primarily pertains to the struggles of professional golfers and high profile figures such as Louis in fighting the PGA and other white groups to participate in premier golf tournaments. Historians particularly have focused on the political and cultural "back-drop" in the context of Jackie Robinson's Major League debut, the desegregation of the military, and the *Brown v. Board* decision. This eight year period, however, is largely interpreted as a period of transition. World War II is generally viewed as an experience that exposed many more blacks than ever before to the game of golf, which set up the increase in the sport's popularity in the post-war years. The removal of the Caucasian Clause from the PGA's constitution in 1961 is viewed as the delayed culmination of efforts by the post-war activists.

To this end, the interpretation of the black experience in golf, even during this era of greater exposure and success on the UGA circuit, has been somewhat circumscribed. The literature focuses more on the struggle against the PGA than on the success of the UGA. While

the leading black golfers of the time clearly desired to play on the PGA tour, most were equally motivated to succeed on the black circuit. Black newspapers did almost as much to promote the UGA circuit as to challenge the PGA's discriminatory policies. Similarly, secondary sources focus more on limitations, such as how black professionals largely were drawn to the game as caddies, rather than on how blacks in many northern communities played the game regularly and, in some instances, used their limited wealth to fund black-controlled golf courses.

Regional differences are not a core component of most historical narratives about blacks in golf. That said, it is also true that little attention has been paid to probe African Americans' interest in golf at the national level. Given the extensive readership of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender*, golf for blacks was being promoted to a national audience. Both professionals and amateurs seeking equal rights on the green had the attention of the black media throughout the post-war era, as a civil rights issue. Scholars have yet to fully document the impact of these locally produced but nationally oriented media outlets in increasing the sport's coverage and growing popularity in the African American community.

Secondary sources on African Americans and golf in the 1947-1954 era largely focus on the most widely-covered events and personalities, rather than on the efforts of everyday people trying to play on golf courses. Scholars have adequately profiled most of the top black golfers of the day, but little attention has been given to the many thousands of other black golfers and their struggle for equal access. Some scholars, such as Calvin Sinnette, offer histories of the black experience in golf, but in such sweeping accounts they only pay limited attention to the post-war era. Similarly, several authors, such as Robert J. Robertson, offer in-depth accounts of key events

involving Jim Crow and black golfers, but rely on instances that happened outside of the 1947-1954 era.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the primary sources used in this paper have gone untouched by the leading scholars of golf in the African American community. The UGA's existence is certainly covered, but mainly in direct comparison to the PGA rather than in terms of its value to the golfers themselves, and as a key cultural institution in the national black community.<sup>4</sup> And only a handful of the protracted legal cases filed by everyday black players, such as *Holmes v. City of Atlanta*, have been examined in much detail.<sup>5</sup> My research suggests that black newspaper accounts of these cases (including, for example, the *Atlanta Daily World* and *Baltimore Afro-American*, neither of which was readily available for my use) should provide an excellent resource for future scholarship on golf as a civil rights issue in the post-World War II era.

Scholar Marvin Dawkins offers the most persuasive narrative on golf in the Jim Crow era, aiming to bridge the success of Tiger Woods with the rise of the UGA in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> Dawkins effectively analyzes the rise of black middle class northern golfers after World War I and the formation of the UGA in 1926. He also succeeds in addressing the main events of 1947-1954 period, though he tends to characterize the UGA as a clearly inferior circuit to the PGA. While it was accepted that to play at the PGA level was to play at the highest level, many blacks did not view UGA competition as inadequate. The irony of the situation, to many black

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<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Robertson. *Fair Ways: How Six Black Golfers Won Civil Rights In Beaumont, Texas*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005. One such account that does focus on the 1947-1954 period highlights the struggle of Dr. Hamilton Mayo Holmes Sr. to play on an Atlanta's municipal course in 1951.<sup>3</sup> Ambrose *et al.* effectively showcase a struggle typical of the time. This work uses diverse primary source material that demonstrate how difficult it was for Atlanta's blacks to gain access to courses funded by their own tax dollars. Andy Ambrose, Brooke Barger, and Alexis Oliver. "'Negroes Cannot Play Here': The Desegregation of Atlanta's Golf Courses." *Atlanta History* 43.1 (1999): 21-32.

<sup>4</sup> Kirsch, 189.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 153.

<sup>6</sup> Marvin P. Dawkins. "Race Relations and the Sport of Golf: The African American Golf Legacy." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 27.4 (Winter 2003): 231.

professionals, was that though they were denied access to the top golf events and courses, UGA competitors like Rhodes were comparable to the greatest white golfers of the era, even Ben Hogan, and with equal opportunities would easily have matched them. That said, Dawkins offers an insightful analysis of the struggle of UGA golfers to compete based on the lack of access to the PGA tour as well as the drastic difference in pay between the two circuits.

A crucial point that could be expanded on in secondary literature is the regional difference between blacks in the north and south, as well as in the east and west during this time. While scholars are aware of the socioeconomic differences between northern and southern blacks during this period, not much attention has been given to the fact that northern blacks more regularly enjoyed UGA events and regular access to courses, while southern blacks were fighting time and again for either equal use or separate Jim Crow facilities that had been lacking for generations.

Also missing is a narrative highlighting both the opportunities for blacks to play in western U.S. tournaments outside of the eastern UGA events, as well as the somewhat heightened levels of intolerance that black pros encountered at some of these western events. This east versus west regional difference is an integral part of both Bill Spiller's and Ted Rhodes's stories, as Rhodes moved to California later in his career and Spiller was a California native. Additionally, a substantial amount of primary source material exists covering these western tournaments, recapitulating infamous incidents such as the controversy surrounding Rhodes and Spiller at the 1948 Los Angeles and Richmond (CA) Opens. There is potential for considerably more research to showcase how the game of golf grew in different ways in various parts of the country.

Some scholarship exists concerning the role of black women golfers in the post-World War II era.<sup>7</sup> As expected, however, the female black golfers have been covered even less than their male counterparts. While Ann Gregory, former track star Althea Gibson, Thelma Cowans, and Eoline Thorton are heralded as trailblazers, there is surely additional information that can be gathered to assess the range of African-American women who became reasonably skilled golfers in this time period. It is worth mentioning, however, that the LPGA was only formed in 1950, which partially explains the lack of primary and secondary materials concerning the struggle of female blacks to play professionally. At the same time, the UGA made a serious effort to allow both women and amateurs to compete in its events. Overall, a more concerted research effort remains to be made to identify additional primary sources to help develop a fuller narrative of the role of black women golfers in the post-World War II era.

One of the most comprehensive histories of the black experience in golf is Pete McDaniel's *Uneven Lies*. McDaniel's coverage of African Americans' involvement in the sport starts well before the post-World War II period, addressing the growth of the game in the African American community throughout the early twentieth century. McDaniel addresses events during the 1947-1954 era in numerous chapters in his book, first highlighting the feats of black UGA women before discussing the top UGA male professionals. He recounts Bill Spiller's legal fight following the 1948 Richmond Open, and the playing efforts of Ted Rhodes and Charlie Sifford during the late 1940's and early 1950's. McDaniel's work is thorough in profiling these golfers while also maintaining a steady narrative of the greater struggle for civil rights in regards to the game of golf.

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<sup>7</sup> M. Mikell Johnson. *The African American Woman Golfer: Her Legacy*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2008.



While I essentially agree with McDaniel's interpretation of the more important golfing events during this time period, notably absent from his account is discussion of the more grassroots, local struggles of blacks to play golf. Certainly black professionals were in some ways symbolic of the civil rights movement in golf. But like many other secondary accounts, McDaniel does not showcase how these professionals' efforts were often mirrored on a larger scale by everyday black citizens who demanded access to the game. As a result, the dominant narrative in African American golf history centers on how golf was primarily enjoyed or pursued at the professional level, as opposed to being a leisure activity for a growing black middle class that emerged after World War I and expanded after World War II.

### **Black Professional Golfers, the UGA, and the Fight for PGA Access**

While World War II, as it did for most activities, disrupted golf play for years, in some ways it helped the game grow in African American communities. In the period preceding the war, there was a stark contrast as to how northern and southern blacks gained access to golf. Northern blacks, many of whom were wealthier than their southern counterparts, were generally not exposed to the game “until they became prosperous enough to enjoy it as a pastime.”<sup>8</sup> Southern blacks, on the other hand, were heavily involved in the game before and after the war as caddies. Northern blacks generally had more disposable income to found their own clubs and create their own courses, but also played golf at black colleges mainly in the south.<sup>9</sup>

Caddying gave southern blacks the opportunity not only to golf regularly, but to golf on white courses when whites permitted them to tee off. Charlie Sifford, who was among the first black golfers “approved” to play on the PGA tour in spite of the PGA’s “Caucasian Clause,” recalled how the opportunity to caddy as a child in Charlotte, North Carolina heavily influenced his golf game: “to me and the other caddies, most of whom were black, the golf club was like our little clubhouse...I knew everything about the golf course, like where the trouble was, where the bad lies were, which direction to best approach the green, and how each putt would break.”<sup>10</sup> As such, to those exposed to it, golf was much more an integrated part of a southern black’s lifestyle, because often exposure meant direct involvement via caddying, working in a clubhouse, or in the exceptionally rare case, playing. In spite of being among the talented golfers of the pre-war period, southern blacks were constantly reminded that they were welcome and free to shoot on white courses as caddies, not as players of equal status to whites.

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, 147.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, 148.

<sup>10</sup>Charlie Sifford. *Just Let Me Play: The Story of Charlie Sifford, The First Black PGA Golfer*. Albany: British American Publishing, 1992, 13-14.

World War II, however, was an outlet that exposed blacks to golf at a time when the game was still very much a niche activity – especially in African American communities. In the context of desegregation of the military, “during and after the war, black soldiers and sailors enjoyed more access to courses on military bases, while black middle-class citizens joined a growing number of private (although still segregated) clubs.”<sup>11</sup> Black celebrities such as Louis helped expand the game’s popularity immediately after the war. Interestingly enough, the attention these celebrities gave to the game, in addition to social factors brought on by Jim Crow’s persistence after the war, continued to shift opportunities for black golfers to the north. Though southern blacks continued to caddy, they faced greater limitations on where they could golf compared to northern blacks, who continued to found their own courses. UGA events were also, in general, regionally-bound northward.

Though the ultimate goal for blacks was to play on the PGA tour, the UGA offered numerous opportunities for professional men, women, and amateurs to hone their craft. With tournaments in Washington D.C., Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Detroit among other locations, the UGA had somewhat of a national following and arguably reached its height of popularity during and after the 1947 to 1954 period. Despite for the most part being geographically restricted to the northeast, the UGA continued to experience growth and success until the removal of the “Caucasian Clause” from the PGA bylaws. Most tournaments were held on less than stellar municipal courses, but the turnout by spectators and golfers alike was consistently high.

In spite of many struggles, post-war black golfers also had many opportunities. Heightened media coverage following the war gave golf an expanded audience in the black community, with UGA tournaments becoming significant social events. Pittsburgh emerged as one of the key tournament stops for blacks on the UGA tour. In 1947, *Pittsburgh Courier* sports

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<sup>11</sup> Kirsch, 150.

writer Wendell Smith, a future Baseball Hall of Fame member who traveled with Jackie Robinson, indicated that the year would “be a banner year for Negro golfers and the number of big tourneys being held across the country indicates that the game is growing by leaps and bounds within this particular group of people.”<sup>12</sup>

Smith continued by addressing the increase of exposure to the sport due to the participation of black celebrities, stating “where the game once attracted the idle rich and ex-caddies, it now has lured the likes of Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Ike Williams, Ray Robinson and many others...When such luminaries as those are bitten by the golf fever, others catch it, too.”<sup>13</sup>

It was Louis’s direct involvement in the game that helped other golfers break down color barriers. Among them was Ted Rhodes, in 1947 widely regarded as the best black golfer in the country. Rhodes was heralded, after winning the Texas Open, Miami View Open, and Courier-Yorkshire tournament in Pittsburgh in 1947, as a year away from being able to “compete in the big tournaments against the best white golfers and hold his own.”<sup>14</sup> Rhodes would soon try and make this dream a reality, fighting for his right to compete at the highest level.

Along with another prominent black golfer, Bill Spiller, Rhodes demanded the opportunity to play in PGA events in 1948. He and Spiller sued the PGA and Richmond Golf Club because they were denied the opportunity because of their race.<sup>15</sup> Spiller recalled how he and Rhodes had legitimately qualified for the event: “In the 1948 L.A. Open me and Teddy shot low enough to finish in the top sixty. According to the tour’s system, that automatically

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<sup>12</sup>Wendell Smith. “Top Golfers In Pittsburgh Tourney.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 5 July 1947: 14.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>14</sup>Wendell Smith. “Louis Comes Into Own As A Golfer.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 16 August 1947: 14.

<sup>15</sup>Herman Hill. “Negro Professionals Sue PGA; Win National Support.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 24 January 1948: 17.

qualified us to play in the next tournament, up in Richmond [outside Oakland.] So we go up there and play a couple of practice rounds... [PGA national tournament director] George Schneider comes over and says he wants to talk...I got to see the PGA bylaws. It said in there that membership was for Caucasians. I said it doesn't say Caucasians had to qualify for the tournament."<sup>16</sup>

Spiller insisted on taking a stand in spite of the great risk to his own career, arguing that the Caucasian-only clause not only limited blacks from playing at tournaments but limited them from having steady jobs in clubhouses as instructors.<sup>17</sup> His and Rhodes's persistence, along with the vehement insistence of Joe Louis, resulted in the PGA's creation of "Approved Entries" (which would not even come to full fruition till 1953,) an alternative to full PGA membership allowing "select" golfers – in reality, black golfers – to partake in PGA events. In retrospect, Spiller recognized that speaking against the PGA may have ruined his career but he refused to be bitter: "They said, if you work five years in a pro shop you get a PGA membership. But who was going to give me a job? I was the one who spoke up. But I was disciplined. Golf teaches you that...[the sacrifice was] rewarding. It may not be monetary, but it has a lot to do with the things you represent."<sup>18</sup>

While Spiller's and Rhodes's fight for the right to play may have fallen short, continued efforts towards equal opportunity by others in the black community persisted. However, there were some instances of a double-standard, even in the black community, as women were at times excluded from tournaments. In 1947, coordinators of the Joe Louis Open, having just increased the purse for professional and amateur winners, rescinded invitations to women to play after

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<sup>16</sup>In Al Barkow. *Gettin' to the Dance Floor: An Oral History Of American Golf*. New York: Atheneum, 1986, 230-231.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid*, 233.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*, 235-236.

allowing them to do so for the first time the year before. The main reason was apparently due to “several disputes center[ing] around women competitors...One particular that caused the committee to frown on the gals was the disturbance created by a young woman who denounced the prize she was given.”<sup>19</sup>

In spite of instances like this, in general efforts towards equal opportunities in golf, both along gender and racial lines, progressed during the late 1940s and into the 1950s. In many instances, black golf clubs reached out to white golfers to play in interracial tournaments, such as a tournament in Gary, Indiana in August of 1947 in which blacks and whites competed at both the amateur and professional levels. Unlike the Joe Louis Open, women were allowed to compete as well.<sup>20</sup> In a few instances, blacks succeeded in their fights for equal opportunity on the golf course. In September 1947, Charlie Sifford made news by playing in the MGA Golf Tournament in Boston, almost winning the tournament.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas mainstream coverage in papers such as the *New York Times* only rarely covered UGA events such as the National Negro Open, black newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender* regularly did so. Coverage was largely geared towards the struggle for civil rights by both amateur and professional golfers, but at the same time the UGA was largely heralded as one of the most prominent sports leagues. Generally speaking, black athletes had widespread support from black journalists. Sports such as track and field, tennis, and even bowling received national attention, as attempts were made to promote blacks in all sports. While Jackie Robinson and, later, Willie Mays’s endeavors in Major League Baseball captivated black audiences, many golfers were held in almost a similar light.

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<sup>19</sup> “Louis ‘Ups’ Golf Monies; Bar Gals from Playing.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 31 May 1947: 11.

<sup>20</sup> “Gary Negroes Invite Whites To Play Golf.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 9 August 1947: 1.

<sup>21</sup> “Plays In White Tourney.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 20 September 1947: 20.

There is no question that Joe Louis's involvement in golf contributed to the growth of coverage and popularity. The 1935 AP Male Athlete of the Year, Louis had broken stigmas of black inferiority through his courageous in-ring battles. Joe Louis's iconic status followed him onto the golf course, and in turn led to the exposure of the pre-eminent black golfers such as Ted Rhodes, and later, Charlie Sifford. Especially in northern cities such as Louis's adopted hometown of Detroit, golf and the UGA continued to grow. The involvement and attendance of black celebrities like Robinson and Louis at tournaments further contributed to the appeal of golf to blacks all around the country.

By 1950, golf had dramatically increased in popularity and media coverage in the black community compared to only a few years earlier. That year, the *Pittsburgh Courier* expanded its coverage of the sport by implementing a ranking system based on the results of the sixteen sanctioned UGA events.<sup>22</sup> Top black golfers were ranked based on tournament records and positions. As black communities across the nation displayed increased interest to the sport, efforts to integrate tournaments continued.

However, a 1950 tournament hosted by music legend Bing Crosby was marred by discriminatory practices, as Ted Rhodes and other prominent black golfers were once again denied the right to play.<sup>23</sup> Crosby himself was outraged and disappointed that Rhodes was not permitted to play, especially after Crosby received a letter from Joe Louis who voiced his displeasure at the entire affair. This particular instance of discrimination proved a catalyst for Louis to get more involved in the fight against racial discrimination on golf courses. The culmination of Louis's effort to fight Jim Crow practices was the exclusion of black golfers from

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<sup>22</sup> Will Robinson. "New Courier Point System Will Select Golf's Big 3." *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 17 June 1950: 22.

<sup>23</sup> Billy Rowe. "Promise To Drop Race Ban In Bing's Golf Tournament." *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 4 February 1950: 28.

the Long Beach Open in 1950. Renowned sports commentator Sam Balter questioned, “Does being qualified mean that [a player] has to be white?”<sup>24</sup>

During the 1950s, as golf continued to rise in popularity among the black population, increased attention was given to female black golfers. Arguably the most prominent of the female black golfers of the time was Ann Gregory, who “captured six of the seven tournaments in which she played in [1950].”<sup>25</sup> In spite of her immense level of talent, Gregory faced both the hurdles of race and gender simultaneously, and as such was not always recognized for her talent. In spite of being the UGA women’s champion in November of 1950, Gregory was notably left off a national list of the best women golfers: she “figured if she was good enough to beat the field for the [UGA] title, she was good enough to be ranked among those she whipped.”<sup>26</sup> Because of her race, Gregory was not able to regularly participate in white events until later in the 1950s. Nevertheless, Gregory’s popularity was comparable to many adored male black golfers at the time, and she is today heralded for trailblazing a path not just for black women golfers but all female athletes.<sup>27</sup>

As he had not done enough already to promote golf in the black community, in 1952 Louis took a monumental step towards advancing the opportunities of his race to play the game. In January of that year, Louis challenged the Professional Golfers’ Association of America to be allowed to play in the San Diego Open.<sup>28</sup> Frustrated with the constant exclusion of the members

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<sup>24</sup> Ches Washington. “Race Discrimination In Big Time Golf Events Blasted.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 28 January 1950: 21.

<sup>25</sup> Russ J. Cowans. “Golf Experts Believe Ann Gregory Is Greatest Of The Womens Champs.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 14 October 1950: 18.

<sup>26</sup> “Not Ranked Among ‘Best,’ Lady Golf Champion Puzzled.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 4 November 1950: 17.

<sup>27</sup> Kirsch, 175.

<sup>28</sup> “Joe Louis To Fight PGA Tourney Bias.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 19 January 1952: 1.



of his race from PGA events, Louis expressed that “it’s time this whole thing was brought out into the open...I plan to do it here in San Diego.”<sup>29</sup>

At a time when America’s football, basketball, and baseball leagues were making consistent efforts to desegregate, Louis was upset that golf had stagnated behind when it came to integration. He exclaimed that “colored athletes are getting their chances to make good and are making good in all sports – and the PGA is just about the only holdout which doesn’t want to give our good golfers a chance.”<sup>30</sup>

Louis was unsatisfied with his experience in San Diego: he had brought along Bill Spiller and fellow amateur black golfer Eural Clark with him, hoping that they would be allowed to tee off. Charlie Sifford recalled how only Louis was allowed to play due to having a sponsor exemption, and that because of PGA bylaws both Spiller and Clark were out of luck.<sup>31</sup> The PGA rationalized that because Spiller and Clark were ineligible for PGA membership, they were barred from PGA competition. Of course, the reason for “ineligibility” was strictly race, not lack of playing ability or inability to play as PGA members, as the black media argued.<sup>32</sup>

Riled by the fact that his friends could not participate in the tournament, Louis persisted to challenge the PGA once again. After pressing PGA President Horton Smith to act, Louis succeeded in gaining black golfers entry to the Phoenix Open in early 1952.<sup>33</sup> This incident was extensively covered by the black media: the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s Wendell Smith heralded Louis once more as a fighter for justice and a hero to his race. He characterized Louis as always being “a fighter for racial equality. He has always been an ardent advocate for equal rights in this

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Ches Washington. “Joe Louis Set For Fight To The Finish Over Golf Bias.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 19 January 1952: 14.

<sup>31</sup> Sifford, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Russ J. Cowans. “How Joe Upset The PGA Race Ban.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 26 January 1952: 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ches Washington. “Joe Louis’ Punch At Bias Helps Kayo PGA Jim Crow Ruling In Golf.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 26 January 1952: 21.

country. The ex-champion has never gone around looking for “incidents” but whenever or wherever he has found them, Louis has put up his dukes and fought back in no uncertain manner.”<sup>34</sup>

The Phoenix event, however, was not without problems for Louis and the others. Sifford, who was among the professional players at the tournament, recalled how unwanted the blacks were not only at the tournament, but in the city itself. He remembered that “when we got to Phoenix, we realized that no hotel would put us up...you couldn’t find a restaurant in Phoenix that would serve a black in those days.”<sup>35</sup> The harsh treatment persisted onto the golf courses, with the tournament officials seemingly setting the blacks to fail by having them only play with each other in the opening round. Sifford recalled how “[the Phoenix Country Club] wouldn’t let us into the locker rooms...instead of mixing us in with all of the other qualifiers, we were all sent out together as a group, and we were sent out as the first group in the morning, before any of the other professionals arrived at the course and before the gallery started to gather. It was clearly a get-the-black-guys-out-of-the-way-so-we-can-get-on-with-our-tournament deal.”<sup>36</sup>

The worst acts of intolerance did not occur till after the black players teed off. As he was about to putt his ball on the first hole, Sifford went to pull out the flagstick and noticed “the cup was full of human shit, and from the looks and smell of it, it hadn’t been too long before we got there that the cup had been filled. Obviously, someone associated with Phoenix’s fanciest country club had known who would be the first to reach the green – the black guys.”<sup>37</sup>

Understandably, the incident on the first hole marred the experience for most of the black players: a day that should have been a triumph turned into disaster. Sifford recalled that he

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<sup>34</sup> Wendell Smith. “Louis Has Always Been A Fighter For Equality.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 26 January 1952: 20.

<sup>35</sup> Sifford, 65.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

played too poorly to qualify for the next round, while Bill Spiller decided to take action to fight for his rights. Spiller told his fellow blacks that he would take a shower in the clubhouse, but he was forced to leave after pressure from club management.<sup>38</sup> Ted Rhodes, however, was able to play at a high level in spite of the abuse that day. Sifford marveled that “despite all of that pressure and harassment, and despite never having played in this kind of tournament or at that course before, he went out and shot a 71 on the first day for fifth place. It was Teddy’s way of saying that blacks did belong in the game and could hold their own at any tournament.”<sup>39</sup> In spite of the fact that none of the black players finished in the money, the 1952 Phoenix Open was a monumental event for blacks, especially black golfers, being one of the first times that blacks were allowed to compete at, arguably, the highest level of competition.

Complementing this was the effort of the top black professional golfers not only to keep fighting to desegregate PGA events, but at the same time to compete on the UGA circuit in order to keep up their game. For black women, the UGA remained a crucial avenue for developing their game. By the end of 1952, UGA mainstays Ann Gregory, along with Eoline Thorton, were considered by some to be the best female golfers of any race.<sup>40</sup> The UGA tour remained the best opportunity for these golfers, and it continued to enjoy popularity while these fights for equality persisted. Pete Brown, a black golfer who got started in the 1950s and would later join the PGA tour, argued that the UGA “launched my career. Without the UGA, I never would have played competitive golf.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Will Robinson. “Eoline Thorton, Ann Gregory In A Class By Themselves Among Women Golfers.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 19 July 1952: 25.

<sup>41</sup> “Remembering the Old UGA Tour – All-Black United Golf Association – Black Enterprise Golf and Tennis Challenge: 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Tournament Journal.” *Black Enterprise* (September 1997): 138-140.

Similar sentiments were felt in 1952: Will Robinson, golf writer for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, highlighted how the organization put excess revenue to the growth and exposure of golf within the black community. He highlighted the UGA's own expansion, citing how by 1951 the organization had "fifty-three clubs whose total individual memberships numbered approximately 8,235. Of this total, 6,873 were men and 1,362 women."<sup>42</sup> The UGA's 1952 National Tournament, played in Pittsburgh, was one of the most widely covered events both locally and across the nation. It continued to draw the top black competitors in addition to black celebrities to the event.<sup>43</sup> The UGA tour remained a celebrated part of black America, still popular in 1953 and still offering unique opportunities for black golfers.

1954 was a crucial year not only for black golfers, but for all of Black America, as the post-war civil rights movement gained new momentum. Russ Cowans, esteemed sports writer for the *Chicago Defender*, continued to criticize Jim Crow policies in the new year. Remembering "promises" for more integration and acceptance of blacks at PGA events following the 1952 San Diego and Phoenix Opens, Cowans, like many other blacks, was frustrated with the lack of effort by Horton Smith and other PGA leaders to take progressive action on racial issues. Cowans recalled how Eural Clark and Bill Spiller were excluded from the San Diego Open due to lacking PGA memberships, and how subsequently the PGA was to institute committees to approve certain players. According to Cowans, the committees, in reality, became a vehicle for the PGA to feign concern for black players, as they rarely approved blacks in the two years after the system's implementation.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Will Robinson. "UGA Operates Solely For Service Of Game." *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 9 February 1952: 23.

<sup>43</sup> "National Golf Tourney To Lure Big Names Here." *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 31 May 1952: 27.

<sup>44</sup> Russ J. Cowans. "PGA Bias Committee." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 23 January 1954: 24.

Cowans lamented how the PGA promised to wipe out the Caucasian Clause at its annual meeting in 1952, but over a year later no such action had been taken. Cowans exclaimed that “it is about time that the PGA realized that this country was established on the right of its citizens to enjoy all freedoms. They should also realize that denying certain citizens the opportunity to compete in their tournaments is as dangerous to the welfare of the country as those subversive elements uncovered by the [McCarthy-inspired] Senate investigating committee.”<sup>45</sup>

While many opportunities were still denied to black golfers, others were becoming available. On the same day as Cowans’s tirade was printed, the *Pittsburgh Courier* covered how Franklin Lett, President of the Detroit Amateur Golf Club, was selected to become the first black delegate to the USGA’s annual meeting. A businessman turned golf enthusiast, he helped run Detroit’s club while supporting amateur tournaments in the region. Lett, who also was a UGA representative, humbly decreed that “we are not interested in becoming the first-this or first-that, nor are we asking for special privileges. Today, golf has come of age to all Americans, and we are determined to better prepare ourselves for the opportunities that will arise.”<sup>46</sup>

The impact of the *Brown v. Board* decision was perhaps greater for everyday golfers, and as such will be discussed in the following section on civil rights. The decision, coming in the same year that Willie Mays was named the AP’s Male Athlete of the Year, promised to offer equal rights in public facilities including municipal golf courses. However, UGA professional golfers continued their own historic fight to complement the greater civil rights cause. Ted Rhodes remained one of the most gifted golfers of any race. In July 1954, Rhodes was once again playing in a PGA event, the Motor City Open in Detroit.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Will Robinson. “Lett To Attend USGA For UGA.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 23 January 1954: 25.

<sup>47</sup> Will Robinson. “Rhodes Back On PGA Trail; UGA In High Gear.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 10 July 1954: 24.

In a huge boost to the case for the removal of the Caucasian Clause, Rhodes finished tied for sixth, beating PGA President Horton Smith by 16 strokes.<sup>48</sup> But while Rhodes's efforts were a testament to the ability of all black golfers, there were still many hurdles to overcome before blacks were regularly allowed to compete at the highest level. *Brown v. Board* was a definitive point – to many, it was the starting point – in the civil rights movement; for black golfers, it became a new tool that could be used to eradicate Jim Crow practices of inequality. However, the top black professional golfers could only rejoice so much at the ruling, as the PGA's traditional policy of racial segregation persisted in spite of the growing civil rights fervor gripping the nation at the time.

While black newspapers highlighted the endeavors of professional golfers, camaraderie in the black community around the game of golf was not limited to the black media. An indispensable body of research evidence for this paper was the primary source accounts of golfers of this time. The accounts of Charlie Sifford and Bill Spiller characterize this era as one where black golfers, although fiercely competitive with one another, saw a bigger picture of showing unity in efforts to play in white tournaments. Newspapers, in an interesting way, complemented this sentiment. Accounts of UGA events differed from accounts of PGA/white events where black players participated: the UGA events largely described a highly competitive athletic environment, whereas the PGA accounts celebrated each black player and characterized the black presence as a joint collaboration among the players.

Spiller and Sifford gave fairly different accounts of the fight for equality, effectively showing how the two golfers were at different stages of their careers at the time. Spiller, viewed as a tragic figure in the history of black golf for his lack of opportunities to play at white events,

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<sup>48</sup> Will Robinson. "Rhodes Plays Top Golf Despite Many Handicaps." *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 17 July 1954: 25.

considered the tumultuous experiences at Richmond and Phoenix damning for his career. He believed that in speaking up against the bigotry and short-sightedness of PGA's racist policies, he forever restricted himself to playing in black tournaments, and later, to caddying. Though he later realized that his efforts helped other black golfers succeed on the PGA circuit, Spiller viewed this period as a disheartening time due to the flagrant persistence of discriminant and the continued exclusion of black players from the premier golfing events.

Sifford, however, was more shocked and upset at the lack of acceptance of blacks at white tournaments, and less resigned to his fate than Spiller. Being about ten years younger than Spiller, Sifford knew Rhodes, Howard Wheeler, and Spiller to be top pros and thought it was foolish that they were being excluded from events. Though the media did not cover him nearly as much as Wheeler, Spiller, or Rhodes at the time, Sifford knew he had the talent to play on the PGA tour in the subsequent years after the 1952 Phoenix Open.<sup>49</sup> His age, of course, was an advantage, as he later directly benefited from the efforts of these men and Joe Louis. But whereas Rhodes and Spiller figured to stay on the black golf circuit in the later years, Sifford sustained his fight for equal opportunities with rigor and was eventually given a PGA membership.

Spiller and Sifford agreed, however, that the fight to play in white tournaments was a unified effort on part of the top black golfers of the era. They both credited Ted Rhodes's play as a testament to the ability of black golfers, but considered Joe Louis equally indispensable to their efforts. Both golfers believed that without Louis's legacy as an American icon, golf in the black community would have failed. In spite of being at different points of their careers during the 1947-1954 period, both viewed the UGA as an indispensable asset to black golfers.

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<sup>49</sup> Sifford, 62.

Spiller knew that his best days as a competitive golfer were spent on the UGA circuit. Even if he regretted never playing in major PGA events, he felt the that depth of competition in the black tour was comparable. Sifford, on the other hand, characterized the UGA at this time as a cultural and social hub for all blacks, largely due to the play of Rhodes and Spiller as well as the celebrity status of Louis. For him, the UGA was an outlet to move from caddy to pro and was the springboard that one day helped him play on the PGA Tour.

At the professional level, the top black golfers from 1947-1954 performed at a level so high that detractors and critics could no longer ignore their athletic ability. Though the likes of John Shippen had broken ground decades before, the efforts of Joe Louis, Ted Rhodes, Bill Spiller, Howard Wheeler, and others both in the UGA and in limited action in white tournaments helped eliminate many obstacles for future black golfers. Though only a few from this generation, including Charlie Sifford, were able to enjoy the benefits of this period of struggle, without the great play of these individuals, as well as their legal challenges, advancement to the PGA would have been even more delayed.

During this period, while it offered extensive coverage of many events, the black media isolated specific individuals, cases, and tournaments as of superior importance. No figure had a more crucial role in the development of the sport than Joe Louis. Even as his boxing career was ending, Louis remained an African American hero who became the vanguard in the continuous fight for equal opportunity. Not surprisingly, the two events that drew the most media attention for black golf writers during this period involved Louis: the San Diego Open and the Phoenix Open. In spite of the hardships that Louis and his fellow golfers felt during those tournaments – especially the Phoenix tournament – writers lavishly praised to the efforts of these men.



The buildup leading to Louis's sponsor exemption at San Diego, followed by the universal disgust at the fact that Bill Spiller and Eural Clark never teed off at the event, were constant focuses of black sports media attention in early 1952. The Phoenix Open not only elevated Louis even more, but it especially elevated Ted Rhodes, who in the minds and words of golf writers was the best black golfer of the era. Rhodes was the subject of numerous player profiles in both the *Defender* and *Courier*, while his tournament play was constantly monitored. His efforts, especially after being excluded from the 1948 Richmond Open after qualifying, and after placing sixth in the 1952 Phoenix Open, made him a quiet hero among black golf writers and fellow black golfers.

With the admiration of fans, peers, and journalists, Rhodes was heralded as a rival to the top white golfers at the time, and one of the most celebrated black athletes in general in the 1950s. Though the papers extensively covered other golfers like Bill Spiller, Charlie Sifford, and Howard Wheeler, because of his dominance Rhodes was a fixture of sports reports in the 1947-1954 era.

Despite these golfers' pioneer efforts, blacks certainly did not have a perfect experience in integrated tournaments; the presence of African Americans in golf, even to this day is fairly limited. But this does not mean that these efforts were in vain. The success of Sifford, Pete Brown, Lee Elder, and even Tiger Woods would likely have been more limited had Bill Spiller and Ted Rhodes not made the career-jeopardizing decision to pursue legal action after the 1948 Richmond Open. Likewise, had Joe Louis not persisted in 1952 to play at San Diego and Phoenix, black progress within and contributions to the game may have not received as much media attention. This, in turn, would have curbed blacks' exposure to the game and limited the opportunities of many of these golfers.

In spite of their exclusion from the most prominent of events on the PGA tour, these black golfers inspired other African Americans to pursue the sport with their play on the UGA tour. As with baseball, one argument made – both by historians and by the black media of the time – is that the “negro leagues of golf” was just as if not more competitive than that of the white “major” league. Though the UGA was celebrated, many black golfers refused to accept that segregation was their only option. As they fought for equal access, so did many less celebrated “everyday” citizens.

## Everyday Black Golfers and the Fight for Civil Rights on the Golf Course

I have already discussed how before World War II golf enjoyed a splintered popularity among blacks in America. The war served to expose many to the game, and in some ways it connected northern middle class blacks taking up the sport for leisure with southern blacks of a lower economic standing who came to love the game first as caddies. A peculiar juxtaposition had occurred, as southern blacks were the first to encounter the game but northern blacks had more opportunities to sustain it, given the UGA's northern focus as well as the greater access offered in northern communities for blacks to play golf.

The post-war period was a time in which the struggle to desegregate public facilities knew no regional bounds. Both northern and southern blacks demanded access, often in vain, to publicly-funded facilities such as golf courses. At times, blacks would also attempt to play on semi-public and even private courses that did not make their discriminatory practices readily apparent. A golf club in Ludington, Michigan operated by the Methodist Church denied access to black attorney Chester Gillespie in 1947, in spite of "nothing in [the club's] constitution which refers in any way to color discrimination."<sup>50</sup> The rationale for Mr. Gillespie's rejection in this case was that the golf course was in truth not run by the Methodist Church of Michigan, but by a private organization that could pick and choose membership as it wished. Ironically, this tactic would be commonly used in an attempt to restrict access to blacks on public courses: local governments would "lease" municipal courses to private interest groups so that they could restrict access to whomever they wished.

In spite of a few moderately successful attempts to integrate, the support for "separate but equal" facilities persisted in many white circles. Blacks continued to take action, though, as in

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<sup>50</sup>"Churchmen Preach Tolerance, Operate Jim Crow Golf Course." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 8 February 1947: 11.

August of 1947 where a black dentist sued Louisville, Kentucky's Board of Park Commissioners for discrimination because he was not allowed to use a white golf course. The suit was "designed to make available to Negro citizens the facilities of those parks from which they are now excluded on grounds that equal recreation facilities [including golf courses] are not found in Negro parks."<sup>51</sup> Such events occurred throughout the country: a similar complaint was filed by Charles L. Law in Baltimore in January of 1948, as Law was barred from playing on a municipal, tax-payer funded golf course because he was black.<sup>52</sup>

Law's suit succeeded as Judge W. Calvin Chestnut ruled that "[Baltimore] blacks may not be legally barred from playing on all four of the municipal courses...In one opinion holding that colored golfers may not be restricted to the nine-hole Carroll Park course, Judge Chestnut found that the Carroll Park facilities were not substantially equal to those afforded white golfers at other municipally-owned golf courses."<sup>53</sup>

In spite of this decision, the Baltimore Board of Recreation and Parks side-stepped the ruling by instituting separate playing time for blacks and whites.<sup>54</sup> This impractical plan, it was claimed, ended costing the city \$300 a week, a cost that could have been completely avoided if full integration and use was awarded to both races.<sup>55</sup> The circumvention of court rulings mandating equal use of golf facilities persisted, but black golfers also continued to fight the injustice in an attempt to utilize the facilities that they had the legal right to use.

Media coverage of these fights around the country for equal rights was great. For the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender*, it was paramount that blacks fighting for equality,

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<sup>51</sup> "Sues Louisville For Full Use of City's Parks." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 9 August 1947: 2.

<sup>52</sup> "Sues To Stop Race Ban on Golf Course." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 5 January 1948: 6.

<sup>53</sup> "Slaps Jim Crow on Md. Golf Course." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 3 July 1948: 11.

<sup>54</sup> "Baltimore Sidesteps Court Order Ending Golf Link Jim Crow." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 31 July 1948: 1.

<sup>55</sup> "Baltimore Pays \$300 Weekly For Golf Bias Plan." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 21 August 1948: 1.

whether it was on the golf course or elsewhere, had an audience and support base. Seemingly “small-town” struggles received national exposure, both by sports journalists and regular columnists. As struggles by professional golfers in the late 1940s, such as Bill Spiller’s suit in protest of exclusion from the 1948 Richmond Open, continued, the struggle of blacks all around the country to play golf were heralded because their ability to gain access on the links could mean greater access in other public arenas as well.

As the 1950s approached, the fight for equality for black golfers expanded. The struggle headed farther south, as golfers in Miami in 1949 petitioned for use of municipal courses in the same manner as black citizens in Baltimore.<sup>56</sup> The black golfers won the right to play, but once again the club side-stepped the decision. Blacks were limited to one day a week, and a court decision upheld this regulation on the grounds that their involvement was hurting business to the point where the club would have to shut down.<sup>57</sup>

In spite of this restrictive policy in Miami, a victory occurred for black golfers in Washington D.C. in April 1949 when “the Interior Department’s Ultimatum was given after the Board [of Recreation in Washington D.C.], in a precedent-setting move, had voted unanimously to run the public golf courses now controlled by Interior on a racially integrated basis...”<sup>58</sup> What was perhaps most significant about this decision was that the D.C. courses were effectively run by the federal government. Thus, the federal government’s involvement in forcing the District to guarantee integration was in effect a promotion for integration at a national level.

Despite constant resistance by local golf clubs around the country, small battles for integration were still won. In October 1950, the Supreme Court revisited the decision of Miami golf clubs to restrict black golfers to a single day a week while opening the clubs to whites every

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<sup>56</sup> “Negro Golfers Seek To Use City Course.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 25 September 1948: 2.

<sup>57</sup> “Limit Negro Golf Players To One Day.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 6 August 1949: 15.

<sup>58</sup> “D.C. Golf Courses To Be Opened To All.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 2 April 1949: 2.

other day. The Court “set aside a Florida court ruling which barred a Negro from unrestricted use of the Miami Springs golf course.”<sup>59</sup> While this was a victory for black golfers in Miami, it would take some time before this precedent spread to other courses and clubs around the nation.

As would be expected given the pervasiveness of Jim Crow, most of the struggles for either integrated golf courses, “separate but equal” facilities, or separate days of access for blacks and whites on shared golf courses took place in the south. Northern blacks, generally-speaking, were more socially accepted and had greater “uninhibited” access to golf courses. That is, while southern blacks may have had more exposure to and involvement in the game from earlier ages, segregationists had a greater ability to deny these people the ability to play. While cities such as Baltimore or Washington D.C., the birthplace of the UGA, had their own share of racial strife on the golf course, the sheer total amount of cases and protests in the south heavily outnumbered those of the north.

Southern blacks still struggled to gain access to municipal courses. In Nashville in the summer of 1951, two black golfers “filed suit in Federal district court seeking an injunction to prohibit Nashville’s municipal golf courses from refusing to permit Negroes on the links.”<sup>60</sup> Optimism remained, however, that efforts to integrate would succeed across the nation. Such efforts finally won out in Baltimore, a city long embattled in cases for and against segregation. Finally, in July 1951, “[Baltimore’s] park board voted... to end segregation at Baltimore’s four municipal golf courses” in addition to allowing interracial tennis matches on some public tennis courts.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “Supreme Court Hits Jim Crow On Golf Course.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 28 October 1950: 18.

<sup>60</sup> “2 Sue For Use Of Links.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 11 August 1951: 5.

<sup>61</sup> “Baltimore Board Eases Segregation On Fields.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 7 July 1951: 17.

Although a few cities eased their Jim Crow practices, Atlanta enforced these practices with as much rigor as ever before. On July 19, 1951 four black golfers in Atlanta went to the Bobby Jones Golf Course “ready, willing, and able to pay all lawful uniform fees. The golfers were refused admittance by Bill Watson, the course’s manager, who cited a city ordinance that prohibited African Americans from using the park.”<sup>62</sup> In the spring of 1952 the city council of Knoxville, in response to pressure to desegregate, leased the municipal golf course to private operators in order to restrict the membership of blacks.<sup>63</sup> In spite of these blatant acts aimed to perpetuate discrimination, blacks around the country persisted. In January 1952, in Charlie Sifford’s hometown of Charlotte, sixteen black citizens who were denied access to the city’s municipal course petitioned for access for all black golfers, arguing that the municipal course was in part funded by the black community and those citizens had an equal right to play there.<sup>64</sup>

A similar event occurred around the same time in Jackson, Mississippi where a black golfer demanded the use of the white links, or the immediate creation of a “separate but equal” facility for blacks which at the time was absent.<sup>65</sup> In New Orleans in the spring of 1952, an inadvertent integration “experiment” occurred when the city opened white golf courses and facilities to blacks while separate Jim Crow facilities were being built.<sup>66</sup> Though efforts to desegregate golf in the early 1950s were relentless, it was not until Joe Louis directly challenged the PGA in January 1952 that the most significant attempt challenging desegregation occurred.

1952 would be another year in which black citizens adamantly fought for equal rights on the golf course. In Houston, black golfers won a major battle when a court barred the city from

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<sup>62</sup> Andy Ambrose, Brooke Barger, and Alexis Oliver. “‘Negroes Cannot Play Here’: The Desegregation of Atlanta’s Golf Courses.” *Atlanta History* 43.1 (1999): 21.

<sup>63</sup> “Lease City Golf Course To Maintain Race Ban.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 17 May 1952: 13.

<sup>64</sup> “Fight Color Bar At Golf Course.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 5 January 1952: 9.

<sup>65</sup> “Miss. Golfer Demand Use Of Public Links.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 5 April 1952: 4.

<sup>66</sup> “Open Recreation Center To All Until Jim Crow Park Is Completed.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 17 May 1952: 13.

banning blacks from any publicly funded courses.<sup>67</sup> While Houston blacks achieved victory, blacks in Knoxville, Tennessee were continuing their fight to play on municipal golf courses.<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately, in the spring of 1953 a court again rejected their court appeal: once more, segregation was upheld on the Knoxville courses “on the grounds the city has leased the course out and no longer operates it.”<sup>69</sup>

In Nashville in December 1952, however, two black councilmen argued over the construction of a black golf course. Councilman Robert Lillard proposed a bill calling for the course’s construction; spearheading the efforts against him was councilman Alexander Looby, who argued that a cheaper, more logical resolution was to desegregate Nashville’s golf courses.<sup>70</sup> The bill was approved, but Looby took Lillard to court over the matter. Such debates were not rare among blacks nationwide: communities were torn over pursuing adequate “separate but equal” facilities, or fighting for the rights to publicly-funded courses.

As the unfortunate events surrounding the 1952 Phoenix and San Diego Opens as well as the 1948 Richmond Open suggest, racial strife on the golf course was not restricted to the south. The animosity that the UGA regulars faced on the west coast showcased that even though golfers such as California native Bill Spiller could succeed, barriers existed that prevented them from competing at the highest level. However, this was not limited simply to PGA events: everyday black golfers on the west coast also had limited access to courses. Ironically, as amateurs fought to keep playing on courses in the west, professionals such as Rhodes, Sifford, and Spiller had some of their greatest successes in west coast events.

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<sup>67</sup> “Court Hits Golf Bias In South.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 5 January 1952: 15.

<sup>68</sup> “Knoxvillians Seek Use Of Golf Course.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 19 April 1952: 28.

<sup>69</sup> “Court Backs Segregated Golf Courses.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 16 May 1953: 4.

<sup>70</sup> “Looby-Lillard Feud Rages In Nashville, Tenn..” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 13 December 1952: 2.



During 1953, black golfers sustained their activist activities for both the right to play in top white golf tournaments, and to use courses they had a legal right to play. In Jacksonville, where blacks had previously secured the right to play – albeit for less time than whites – on municipal courses, the City Recreation Department was debating whether to “withdraw the privileged two days now granted each week to Negroes.”<sup>71</sup> A famous case, however, was filed in Atlanta, as Dr. H.M. Holmes and his sons sued the city for use of the white golf facilities after feeling dissatisfied with the nine-hole, black-owned Lincoln Country Club.<sup>72</sup> While suits such as these often took years to finish, the sustained battle for equal use, or at the very least, equal Jim Crow facilities, continued into the new year.

Another major victory occurred in Houston. In 1952 blacks had won the right to play on some municipal golf courses, but after pressure by the city’s black golfers and a court ruling, the city council voted to end segregation on all city-owned golf courses in June 1954.<sup>73</sup> In spite of these strides, some segregationists continued to prevent blacks from gaining equal rights. In Birmingham, Alabama attorney Hugh Locke proposed a law that prohibited any kind of interracial athletic contest, including golf.<sup>74</sup>

Yet 1954 was the culmination of many previous efforts towards desegregation. The Supreme Court heard numerous cases concerning racial inequality, and in turn offered many rulings that forever changed the landscape of American race relations. No decision was considered more groundbreaking than *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, handed down May 17. This seminal decision formally prohibited racial segregation in public schools. Later in the month, the Court expanded on its ruling by unanimously announcing that “its ban on

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<sup>71</sup> “Say Jax May Withdraw Golf Course ‘Privilege.’” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 24 January 1953: 5.

<sup>72</sup> “Atlantans Sue For Golf Facilities.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 4 July 1953: 5.

<sup>73</sup> “Houston Courses Wipe Out Bans.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 12 June 1954: 22.

<sup>74</sup> “Seeks Sports Ban Vote In Birmingham.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 27 February 1954: 1.

public school segregation also applies to the exclusion of Negroes from publicly owned colleges, universities, theatres, and recreational facilities.”<sup>75</sup>

This finally settled the longstanding debates such as in Houston as to whether blacks could play whenever they wanted on the municipal golf courses: not only did blacks have the right to play, but they had the unquestionable right to play at any time rather being forced to play on certain days of the week.<sup>76</sup> Houston’s City Golf Director Jack Speer expanded the impact of the decision even further, mandating that “not only will the golf courses be open to Negroes but also other facilities connected with the course, such as showers, rest rooms, and cafes.”<sup>77</sup> The impact of *Brown v. Board* was not immediately felt everywhere, though.

In Atlanta, Dr. H. M. Holmes finally won his suit against the city: rather than applying the Supreme Court’s decision, however, Federal District Court Judge Boyd Sloan effectively enforced the “separate but equal” doctrine, but ruled that “if the city provides golf courses for whites but does not have any for Negroes, it must admit Negroes to what it has.”<sup>78</sup> Sloan argued that separate-but-equal facilities were perfectly legal in spite of the Supreme Court decision. This decision was later challenged in a Federal Court of Appeals, as in December of 1954 the NAACP filed a petition on behalf of Atlanta’s black golfers to prohibit racial segregation on public courses as such segregation was a violation of the black golfers’ Fourteenth Amendment Rights.<sup>79</sup> In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Jim Crow practices persisted in spite of the *Brown v. Board*

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<sup>75</sup> Darrell Garwood. “Court Strikes Again!” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 29 May 1954: 1.

<sup>76</sup> “Supreme Court Takes 6 More Steps To Eliminate Jim Crow Practices.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 5 June 1954: 1.

<sup>77</sup> “Houston Courses Wipe Out Ban.”

<sup>78</sup> “Atlanta Must Lower Golf Bar.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 17 July 1954: 1.

<sup>79</sup> “Ask Court To Outlaw Atlanta Golf Jim Crow.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 18 December 1954: 11.

ruling: the city, unwilling to desegregate, instead opted to construct a black golf course in order to avoid the integration of existing white facilities.<sup>80</sup>

Between 1947 and 1954, the popularity of golf within black communities around the nation continued to rise. As a “back-drop” to the struggle of professionals to find acceptance on the PGA tour, everyday citizens played or battled to play the game. Golf was, and remains, one of the few sports in which everyday people can participate widely as a leisure activity. As such, fighting for access to play golf was – at times - arguably of even greater importance to everyday people than baseball or football. Being allowed to play on a public, tax-funded golf course represented an affirmation of one’s rights and citizenship.

Perhaps the most amazing part of the struggle for equal rights in golf by “average” citizens was how many of these people acted alone in their suits and protests. In many cases, whole communities would fight for access to public courses: however, because golf is an individual sport, the fight for equality was often an individual fight. Often it was the most prominent members of black society – doctors, ministers, and lawyers among others – who fought for the entire community’s right to play. While these individuals achieved varying levels of success, their actions helped promote the growth of an even greater struggle for civil rights.

This is not to say that equal rights necessarily meant equal rights for all blacks. In many cases concerning public courses, women were still not allowed even when black men won the right to tee off at formerly all-white courses. Similarly, class divisions remained within the game: when it came to suing for membership rights to private clubs, only the wealthiest of blacks could fathom doing so. Despite these situations, challenging for the ability to play golf usually meant

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<sup>80</sup> “Builds New Golf Course To Thwart Race Bias Charge.” *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 9 October 1954: 26.

either challenging the segregation status quo or promoting access to a previously-exclusive game. In both situations, community support was widespread.

Yet a key feature of the era was arguably a lack of solidarity nationally concerning whether the fight on public links should be for “separate but equal” courses, shared courses with different days of use for blacks and whites, or full integration of these municipal courses. Seemingly depending on geographic location different black communities would fight for different solutions: these fights had varying levels of success. Media coverage of all three fights was balanced: no stances were taken as to whether segregated or integrated courses should be allowed, as journalists usually simply covered the raw facts of each case rather than analyze them. Despite this lack of a slant, what was clear was that papers such as the *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier* at the very least wanted to showcase these struggles.

The fight for access to golfing facilities reveals how blacks, facing a virtually “rigged” system of segregationist, racist policies, often succeeded in upholding their legal rights. While protests were often necessary to secure such access, the ability of many of these African Americans to utilize the court systems, even in the south where too often judges could be swayed by segregationist arguments, highlights how the 1947-1954 era was one of great social change. In many regards, this struggle for equal rights in golf can truly be viewed as a precursor to the widespread national civil rights movement that took full shape in the 1960s. While the stars of other sports such as boxing and baseball were extensively covered well before this era, the actions of everyday citizens to play golf arguably had greater immediate implications for black society in America.

*Brown v. Board of Education* was of course not the absolute end to segregation, especially in golf. As discussed before, for black professionals the decision may have made

access easier, but the Caucasian Clause remained in the PGA bylaws for seven more years.

When race could no longer be a factor for membership, the PGA utilized “invitationals” in which it could freely select who was allowed to play a particular tournament. For amateur golfers, similar hurdles remained.

The willingness of certain local governments to accept “separate but equal” facilities in the wake of the *Brown* decision can only be characterized as amusing. Previously staunch opponents of affording blacks their own golf courses, these governments quickly looked to create separate facilities in an attempt to appease their black populace and avoid integration. In other places, however, integration was thankfully affirmed. More than anything, *Brown v. Board* laid a foundation for future steps towards complete integration. What may be viewed as unfortunate, however, is that in some cases for integration in golf, the *Brown* decision was compromised.

To explain, the *Brown* decision is popularly summarized as decreeing that separate-but-equal public facilities are inherently unequal: however, in many of the cases in golf there were no separate facilities to begin with. Blacks were, and continued to be, excluded from municipal courses that were in part funded by their tax dollars. They had no separate courses, and as such were simply being denied use of public courses, even though they had a legal right to such facilities. To side-step this issue, both before and after the *Brown* decision, local officials often designated specific days for blacks and whites to utilize the courses.

Some blacks actually fought for such an arrangement when instances of complete integration or separate facilities did not seem possible. More often than not, however, blacks had fewer days than whites to play. Another method to this “integration” plan was to offer different tee-times for blacks and whites; again, blacks often received inconvenient hours on the course. In

other instances, local governments simply leased the courses to private parties who could determine who played; more often than not, this did not include blacks.

Regardless of the trials that remained for blacks seeking equal rights on golf courses as well as in every other public institution, the actions of both the professional and everyday black golfers in the 1947 to 1954 period were inspirational forces that directly impacted the greater civil rights movement. As professionals like Bill Spiller sacrificed personal ambition for the opportunity to overturn decades of prejudice by the PGA, average citizens, most notably in the south, demanded that they get the chance to play a game that they loved. Reinforcing the courageous steps these people took was a unified black press, determined to bring attention to the lack of equality in golf.

### **Black Journalists as Golf Promoters and Civil Rights Activists**

It may be presumptuous to refer to the primary sources I use in this thesis as “the black media” because, in truth, “the black media” in post-World War II America certainly could refer to other common communication outlets such as radio. However, in the post-war era owning a radio was more expensive than buying the daily paper, and the black presence on the airwaves was not nearly as extensive as it was in newsprint. And while the black media extended beyond the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender*, these papers still represented a large proportion of black readership, had national audiences, and to an extent reflected widespread sentiments among black journalists and citizens alike.

What is known based on the accounts from the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender* from 1947 to 1954 is that golf was a central interest of significant segments of black society, at least in the realm of sports. Not only were professionals heralded for their success but average citizens were promoted as they fought for equal rights. It is true, at least for the *Courier* and *Defender*, that golf was far from the primary focus of the sports pages. However, golf did maintain a regular, substantial following. Key events involving golf, especially those pertaining to the struggle for civil rights, occasionally even left the sports pages and made front page news.

Easy access to material on black golfers during the 1947 to 1954 period is limited. While papers such as the *Baltimore Afro-American* and *Atlanta Daily World* covered golf much like the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender*, these papers have not been fully digitized and thus were unavailable for my use.<sup>81</sup> But the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender* had a large combined readership at the time. Although articles I cite from the *Courier* came from the

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<sup>81</sup> Marvin P. Dawkins. “African American Golfers in the Age of Jim Crow.” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 20.1 (1996): 41-42.

paper's city edition, not its national edition, evidently even the city edition covered many of the major golf events around the nation.

The evidence I have gathered convinces me that golf was often, if not always, a central focus of the black sports world in post-World War II America. Between 1947 and 1954, the *Courier* and the *Defender* combined published over thirteen-hundred articles dealing with golf to greater or lesser extent. The majority of these articles covered UGA events. In 1950, the *Defender* began a weekly column entitled "Down The Fairway" (which was also the title of Bobby Jones's 1927 autobiography) to regularly cover the sport. The column generally discussed UGA events, players, and golf "technology," as well as golf in popular culture.

Data are not readily available to provide a complete profile of the journalists who covered golf for black newspapers, or even for just the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender*. Most golf articles from 1947 to 1954, especially those pertaining to everyday citizens, did not cite the author. While some of the main writers, such as Russ Cowans and Will Robinson, are known, no information on all of the *Courier's* or *Defender's* staff could be found. Without thoroughly researching the organizational archives of both newspapers, it is impossible to attribute specific anonymous/unaccredited articles to particular writers.

It is equally impossible to gauge the exact level of exposure or popularity that golf had within the black community. While the general readership of the *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier* at the time may be known, one cannot obviously assume that every reader was invested in every story.

What I think can be reasonably concluded, based on my research, is that (1) the writers for the *Courier* and *Defender* were predominantly, if not exclusively, African American, and (2) -- given the sustained efforts of these prolific sports writers to promote golf over an eight year



span -- there must have been a substantial readership in the African American community that was intrinsically interested in the game of golf itself, and/or in the game's connection with the broader civil rights issues that were these newspapers' bread and butter. As with many of the writers for these newspapers, blacks around the country viewed Joe Louis as a hero. His active involvement in golf in the post-World War II era, by itself, surely led to some level of following by many blacks, as did the involvement of other celebrities like Sugar Ray Robinson, Billy Eckstine, and Jackie Robinson.

An interesting note concerning black journalists mirrors the reality among black golfers: for the most part, though not exclusively, these sports writers were male.<sup>82</sup> It is not impossible, of course, that some or many of the uncredited pieces in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender* were written by women. Nevertheless, based on the known identities of sports writers for these papers, it is likely, and not surprising, that men dominated the writing of the sports section.

As discussed before, a notable feature of the reporting on golf in the African American newspapers was the balance of coverage between articles covering high-profile exploits of pros on the UGA tour or the professionals' attempts to play in white tournaments, versus the actions of everyday people around the nation fighting for equal access and rights in the game. Both the *Defender* and *Courier* meticulously covered instances of racial strife on the golf course, rallying not only to bring more exposure to the sport itself but to promote equality and political activism by highlighting the actions of citizens.

Arguably because of the success of the UGA and its regional bias to hold events in northern cities such as Pittsburgh and Detroit, most of the publicized battles against Jim Crow

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<sup>82</sup> Ramona Lowe. "Miami, Greensboro Get Golf Courses On Concerted Action." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 23 April 1949: 1.

golf practices in the post-war era were in the south. Blacks clearly had more opportunities to play the game in the north, even though many of the top pros were southerners who started out as caddies. Generally, more “affluent” blacks such as attorneys and doctors, those with the disposable income to join country clubs, would be the ones leading a legal campaign for equal rights.

To expand on a point made in the civil rights section of this thesis, the black newspapers showcased different debates for equality in a similar reporting style. Whether blacks were fighting for their own “separate but equal” facilities, for partial access to tax-funded municipal courses, or for complete integration of public courses as a vindication of their civil rights, both the *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier* rallied to each cause equally. None was portrayed as “more important” than the other. The papers’ writers seemingly viewed any attempt to grow the game of golf in the black community as worthy of enthusiastic support. Even after *Brown v. Board*, when attempts to maintain the “separate but equal” status quo in golf continued, the papers did not necessarily argue for immediate integration.

During the 1947-1954 time period, black sportswriters were as much political activists as reporters. Committed to growing the game of addition to fighting for the well-being of their race, these writers did their best to bring widespread attention to events on the course. The efforts of Will Robinson, Wendell Smith, and Russ Cowans not only contributed to the growth in popularity of golf among blacks in the early 1950s, but it directly led to greater success for black professional golfers and the UGA.

Smith, an avid Joe Louis supporter, routinely mixed political commentary favoring integration into his coverage of black golf. In his articles on Louis, he demonstrated why blacks needed to continue supporting the “Brown Bomber” outside the boxing ring so that fellow blacks

had more chances to succeed. To both Smith and Robinson, while playing in the PGA was the dream of black golfers, the UGA was of equal or better quality: the two regularly celebrated the black tour's events and closely covered each tournament in order to sustain the UGA's popularity. To them the UGA truly mattered, as a civil rights cause. These golf writers also helped break the gender barrier in sports coverage by regularly covering women athletes and golfers, such as Ann Gregory and Eoline Thorton, in their stories.

Russ Cowans wrote in a somewhat more inflammatory tone than either Smith or Robinson. He appeared even more fed up than they with the PGA's racist policies, arguing that the PGA's and other white sporting organizations' exclusion of black players from top competition inevitably harmed the quality of play.

In the context of Jackie Robinson's 1947 call-up to the Brooklyn Dodgers, members of the black media more systematically pressed white authorities in golf to integrate. Black pros such as Ted Rhodes and Bill Spiller were analogous, in their view, to Jackie Robinson. If they legitimately qualified for certain PGA-sponsored or other white-backed tournaments, they clearly had the ability and right to play and should never be excluded from participation.

To better understand how these three journalists helped promote golf, it is helpful to look at their overall sports-writing careers and see where the sport ranked among their interests.

Little is known about Will Robinson's background. From the *Pittsburgh Courier* archives, however, it is evident that he was a general sports writer and became "Courier Golf Writer" sometime around 1950. In this capacity he did not exclusively write golf stories, but obviously he regularly covered the sport and was formally identified with it.

Robinson's main focus was professional golf rather than the struggles of average citizens to gain equal rights in the game. Moreover, in comparison to the two other journalists, he

focused more on UGA events than on black golfers' struggles to gain PGA acceptance. That is, while he regularly reported on professional black golfers' attempts to play in white tournaments, he was equally if not more focused on building readers' knowledge and support for the UGA.

Robinson expanded the *Pittsburgh Courier's* coverage of golf in a variety of ways. By 1950, he helped create a ranking system for the UGA's top competitors, drew attention to female UGA competitors, and wrote opinion pieces in an effort to showcase how the UGA benefitted black society.<sup>83</sup> While it is impossible to gauge exactly how large a following golf had in Pittsburgh's black communities, Robinson's specialized role as golf correspondent – and this for the city edition of what was also a national newspaper – suggests that there must have been substantial demand or investment in golf among Pittsburgh's African Americans in the post-war years.

Russ J. Cowans was the *Chicago Defender's* sports editor throughout the 1947 to 1954 period.<sup>84</sup> While golf was not his sole focus, as sports editor Cowans regularly covered it and kept up with current events. As with many other sports journalists at the time, Cowans utilized sports writing as a means to comment on civil rights issues, and not just to recapitulate the details of specific sporting events. In other words, sports in general for Cowans had a significant political dimension for the black community. Unlike Robinson, Cowans's focus on civil rights issues regularly included the endeavors of everyday citizens.<sup>85</sup>

In his overall sports writing, Cowans did reveal a passion for golf and other less mainstream sports. While baseball often made the top headlines, Cowans regularly featured golf, track and field, and bowling in his sports column to demonstrate that blacks were breaking

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<sup>83</sup> Will Robinson. "New Courier Point System Will Select Golf's Big 3." *The Pittsburgh Courier (City Edition)*. 17 June 1950: 22. (For more, see ProQuest's *Pittsburgh Courier* database and the attached bibliography.)

<sup>84</sup> For additional information on Mr. Cowans, reference ProQuest's *Chicago Defender* database.

<sup>85</sup> Russ J. Cowans. "A Few Closed Doors." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*. 17 June 1950: 17.

ground in different athletic domains. As a fan of Joe Louis, Cowans thought that Louis's PGA battles rivaled his in-ring fights, and he anxiously monitored the efforts to integrate at the much-publicized San Diego and Phoenix golf tournaments. Concerned for better treatment of his race's athletes, Cowans regularly applauded the abilities and efforts of black pro golfers, while being one of the most vocal critics of the PGA's race ban. Though he would leave the *Chicago Defender* in 1959, Cowans' actions as a promoter and political activist helped draw attention to golf as a civil rights cause between 1947 and 1954.

Of the three journalists whose views on golf were most widely published between 1947 and 1954, Wendell Smith was probably the most famous. A general sports editor for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Smith was best known for shadowing Jackie Robinson during his days in the minor leagues in Montreal and, later, while he was a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Smith, who would become the first African American member of the Baseball Writers Association of America, and who was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1994, was especially passionate about integration due to his direct role in helping Robinson advance to the major leagues.<sup>86</sup>

Smith's role in promoting golf was much more limited than that of Cowans and Robinson. However, he viewed golf as another avenue for blacks to succeed and challenge for civil rights in America. Like Cowans, Smith was an avid follower of Joe Louis's boxing career and supported his entry into golf as both a skilled player and a political activist. When the UGA tour stopped in Pittsburgh, Smith covered the events extensively. Though his knowledge and love for baseball formed his principal sports-writing identity, Smith's encouragement of UGA golfers and their struggles for equal rights carried a powerful sign of approval for the *Courier's* readership. Like

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<sup>86</sup> For more information on Smith, refer to ProQuest's *Pittsburgh Courier* database, the Baseball Hall of Fame website, and the African American Registry at < [http://www.aaregistry.org/historic\\_events/view/wendell-smith-sportswriter-helped-desegregate-baseball](http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/wendell-smith-sportswriter-helped-desegregate-baseball)>

Cowans at the *Chicago Defender*, as a sports editor for a black newspaper Smith felt an obligation to promote the success and trials of black athletes as a whole in an attempt to elicit further grassroots support across the nation.

Robinson, Cowans, and Smith were not necessarily the chief journalistic experts on black golf during the post-war period. To determine that definitively will require research into several other prominent black newspapers, such as the *Baltimore Afro-American*. However, their collective influence in helping grow the game in the 1947-1954 period seems clear.

Russ Cowans and Wendell Smith commanded a widespread audience and could easily influence public opinion; they vigorously did so in promoting the efforts of Joe Louis and other prominent figures in black golf. Will Robinson highlighted both the national and regional importance of golf. While it is unknown whether he was recognized as a golf commentator outside of Pittsburgh, his coverage of the UGA suggests that there was a strong following for these golfers' exploits, at least in the north. It is likely that Robinson's columns, many of which dealt with tournaments and events outside of Pittsburgh, appeared in the national edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier* as well, and that Robinson therefore helped bring more attention to the sport on a national stage. At the very least, the actions of these three men kept golf relevant in the black media, offering those who enjoyed it substantial insight and increasing coverage during the post-war years.

Even though golf's growth in the black community in the post-war era occurred in the shadow of Jackie Robinson's heroics on the baseball diamond, what is clear is that black media members showed solidarity in an effort to promote sports among their race. The media may have displayed heightened attention to golf because of the nature of the sport: there was no formal organization that could help a black golfer break the color barrier. Jackie Robinson had

teammates and the Dodger front office to partially protect him and make his transition into Major League Baseball easier. By contrast, black media members suggested Joe Louis had the moral and political responsibility to draw on the celebrity from his boxing career and single-handedly fight to play golf on behalf of all African Americans at San Diego in 1952.

For regular, everyday black golfers, the fight was even more difficult: these people lacked the celebrity of Louis or the professional black golfers of the day. Hence, media support was invaluable. Both the *Defender* and *Courier* regularly overlapped in their coverage of specific civil rights cases, but both also revisited these debates many times over the 1947-1954 period. Civil rights legal cases in Nashville, Atlanta, Baltimore, Houston, Knoxville, Miami, New Orleans, and Baton Rouge to achieve equal use of golf courses, or at least Jim Crow facilities for black players, attracted sports headlines for years. Writers seemingly felt obliged to cover every detail of each case; even minor cases that were quickly settled received decent mainstream exposure. This was especially true for the *Pittsburgh Courier's* city edition: articles concerning the fight for equal facilities in southern cities such as Knoxville were eagerly followed because, to both the writers and their audience, any fight against Jim Crow was beneficial to blacks everywhere in the United States.

In sum, my reading of the articles by Robinson, Cowans, and Smith captures the importance of the game of golf to the black community in the post-World War II era. The black public and media were strongly invested in the success of their professional golfers, as well as in securing the right of the average citizen to play golf, regardless of race. These efforts, aimed at challenging long-established Jim Crow restrictions and proving that black athletes had a place in all mainstream sports, were highlighted often and effectively by the black media, and thereby helped transform golf into a civil rights cause.

For black golf professionals, the 1947-1954 era was one of difficulty but also one of demonstrable progress. The few times that blacks, despite considerable resistance, broke the color barrier on the golf course, they helped expand their race's future in the game.



## Concluding Thoughts

The African-American experience in the game of golf between 1947 and 1954 was both an immense struggle for justice on the greens, but also a significant triumph in that the popularity of the game continued to increase after the war. World War II gave many blacks the chance to experience the game for the first time, while the subsequent desegregation of the military raised the question of why, if men of different races could serve together in war for their country, they not could enjoy a leisurely game of golf together.

For blacks, 1947's greatest triumph was the ascension of Jackie Robinson to the Major Leagues. Robinson served as an example of the possibilities that black citizens, not only athletes, could realize if they continued to press forward for equality. Yet Robinson was destined to be a Hall of Fame ball-player; his abilities in many ways overshadowed his race, and he received much outside help in breaking baseball's color barrier. For everyday black golfers, however, ability was often not enough; racism on the golf course was systemic. Already divided along class lines, golf remained divided along racial lines by the policies of both private clubs and uncompromising local governments.

Yet even for those black golfers of the highest caliber, the likes of Ted Rhodes, Bill Spiller, Howard Wheeler, and Charlie Sifford, the road towards equal playing opportunities was very difficult. The late 1940's and early 1950's were a period of constant struggle for these men, as they strived to be the best on the black golf circuits while battling, either in courts of law or the court of public opinion, to get a fair shot at PGA events. Even an American icon - a man ironically picked by his country to challenge the bravado of Nazi Germany - heavyweight boxing great Joe Louis, faced both aggression and rejection when trying to fight for his right to play on any golf course. But Louis pressed on: not only did he succeed in fighting for his race yet again

by participating in the 1952 San Diego and Phoenix Opens, he promoted golf among his people by financially sponsoring the top black pros of the time and bringing his celebrity to the United Golf Association.

Because the PGA's long-term Caucasian Clause remained in place until 1961, the UGA continued to be a very important competitive alternative due to the ambition and talent of its players. Purses may have been pitifully small on this tour, but UGA events were of cultural significance to much of black America and helped grow the game. In spite of the visibility of black golf professionals in the north-based UGA, however, the average black golfer still had to assert his right to play the game, especially in the south. Discrimination lawsuits pertaining to golf between 1947 and 1954 were commonplace. Blacks fought either for their own separate golf courses, for partial "equal" use of existing "white" facilities, or for full integration of the white courses.

While some black protesters succeeded in achieving their rights, many did not. Cases that were not dismissed were often settled by building Jim Crow facilities aimed at minor appeasement of the black community; or, when courts ruled in favor of integration on public municipal courses, the local governments owning those courses sometimes leased them to private groups in an effort to maintain the segregated practices. Mirroring this "run-around" model was the PGA when it was pressured by black golfers. Introducing the concept of "approved players" was theoretically a way to allow the top black talents to play in PGA tour events, but in reality, top black players were only rarely approved while the Caucasian Clause was still in effect.

Such actions were quickly condemned in the court of black public opinion. The black media rallied behind its golfers, both professional and amateur, in an attempt to increase the

sport's popularity and promote equal rights activism. Writers for the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender* vocally attacked the racist policies of Jim Crow-supporting governments, while chastising the PGA for its disregard of black players. In contrast, these newspapers celebrated the UGA as an opportunity and a showcase of the most talented golfers of any race.

While mainstream newspapers like the *New York Times* only covered the biggest events on the black golf circuit, the black papers strived to give as much coverage of the sport as possible with weekly columns and in-depth results of every UGA event. These writers also helped elevate the profiles of some of the best black female golfers, such as Ann Gregory, helping black women cement their rightful place as top competitors in the sport. The activist mentality of the writers guaranteed that golf stories on racial discrimination would be followed through until each case was settled. This process often took years, but reporters did not waver in their dedication to promoting equal rights as a signal of solidarity with those fighting for civil liberties on the golf course.

The impact of *Brown v. Board* was readily apparent within the game of golf, but in many cases resistance to the decision -- in golf as in public education -- was quick. While some courts immediately interpreted the decision as pertaining to all public facilities, others rationalized that Jim Crow regulations were still permissible under certain conditions. As such, in the months following the seminal Supreme Court ruling, a few local governments settled racial disputes on the golf course by allocating separate but equal facilities to blacks. Beyond the realm of public facilities, racist exclusionary practices remained unchallenged. Black golfers and sports writers thus knew that despite the *Brown* decision, their struggle to fight for the chance to compete at the highest level would continue; the PGA's Caucasian Clause would remain.

Although Jim Crow persisted after *Brown*, the 1947 to 1954 period was more than transitional for blacks and golf. This was the era in which the game was first cemented among an entire race of people and integrated into the collective fight for equal opportunity. Blacks increasingly paid attention to the game during this period. Though it was the era of Ben Hogan and Sam Snead, for black golfers it was as much the era of Ted Rhodes and Charlie Sifford.

The post-war era was the heyday of the UGA, a time when the black golf circuit had an enormous following and black pros and celebrities like Joe Louis were heralded as both athletes and civil rights heroes. This was the period in which black golfers like Charlie Sifford, Pete Brown, and other black golfers who later succeeded in their fight to play on the PGA tour, first emerged as up-and-comers on the black golf tour. This was the time of the emerging Civil Rights Movement, when black citizen-golfers whose names have long since been forgotten challenged racist institutions for love of the game of golf. In the face of Jim Crow policies and PGA indifference, both professional and amateur black golfers, along with members of the black media, dedicated themselves to the continuous fight for equality on and off the course.

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