Game of Privilege
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The Development of the United Golfers Association

AUGUST 1955—WESTON GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB, TORONTO, ONTARIO

Arnold Palmer stared at the leaderboard, shocked his name was not on top. The twenty-five-year-old rookie was playing one of his first PGA tournaments and had just shot 64 in the opening round of the 1955 Canadian Open, a fabulous score equaling the course record. The event brought the world’s leading players to Toronto, where for the first time in Canada’s history a golf tournament was being televised nationally.

Palmer was sure he had bested the field, but above his name read one other.

“Charlie Sifford?” he said to no one in particular. “How on earth did Charlie Sifford shoot a 63?”

“Same way you shot a 64, chief. Except I did you one better.”

Palmer turned and saw the thirty-three-year-old Sifford standing behind him. There the two men met for the first time—the most popular white and black golfers of their generation. For the next fifty years elite golf would periodically bring them together, always with mutual respect and friendship.

But it was no coincidence they’d met in a foreign country. Days later Palmer posted 64-67-64-70 for a total of 265 (-23), overtaking Sifford with the lowest score he’d ever post in his career and winning the tournament. He returned to his country with the first of sixty-two career victories on the PGA Tour, well on his way to becoming “The King” and revolutionizing the game for American TV audiences and a legion of fans dubbed “Arnie’s Army.”

Sifford returned to a country where he was excluded from
most tournaments because a clause in the PGA constitution limited membership to “professional golfers of the Caucasian race.” Armed with the knowledge that he could compete with any golfer in the world, he returned to play most of his tournaments on a different tour, one organized by the UGA.

That summer Palmer went to Detroit to compete for the PGA Championship at Meadowbrook Country Club. Sifford went for the UGA Championship at Rackham Golf Course, which he won for the fourth straight time. Black and white, UGA and PGA, this was the world of segregated professional golf, one in which paths constantly crossed all over the country even as discrimination enforced separation. It was a world that put racism on tour.¹

Beginning in 1926 and lasting into the 1980s an important entity—long overlooked by fans and historians—organized a national golf tour open to all players regardless of their race. The organization, called the United Golfers Association for most of its life, provided thousands of African American players—men and women, amateurs and professionals—access to competitive golf tournaments around the country. Under the loose umbrella of this national entity, UGA tournaments were planned and hosted by local groups of black golfers, some of whom had established their own organizations years before (like Chicago's Alpha Golf Club and Windy City Golf Club) and others that formed in the 1930s and 1940s. There were initially twenty-six member clubs under the UGA’s auspices, but the number grew steadily, reaching an estimated ninety by the 1960s. It is difficult to ascertain how many members each individual club boasted, and certainly some participants were more active golfers than others; but many of these groups, particularly the largest in cities like Chicago, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C., served thousands of golf enthusiasts.² These clubs were the key to maintaining black support for golf in cities around the country, and they maintained their organizational independence even as the national UGA grew in stature. Examples included the St. Nicholas Golf Club (New York City), the Sixth City Golf Club and the Forest City Golf Association (Cleveland), the Vernondale Golf Club and the Cosmopolitan Golf Club (Los Angeles), the Paramount Golf Club (St. Louis), the East Denver Golf Club (Denver), the Riverside Golf Club and the Wake Robin Golf Club (Washington, D.C.), the Twentieth-Century Golf Club (Evanston, Ill.), and the Fairview Golf Club

¹ The United Golfers Association (85)
(Philadelphia). Three of the most prominent in the South were the Crescent City Club (New Orleans), the Hillard Golf Association (Dallas), and the Lone Star Golf Association (Houston).

City clubs also banded together to form black regional golf associations, such as clubs from Philadelphia and New York City that formed the Eastern Golf Association in 1932 and whose annual tournament, the Eastern Open, became a regular UGA event. In 1954 eight groups from San Francisco, San Diego, Phoenix, Seattle, Portland (Ore.), and Los Angeles (including Cosmopolitan and Vernondale) formed the Western States Golf Association.ª

The first attempts at organizing a “national” golf championship for African Americans came soon after the establishment of these city clubs. In 1922 the Windy City Golf Club, with help from the Chicago Defender and Walter and Nettie Speedy, hosted a small national open golf tournament in Chicago. Three years later, Shady Rest Country Club in New Jersey hosted a larger, two-day tournament it dubbed the “National Colored Open Golf Championship.” That event drew thirty-five players from ten different states, most from New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Competitors included Chicago’s top player, Robert “Pat” Ball, as well as John Shippen, who twelve years after competing in his last U.S. Open was teaching and coaching in Washington, D.C., and soon became Shady Rest’s club professional. Neither man managed to best the winner, Harry Jackson, who also hailed from Washington. Although relatively small, the event managed to attract two cameramen from “Fox News,” the silent newsreel established by producer William Fox in 1919. Fox’s men shot footage of the players, the Shady Rest facilities, and the small gallery of onlookers; this was the first black golf tournament ever filmed and perhaps even the earliest surviving footage of African Americans playing golf.ª The following year Mapledale Country Club in Stowe, Massachusetts, hosted another national tournament. Robert Hawkins, the former caddie and course manager who purchased Mapledale, brought a larger group of players; nine came from Chicago alone, including Robert “Pat” Ball, Walter Speedy, and Horace McDougal. Hawkins and the participants formed the United States Colored Golfers Association, with players pledging to send the best members of their respective city clubs each year to determine a national champion (two participants from Washington, Beltram Barker and George Adams, were particularly helpful in organizing the group). In 1929 the association changed its name to the United Golfers Association. Shady Rest and Mapledale continued to schedule
tournaments, often on subsequent weekends so the same players traveling to compete in New Jersey then participated in the UGA Championship the following week in Massachusetts. The winner of the inaugural 1926 UGA National was Harry Jackson, the same man who had won the previous year at Shady Rest. Thus, between Shady Rest and Mapledale the UGA forged the nation’s first black professional golf tour. Within five years it had added its name to several more tournaments hosted by black clubs around the country.

For the next thirty years this tour was the primary outlet for black professional players. Even as USGA and PGA tournaments began to allow a trickle of African American competitors after World War II, the UGA continued to play a critical role in fostering black professional golf well into the 1960s. Its tournaments featured hundreds of black men and women professional players as well as amateurs. In the 1920s and 1930s this included the same individuals who pioneered professional golf at the turn of the century, helping to organize local clubs in their cities and fighting segregation at municipal courses. John Shippen was forty-six when he took part in Shady Rest’s inaugural national championship; his best play-
ing days were behind him, yet he continued to compete in UGA events and even won the 1926 and 1932 Shady Rest tournaments. A gallery of 500 spectators watched the veteran capture his 1926 title in a match-play duel against George Aaron, a member of Harlem’s St. Nicholas Golf Club and runner-up in the New York City public links championship.6

The UGA’s top player during its first decade was Chicago transplant Robert “Pat” Ball, a southern native who caddied for famed white amateur Bobby Jones in Atlanta before heading north. Ball won many UGA tournaments, including the national championship four times (1927, 1929, 1934, and 1941). When he returned to Chicago after his first victory in 1927, he was celebrated by Walter Speedy and the city’s black golfers, who threw a banquet in his honor and crowned him the “Golf King”; two years later he set the course record at Shady Rest en route to winning the 1929 UGA National. Pat Ball’s wife, Cleo, was also an exceptional player, and the duo swept the 1941 UGA National in Boston, Cleo taking the women’s crown the same year Pat claimed his last men’s championship.7 Pat Ball briefly ran a miniature golf facility in Chicago before the city recognized his accomplishments in 1939, naming him the head professional at Palos Park; he was the first African American pro at a municipal course in U.S. history. His position was all the more significant because half of Palos Park’s golf patrons were white. Transitioning from competitive golf (he was forty-two by the time he won his last UGA championship in 1941), Ball became a leading golf instructor and focused on cultivating the game among Chicago’s black youth after World War II.8

Chicago produced other successful UGA players, including Porter Washington. Washington moved to Massachusetts to become head professional at Hawkins’s Mapledale Country Club, where he defeated Ball in the finals of the 1928 UGA National with a record-low round. He also won that year’s Philadelphia UGA tournament at Cobbs Creek and continued playing UGA events into the 1940s.9 Horace McDougal was another early UGA standout from Chicago. After joining Northwestern University’s golf team in 1923 to become the first African American to compete in intercollegiate golf, McDougal served as club professional at Wisconsin’s Casa Loma Country Club, host of the 1930 UGA National. Like Walter Speedy before him, he wrote regular golf pieces for the Chicago Defender and was named the newspaper’s “golf editor.”10

UGA tournaments initially drew golfers from the Northeast and Midwest, but by 1930 players from the South and West regularly participated, especially in the national championship. This included Californians like
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Men’s Champion</th>
<th>Women’s Champion</th>
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<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Mapledale Country Club</td>
<td>Harry Jackson</td>
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<td>Scotch Plains, N.J.</td>
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<td>1930</td>
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<td>1931</td>
<td>Sunset Hills Country Club</td>
<td>Edison Marshall</td>
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<td>1932</td>
<td>Douglass Park Golf Course</td>
<td>John Brooks Dendy</td>
<td>Lucy Williams</td>
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<td>Asheville, N.C.</td>
<td>Indianapolis, Ind.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Howard Wheeler</td>
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<td>Rackham Golf Course</td>
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<td>1935</td>
<td>Mohansic Golf Course</td>
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<td>1951</td>
<td>Seneca Golf Course Cleveland, Ohio</td>
<td>Ted Rhodes Nashville, Tenn.</td>
<td>Eoline Thornton Los Angeles, Calif.</td>
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<td>1953</td>
<td>Swope Park Golf Course Kansas City, Mo.</td>
<td>Charlie Sifford Charlotte, N.C.</td>
<td>Ann Gregory Indianapolis, Ind.</td>
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<td>1962</td>
<td>Fuller Park Golf Course Memphis, Tenn.</td>
<td>Pete Brown Jackson, Miss.</td>
<td>Carrie Jones Jackson, Miss.</td>
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amateur Oscar Clisby, winner of a 1931 Los Angeles public links tournament, as well as Cliff Strickland, a caddiemaster from the Victoria Club in Riverside, California, who won the 1939 UGA National in Los Angeles when the event was held in the West for the first time. Yet the largest surprise in the UGA’s early years was the flood of talented black players from the South who began to dominate the circuit in the 1930s and continued to outperform northern golfers after World War II. Starting with New Orleans resident Edison Marshall’s victory at the 1930 UGA National, southern players won eight out of ten national championships. Following
the war, a new generation of players who developed their games in the South—such as Ted Rhodes (Nashville, Tenn.), Charlie Sifford (Charlotte, N.C.), and Lee Elder (Dallas, Tex.)—would continue to lead the tour.

No one should have been surprised at this ascendance of southern players. Although the UGA was established in the golfing communities of the Midwest and Northeast, where most of its tournaments took place and where African Americans had successfully fought for access to municipal courses, golf thrived in the heart of the segregated South. There far more African Americans encountered the game as caddies and groundkeepers while finding more opportunities (and space) to establish their own segregated links. Nevertheless, black observers were shocked when southerners started outperforming the most talented players from Chicago, Cleveland, and New York City. “This national golf tournament is taking on a North vs. South row,” proclaimed the Chicago Defender in 1938. “Unless the North wants to be humiliated, the golfers in this section had better get busy. Those southern boys can sure shoot.” Sportswriters scrambled to explain how the nation’s best black golfers could reside in the South; some speculated that the region’s warmer weather (“they play
the year around”) helped overcome the barriers to golf erected by racism and segregation. This surprise was another indication of how the reality of race and golf differed from public perception. Southerners dominating the UGA seemed to belie the notions of northern opportunity and refinement symbolized by golf and entrenched in the minds of many African Americans. The active golf scene that existed in southern black communities did not fit the popular narrative that helped fuel the Great Migration.

Edison Marshall was the first of many UGA southern champions. A fixture at New Orleans’s Audubon Park, where Joe Bartholomew had developed his game, Marshall joined a contingent of southern players from Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana who made their way to the 1930 UGA National at Wisconsin’s Casa Loma Country Club for the first time. After taking the title, Marshall followed up by winning again the following year at Sunset Hills, another Chicago-area course. Beating Chicago stalwarts (including Pat Ball) on their home turf, he and other talented southerners (another from New Orleans was his friend John Roux, who finished third in 1931) sparked a rivalry that helped the UGA become a truly national golf tour. Players now competed not only for themselves but also for regional pride. The rivalry was cemented by Marshall’s personality, which the northern press compared to that of white baseball star Art Shires, infamous for his hubris. Marshall’s victory speech in 1930 was short and sweet: “Well, I’ll be back next year to take the cup again, and I am sorry there will be no trophy for the rest of you players.” On hand was sportswriter Al Monroe: “If there was an accompanying smile,” he wrote, “we were not among those seeing it.”

Solomon Hughes was another of the southern contingent that dominated UGA competition before World War II. Born and raised in Gadsden, Alabama, Hughes caddied for whites at the Gadsden Country Club and won a number of UGA events, including the 1936 UGA National at Lake Mohansic Golf Course in New York’s Westchester County. Hughes was so popular among black golfers that the world’s most famous athlete tracked him down in rural Alabama. During World War II, Joe Louis (nicknamed the “Brown Bomber”) was stationed in nearby Fort McClellan. Louis, whose celebrity status allowed him to leave his base frequently, spent many evenings befriending Hughes and his wife and taking lessons from the pro. The men were often joined by fellow serviceman Sugar Ray Robinson, the future welterweight and middleweight boxing champion who was also a golf fan. The men remained friends for many years, with
Hughes winning the 1945 Joe Louis Open—the UGA event in Detroit sponsored by the Brown Bomber—and Louis asking Hughes to be his personal golf instructor. (Hughes politely declined, having moved his family north to Minneapolis during the war.)

Atlanta’s black golf scene, centered at New Lincoln Country Club, produced a number of the UGA’s southern stars. Three-time national champion John Brooks Dendy (1932, 1936, and 1937) grew up caddying at the white country club in Asheville, North Carolina, where at age twelve he fashioned his first set of clubs by attaching broken club heads to broom handles; six years later he won his first UGA National. Enrolling at Atlanta’s Morehouse College, Dendy went on to win the nearby Southern Open in 1932, 1934, and 1936. During a 1933 exhibition at the South’s second-most-important black links, the Lincoln Golf Course in Jacksonville, Florida, Dendy wowed the gallery with a hole-in-one at the 342-yard, par-four first hole, followed by three consecutive birdies; the 1-2-3-4, six-under-par start was later recognized in Ripley’s Believe It or Not. Most of Atlanta’s standout golfers were multiple-time winners of the Southern Open, the top black tournament in the South. Along with Dendy, other winners included Zeke Hartsfield, Howard Wheeler, Hugh Smith, Sanders Mason, and Ralph Alexander. Atlanta’s talented players also interacted with the city’s burgeoning white golf scene: like Pat Ball, Hartsfield and Wheeler also caddied for Bobby Jones at the all-white East Lake Golf Club. Hartsfield later became head professional at Lincoln.

The most accomplished of these Atlanta players, and perhaps the most eccentric in UGA history, was Howard Wheeler. Wheeler was born in Atlanta and grew up on its golf courses, caddying at Brookhaven Country Club and eventually becoming caddiemaster at East Lake. The tall, long-hitting player wowed onlookers with his powerful drives and unorthodox style, which featured a unique and awkward grip. “Wheeler was a cross-handed player, which means that he gripped a golf club opposite the way nearly everybody else does it,” recalled rival Charlie Sifford, who first met Wheeler in 1939 when Sifford was seventeen years old. “It looks awkward as hell. . . . I was so busy telling myself that Wheeler couldn’t possibly hit the ball right that I didn’t pay attention to the shots he was making with his short, quick swing.” When he was twenty-one, Wheeler won his first Southern Open, and he went on to win six UGA championships (1933, 1938, 1946, 1947, 1948, and 1958), a record matched only later by Sifford. Peaking in the late 1940s, when he rivaled Ted Rhodes as the top black player in the country, Wheeler played at a high level for a long time and
managed to recapture his form following an extended break for service during World War II, a rarity for professional athletes in any sport. The twenty-five-year gap between his first UGA championship (1933 at Chicago’s Sunset Hills) and his last (1958 at Pittsburgh’s North Park) was also a record. Like many southern-born players, Wheeler moved north during his career. In 1938 he resettled in Philadelphia and became a fixture at Cobbs Creek, where he dueled with the young Sifford after the cocky teen called him out one day. “I’m Charlie Sifford, and I’m gonna whip your ass on that golf course,” Sifford said when they first met. “Wheeler asked me how much money I had in my pocket [$20]. . . . Fine, he said, we’ll play for

ten dollars a nine, match play. He stepped up to the tee, and backhanded a ball a good 270 yards. He proceeded to systematically take me apart.”

Eventually the two partnered and became an unbeatable team playing cash games in Philadelphia.

Wheeler matched his unorthodox style with an eccentric personality and ability to perform crowd-pleasing trick shots. At first he received a chilly reception from northern golf fans. When Wheeler came to Chicago and defeated hometown hero Pat Ball at the 1933 UGA National, the *Chicago Defender* announced that the “long, lanky lad” was “not popular with the gallery because of his high pitched temperament.” He also sported “trousers any tailor would shudder to accept” and “a shirt that was soiled from both use and exposure.” Yet Wheeler eventually won over fans and was dubbed the UGA’s “Clown Prince of Golf.” He could tee a ball on top of random objects, like a box of matches or a soda bottle, and hit booming drives. “Before anyone knew what a trick-shot artist was, [he] was hitting 300-yard drives with balls that were teed up on top of Coke bottles,” recalled Sifford. “Wouldn’t scratch the bottle, but the ball would take off like it was shot from a cannon. . . . It was the damndest thing you ever saw. If he’d been alive 40 years later than he was, Wheeler could have made a fortune giving trick-shot exhibitions.”

In addition to southern players helping the UGA develop a national footprint in the 1930s, the tour even took on an international dimension. Bermuda’s thriving black golf scene prompted several residents to travel and compete in UGA events. The biggest international splash came from one of the tour’s lesser-known players: vaudeville star Frank Radcliffe. Radcliffe was an accomplished amateur golfer who won the amateur title at the 1935 UGA National. Joining entertainer George Sorlie’s traveling stage show in 1939, Radcliffe performed on tours across Australia and Europe. His golfing prowess drew considerable attention, especially a series of exhibitions in Australia that made headlines when he broke scoring records on four prominent courses. At Bathurst Golf Club he bested a record held by renowned white golfer Norman Von Nida, one of Australia’s top professionals. He did the same at Brisbane’s Gailes Golf Club, this time beating American Gene Sarazen’s record. “In a practice round, with borrowed clubs, at Victoria Park, he proved himself one of the longest hitters to be seen in Brisbane for many a long day,” proclaimed the *Sydney Referee*. Radcliffe also played exhibition matches against the top two English golfers of the era, British Open champions Alf Padgham and Henry Cotton.
Australian fans were enthralled with the “colored U.S. champion,” while curious black sportswriters back in the United States noted that Radcliffe was not the UGA’s best golfer by far, nor was he even a professional. “We have any number of golfers who turned in better scores as a pro than Mr. Radcliffe who is a whale of a golfer as an amateur,” wrote one.23 Nevertheless, Radcliffe’s amazing run marked the first time a UGA player (or any African American) received overseas attention in competitive golf. “Travelling extensively he has played on most of the courses of international fame in the British Isles,” exclaimed the Queensland Times. “As far north as the Balgownie course, in Scotland, also at the Braid Hills (Edinburgh), Hoylake, Lythan, St. Anne’s, and Westward Ho [Royal North Devon].”24 A UGA player would not attract such attention playing abroad until Lee Elder toured Africa and won the 1971 Nigerian Open, over thirty years later.

The UGA drew talented men, but in 1930 it developed a notable feature that distinguished it from other black sporting organizations: a full women’s division. Female competition came only after dedicated women struggled to convince the tour to include them at its events. The first four national championships featured no women despite some expressing interest. Organizers bluntly insisted that the quality of play among black women would not attract fans. In 1930, however, they agreed to include a women’s tournament as part of the UGA National at Wisconsin’s Casa Loma, in part to prove that interest among black women and the level of competition were both inadequate. To the UGA’s surprise, sixteen women signed up and paid to compete, almost as many as the male competitors (twenty-two). Moreover, they exhibited impressive skills, none more than Marie Thompson. A member of Chicago’s Pioneer Club (the group founded by Walter Speedy), Thompson was an early promoter of the game among the city’s black women, joining others like Nettie Speedy and Cleo Ball.

Well aware that the male players, the gallery, and the black press were curious to gauge the level of competition among black women, Thompson arrived at Casa Loma on a mission and did not disappoint. She destroyed the competition (beating her nearest competitor by sixteen shots) and impressed onlookers with her play. Her performance helped guarantee that all future UGA championships, and most UGA events, would include a women’s division. The following year she won the championship again at Sunset Hills in Kankakee, Illinois.25 Not only was she the first black woman to win a “major” golf tournament (women always competed
as “amateurs” in the UGA, whereas most tournaments had separate “amateur” and “professional” divisions for men), but she was also the first to achieve some celebrity attention for her skills. Her contentious divorce in 1935 became a minor scandal in the black press, as Thompson charged her husband with cruelty, married another man the following year, and moved to Detroit. There she was instrumental in the development of the Detroit Amateur Golf Association and continued to perform well at UGA events; she finished in the top ten at each UGA National from 1933 to 1941. Thompson’s fearless play under scrutiny inspired a growing number of women to sign up for competition. While sixteen women were in the field for the first UGA National in 1930, forty-five competed at the 1941 championship in Canton, Massachusetts.26

Southern men excelled in UGA events during the 1930s and 1940s, but female players from the Midwest stood atop the women’s division. In fact, only two women residing in the Deep South ever won the UGA championship: Melanie Moye (Atlanta) in 1938 and Carrie Jones (Jackson, Miss.) in 1962. In addition, some of the best women on the early UGA tour hailed from two cities not particularly known for producing top male players: St. Louis, Missouri, and Indianapolis, Indiana. A thriving club of black women played regularly at the Douglass Park Golf Course in Indianapolis, including Lucy Williams and Ella Able. Williams won the UGA National four times (1932, 1936, 1937, and 1946) as well as the inaugural Joe Louis Open in 1946, while Able won the UGA championship in 1934 and 1935. The 1933 national champion, Julia (Towns) Siler, hailed from St. Louis and enjoyed a long career: she recorded more than 100 victories at the local, regional, and UGA levels, including the senior women’s title at the 1959 UGA National.27 Williams, Able, and Siler all reportedly drew sizable galleries in the 1930s: large crowds at Douglass Park followed Able and Williams whenever they squared off against each other, while matches between Siler and Able were the highlight of intercity contests between St. Louis and Indianapolis black golf clubs, occasionally drawing more attention than the men’s matches.28

Meanwhile, Chicago continued to produce both male and female UGA standouts, including Pat and Cleo Ball, husband-and-wife national champions in 1941, and Geneva Wilson, women’s national champion in 1939 and 1940. Wilson joined the ongoing fight against segregation in Chicago golf, suing a white-owned miniature course on the South Side in 1939 after the facility turned her away.29 The following year she won her second consecutive UGA National in Chicago, notable because it was or-
organized by the Chicago Women’s Golf Club, the first time a female club hosted the championship. The other top women’s organization, Wake Robin Golf Club in Washington, D.C., also provided leadership to the tour. In 1941 Wake Robin’s president, Paris Brown, was elected vice president of the UGA. By World War II, black women had gone from being totally excluded by the UGA to organizing and participating in its most important tournaments. Yet the world of competitive golf remained far from equal, as women bemoaned the relative lack of attention female players received in the press and the little prize money available. The year after Lucy Williams won the 1946 Joe Louis Open, the tournament barred women from competing after some complained about the large discrepancy between male and female prize money.

Louis was the world’s most popular athlete and provided key support to help increase the UGA’s visibility. World heavyweight boxing champion from 1937 to 1949, he achieved more fame than any American athlete before him, and his passion for golf was legendary. Louis first played soon after he became a professional boxer in 1934, and by 1939 he had started to “take my golf game very seriously.” He often played between fights, insisting reporters join him on the course if they wanted an interview and seeking out black professionals to help improve his skills. That year he hired his first golf instructor, Louis Rafael Corbin, a black professional from Bermuda who frequently traveled to the United States and challenged racial discrimination in white tournaments. Corbin was barred from playing in New York’s 1936 Metropolitan Open but in 1939 became the first black player to compete in the Michigan Open. Louis also played with Clyde Martin, the first head professional at Langston Golf Course in Washington, D.C. (a large oak on Langston’s fifth hole was dubbed the “Joe Louis Tree” because the champ hooked so many drives into it). Martin was born in Maryland and caddied for white professional Tommy Armour at Bethesda’s Congressional Country Club. Louis and Martin played together consistently from 1939 until Louis joined the army in 1942, most often on Rackham Municipal Golf Course, Louis’s home course in Detroit.

The Brown Bomber was bitten hard by the golfing bug. He was on Rackham’s fifteenth hole when he was notified in 1941 that his wife was filing for divorce, resentful at becoming “a golf widow.” He also gambled lavishly on the game: black professional Bill Spiller once won $14,000 from him in a single weekend and bought a house. In 1946 Louis threatened to sue Ebony after an expose claimed he owed $60,000 in golf debts and played high-stakes matches with entertainers Bing Crosby and Bob
Hope for $1,000 per hole. By 1939 he was organizing his own golf tournament at Rackham, and in 1941 he started attending the UGA’s annual national championship. That year his Detroit tournament became an official UGA event: the Joe Louis Open. “This tournament will prove to the whites that we have some Hagans and Sarazens too,” he told the press. Early winners included his first two instructors, Corbin (1939) and Martin (1941). While African Americans frequented all six of Detroit’s municipal courses, the Joe Louis Open helped Rackham—which hosted the UGA National in 1934, 1955, and 1965—become a key gathering spot for black golfers and events. Forty percent of its players were African American by 1951 when the city appointed a black pro, Willie Mosely, to serve as its head professional.

World War II put the UGA (and the Joe Louis Open) on hold but failed to dampen Louis’s enthusiasm for golf. He joined the army’s Special Services Division and staged ninety-three boxing exhibitions for over 2 million soldiers, performing with other celebrity golf aficionados like boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. Louis’s celebrity status allowed him to pursue golf while enlisted, even at segregated military bases in the South. This included his lessons with UGA pro Solomon Hughes outside Fort McClellan, Alabama, as well as golf with white GIS at Fort Riley, Kansas. He also played with Allied troops on courses in England.

A fairly accomplished player, Louis entered his first serious amateur tournament at Langston Golf Course in 1940, where an estimated gallery of 3,000 watched him play with UGA president George Adams and shoot a terrible 97-95-90. Yet he improved dramatically during and after the war, eventually scoring in the high 70s and low 80s on difficult courses (he once shot 69 at Rackham). He won amateur titles at the UGA’s Eastern Open in 1947 and his own Joe Louis Open in 1948. In 1950 the Pittsburgh Courier even ranked him the top black amateur golfer in the country, although his fame certainly helped boost such perceptions. By that point Louis had begun to hint that he would quit boxing permanently for golf. For the UGA, the success of Louis’s tournament was more important than his skills as a player. From its inception the Joe Louis Open was “the richest golf tournament in the world for Negro players,” its prize money and the Brown Bomber’s celebrity connections drawing more fans and press coverage than any other event. In 1947 the men’s winner received $1,000 out of a total purse of $2,500, more than the $1,500 purse up for grabs at the UGA National. By 1950 Louis had upped the purse to $4,000.
In addition to funding the UGA’s most successful tournament, Louis also provided critical financial support to black players as they pursued professional golf. Along with Louis Rafael Corbin and Clyde Martin, several other UGA pros joined Louis’s golfing entourage, traveling with him around the country, offering him golf lessons, and attempting to integrate white tournaments under his sponsorship; most notable were Solomon Hughes, Bill Spiller, and Ted Rhodes. In addition, it was Louis who convinced his friend entertainer Billy Eckstine to hire twenty-four-year-old Charlie Sifford in 1946 to be Eckstine’s personal valet and golf instructor, a partnership that lasted ten years and helped Sifford become one of the most important golfers in history. “Joe Louis was the most big-hearted man I have ever met in my life,” Sifford wrote in his memoir. “He just loved the competition, and he loved to help people out. He didn’t care about the money. . . . He was the most generous man I’ve ever seen, as well as one of the few black men committed to making things better for his people. In his day he was a towering symbol of strength and pride for the black man. He was a true hero.”42 Without Louis’s support the UGA tour would not have thrived the way it did in the late 1940s and 1950s, nor would it have received as much notice and press attention, especially from white fans. Louis was thus an ideal ambassador for black golf who helped black professionals appeal to whites and, eventually, integrate the PGA. UGA organizers and fans certainly agreed and never forgot; in 1975 the tour dedicated its fiftieth anniversary UGA National to Louis, fans besieging the champ at San Diego’s Torrey Pines Golf Course six years before his death.43

The UGA offered black professionals a space to pursue competitive golf in a segregated society and a platform to challenge discrimination in the world of white golf, especially tournaments sanctioned by the PGA and USGA. Unlike in other sports, white players did not even have to show up: access to certain facilities allowed UGA standouts to compare their talents with white pros simply by posting comparable tournament scores on the same courses. When Ted Rhodes won the UGA’s 1948 Houston Open on Memorial Park Golf Course, local fans noted that his score flirted with acclaimed white pro Jimmy Demaret’s course record.44 Head-to-head contests also took place before World War II, as leading UGA players entered the occasional white tournament and arranged exhibition contests against white pros. Pat Ball, first snubbed by white golfers in 1918 after he and Walter Speedy were barred from the Chicago city championship, continued to challenge discrimination at white tourna-
ments more than any black golfer since John Shippen. By the 1920s he was winning local tournaments against white players, including the Cook County Open in 1927, 1929, and 1934. In 1928 he and Porter Washington staged an exhibition match against two white PGA pros at Shady Rest.45

Even Howard Wheeler, whom many contemporaries considered less willing to confront discrimination in golf, played high-profile exhibitions against whites, including a 1938 match that featured Wheeler and Frank Radcliffe defeating white pros Charles Halarack and Gene Battistoni (Battistoni qualified for the U.S. Open in 1938 and 1941). The interracial contest drew a large gallery to Chicago’s Palos Park.46 However, Wheeler made fewer inroads into white professional golf compared with other black pros, especially those who peaked later in the 1950s and 1960s. He took occasional jobs that provided financial security and allowed him the freedom to play (for a time he was a chauffeur for entertainer Ethel Waters), all the while earning more money from unsuspecting players in cash games than he ever would at professional tournaments. As a result, his legacy and contribution were particularly forgotten, much like the legendary black players who dominated Negro League baseball yet were unknown to whites. “As good as Howard Wheeler was,” recalled Sifford, “he never talked to me about wanting to play professional golf on the white tour. . . . Howard just didn’t have that kind of personality or persistence to push his way into pro golf. He was content to be the local favorite and to take on anyone who wanted to challenge him on his home course.”47

The most significant prewar challenge at a national tournament took place in 1928 when Pat Ball and another black golfer, Elmer Stout of Newark, New Jersey, qualified for the USGA’s Public Links National Championship and traveled to Cobbs Creek in Philadelphia to compete. It was a course familiar to Ball, who had won a UGA tournament there the previous year. Ball and Stout participated in the opening rounds (Ball was tied for sixth place after the first round), and both men qualified for the tournament’s final. Although some white participants had objected, everything appeared fine until USGA officials abruptly informed the men that they were disqualified from the tournament for a scoring error. Ball and Stout immediately went to a Philadelphia court and sought an injunction to halt the event and allow them to continue playing. What followed was an emergency, four-hour court hearing in which the players squared off against lawyers representing Ganson Depew, head of the USGA’s Public Links division and nephew of former New York senator Chauncey Depew. The details revealed in the hearing proved embarrassing to Depew and
the USGA. Disgruntled players and USGA officials had indeed discussed whether or not to even allow Ball and Stout in the tournament before it began. Worse, although players were responsible for policing themselves (the honor system), Ball and Stout had been followed by men posing as reporters who were charged with looking for infractions in order to remove them from the tournament. At the end of the hearing, the court ruled in favor of the two black players despite the USGA’s plea that the tournament was nearly over, many participants had already left town, and an injunction would ultimately lead to its cancellation. The judge suggested Ball and Stout play against the white tournament “winner” in order to determine the actual winner, an idea the USGA rejected. Unperturbed, the judge responded, “If you don’t want this match stopped, you must make some arrangements to put these men back in the game.”

Vindicated from charges of cheating, Ball and Stout then approached USGA representatives outside the courtroom with a significant gesture: in order to save the tournament, they would voluntarily withdraw “for the good of the game.” It was, the judge announced, an example of “exceptionally good sportsmanship.” The USGA also applauded the men and offered to pay their expenses, while reaction in the black community was mixed. Ball and Stout were cheered for exposing racism in the rarefied world of a national golf tournament: “Very unceremoniously the blue-blooded scions of golfdom were hauled into a court of civil action to answer charges of discrimination . . . by shady-skinned sons of Africa,” proclaimed the black Philadelphia Tribune. But other black observers soured at the men’s decision to bow out of the tournament, especially after a court had ruled in their favor. “It was a mistake, a great, big mistake, in not stopping the Golf Tournament if they refused to begin the tournament over again and give the barred men a chance to compete against the other players,” wrote one upset fan. “For be it remembered, the barred men were accused of cheating, for this, if for no other reason, they should have put the ‘iron’ to the souls of the cowards who would dare to besmirch the characters of men who are honest sports.” One black sportswriter echoed that criticism: “It is okay to show high-class sportsmanship . . . providing that you are dealing with high-class sportsmen,” he wrote. “We have got to fight fire with fire and quit compromising.”

The players’ lawyer, Raymond Alexander, was a young black graduate of Harvard Law School who took the case for free. Alexander defended Ball and Stout in court and subsequently in the black press, where he praised their sportsmanship and argued that the judge’s decision would help
future legal challenges to segregated schools in Philadelphia (Alexander would later become the city’s first African American judge in 1959).\textsuperscript{52}

Unfortunately, the sportsmanship that saved the 1928 USGA Public Links Championship was not returned. When Ball attempted to enter the 1933 U.S. Open at Chicago’s Medinah Country Club, he received a letter from the competition committee indicating he was banned from all future USGA national tournaments owing to his “conduct” in Philadelphia five years earlier. The note was signed by Prescott Bush, who later became head of the USGA in 1935 and a U.S. senator (as well as father and grandfather to future U.S. presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush, respectively).\textsuperscript{53} Along with Ball and Stout, other UGA players, including Louis Rafael Corbin and Howard Wheeler, made numerous attempts to follow John Shippen’s legacy and reintegrate USGA national tournaments, especially the U.S. Open.

Ball was briefly successful, entering tournaments hosted by the Western Golf Association (WGA), an organization founded to promote golf in the Midwest and counter the USGA’s “eastern establishment.” He played in the WGA’s signature Western Open twice, in Detroit (1930) and Dayton, Ohio (1931), where he was the only black competitor in a field of leading white pros like Gene Sarazen and Walter Hagen. The WGA responded in 1932 by prominently including the phrase “caucasians only, except by invitation” on its entry blanks and barring UGA players for the next twenty-four years. A group from Tampa, Florida, including Southern Open champion Sanders Mason, was rejected from the 1938 Western Open in St. Louis.\textsuperscript{54}

Struggling to access PGA-, USGA-, and WGA-sanctioned events, UGA pros in 1942 were offered a unique opportunity to play against elite white professionals at an unsanctioned tournament: the “All-American Open.” Noted businessman and golf promoter George S. May organized the event at his Chicago-area course, Tam O’Shanter Country Club. With PGA and USGA events facing wartime cancellation, May’s vision was simple and bold: with a shrewd marketing plan and the largest cash prizes in history, he would attract the world’s top players and turn golf into a national spectator sport. More important for UGA players, and cheered by African Americans, was May’s ardent support for integration, and in 1942 he insisted that his event would be opened to all qualified golfers. “The words ‘national’ and ‘All-American’ in the names of these tournaments mean exactly what they say,” he responded after a black Chicago alderman asked if African Americans were permitted to participate. “I am fully
aware that Negroes are being called upon . . . to do their full share in the
central war effort and I know that many thousands of your people are
presently serving. . . . Their participation will not only be permitted at the
Tam O’Shanter tournaments, it will be welcomed.”55

Along with black amateurs, ten professionals were invited to the 1942
All-American Open (also called the “Tam O’Shanter Open”): Pat Ball,
Howard Wheeler, Edison Marshall, John Brooks Dendy, Zeke Hartsfield,
Frank Radcliffe, Clyde Martin, Calvin Searles, Hoxie Hazzard, and Eddie
Jackson. Although none finished in the top thirty, a large gallery followed
the players, especially the popular Wheeler, who finished top among the
black participants (T-64) and received a $200 prize for “most colorful
golfer.”56 Wheeler’s trick shots particularly wowed the crowds.

The Tam O’Shanter Open made history again the following year after
May convinced a reluctant PGA to make it a sponsored PGA event, the
first in history to feature black professionals. This time thirteen teed up,
including Wheeler and Calvin Searles, a caddie at the New Orleans Coun-
try Club who finished first among the black players. The largest gallery
flocked to watch a popular black amateur compete: Joe Louis. Among the
spectators was sixty-five-year-old Walter Speedy, the grandfather of Chi-
cago’s black golf scene in one of his final public appearances before he
died that December.57

While black women struggled to make inroads into white tournaments
and women in general had far fewer outlets in the world of competitive
golf, the Tam O’Shanter Open welcomed them as well. At the 1944 Tam
O’Shanter, Geneva Wilson became the first black woman to compete
against white women in a major tournament. In subsequent years she
was joined by Thelma Cowans, Ann Gregory, and Mary Brown. Male or
female, black entrants also improved their performances over time and
competed gamely against the world’s best. Gregory finished eighth among
the women at the 1951 Tam O’Shanter, while Calvin Searles in 1944 was
challenging the world’s best white player, Byron Nelson, for the lead in
the final round before a late quadruple bogey left him in twenty-second
place.58 Searles’s fine play in a tournament dedicated to servicemen was
quite poignant: within months he was killed in action in France, a prom-
ising golf career cut short by both racial segregation and war.59

With African Americans forging a national tour and competing along-
side white professionals in the nation’s richest tournament, a curious
sentiment emerged in the early 1940s: the idea that professional golf was
actually more racially tolerant than other sports, especially baseball.
After all, at Tam O’Shanter dozens of black golfers competed against the world’s best white players, including southerners like Byron Nelson, Ben Hogan, Sam Snead, and Babe Didrikson Zaharias, five years before a lone Jackie Robinson stepped onto a Major League Baseball field. The notion of golf as the last bastion of white privilege, so powerful in American history, was challenged yet again. Fans took notice, some even finding in golf the motivation to challenge segregation elsewhere. “Negro stars are competing . . . in golf tournaments,” hailed the New Journal and Guide in 1939. “Baseball seems to be the most stubborn of all, but, it too, can be cracked, and it will be.” Such calls escalated dramatically after the integration of the Tam O’Shanter in 1942: “Last summer the biggest professional golf tournament was open to Negroes,” remarked the Cleveland Call and Post. “Baseball is the only major sport that draws a color line.” In Baltimore, the Afro-American fumed at segregation in Major League Baseball by telling its readers that golf was “open to all.” In the game’s popular memory this burst of optimism surrounding race and professional golf was short lived and soon forgotten. Along with the desegregation of Major League Baseball, the end of World War II would present fans with a new set of high-profile examples reiterating the unwillingness of the PGA and USGA to pursue integration, especially in the all-important events hosted by private golf courses.

Meanwhile, after suspending its tour during World War II, the UGA returned to action stronger than ever, nurturing a new crop of elite players in the late 1940s and 1950s. Foremost among them was Theodore “Ted” Rhodes. A native of Nashville, Tennessee, Rhodes grew up in the 1920s caddying for white players at the Belle Meade and Richland country clubs, occasionally finding opportunities to practice with a discarded 2-iron. His pursuit of golf was remarkable considering how inaccessible the game was in the black neighborhoods of Nashville: all of its municipal courses were closed to African Americans, and unlike many cities in the South it had no segregated black course. The young Rhodes practiced in local parks, building his own play areas by sticking tree branches in the ground and fashioning rudimentary “greens” around them. He then served in the CCC and joined the navy during World War II. In 1943 the thirty-year-old Rhodes overheard golfers discussing a new tournament in Detroit. “I heard one of the Nashville pros talking about his score in the [Joe] Louis Open,” he recalled. “And I said to myself, ‘I can beat that.’” And he did; he failed to win on his first try but then captured Louis’s UGA crown four straight years from 1946 to 1949.
More important than Rhodes’s success in Detroit was that he endeared himself to Joe Louis and Billy Eckstine, the entertainer who became Charlie Sifford’s patron. Louis, ever searching for talented golfers to patronize, offered to sponsor Rhodes and fund his pursuit of professional golf, just as he had Solomon Hughes. Unlike Hughes, Rhodes took the offer and used the opportunity to become the best black golfer in America, traveling alongside Louis (often serving as his valet) and playing as much golf as he could. Louis’s money, fame, and connections to the white golfing world immediately helped. He paid for Rhodes to spend

Ted Rhodes at Chicago’s Tam O’Shanter Golf Course in 1952 (Courtesy USGA Archives).
significant time in southern California and take lessons from Ray Mangrum, a notable white instructor from Texas. (Mangrum was a five-time winner on the PGA circuit, and his brother, Lloyd Mangrum, won thirty-six times, good for thirteenth on the all-time list for most career PGA victories.) Mentored by one of the period’s top white pros, Rhodes matched his success in the Joe Louis Open with stellar performances in the UGA National, which he won three consecutive times from 1949 to 1951 immediately after Howard Wheeler’s three-peat from 1946 to 1948.

Wheeler and Rhodes forged a celebrated rivalry at a time when black interest in competitive golf surged with postwar optimism. Like Wheeler, fans were enthralled with Rhodes and liked his eccentricities: nicknamed “Rags” because of his meticulous style and dress (he was known for wearing distinctive, multicolored Tam O’Shanter caps), Rhodes won awards for being the best-dressed golfer on tour. His easygoing demeanor also earned accolades, although neither his laid-back attitude nor Wheeler’s trick-shot antics got in the way of serious golf.64 When it came time to compete, the men were true professionals, and the UGA competition could be fierce. “For the first time in my life, I found myself surrounded by a whole bunch of black guys who could really play,” wrote Charlie Sifford of his first UGA tournament. “The National Negro Open was our Masters.”65 During a tense final round at the 1949 Sugar Ray Robinson Open (like Louis, Robinson also sponsored his own UGA tournament), Rhodes got mad when he heard a noisy fan in the gallery and insisted that the man leave the course. He did not care when the offender turned out to be Robinson, the event’s celebrity host. Rhodes went on to shoot a record 62 on Staten Island’s South Shore Golf Club to win the tournament, which he also won in 1947 and 1948.

Rhodes solidified his ascendancy over Wheeler in 1949 when the UGA’s two biggest tournaments, the Joe Louis Open and the UGA National, took place in the same city (Detroit) one week apart and Rhodes won them both.66 When the Pittsburgh Courier published a ranking of black golfers in 1952, he was the runaway leader, and in 1954 he became the first black professional to land an endorsement, signing a three-year deal with Ohio’s Burke Golf Company.67 By 1960, however, his health had begun to falter, reportedly due to a kidney ailment. Having won an estimated 150 UGA tournaments, including the national championship four times (1949, 1950, 1951, and 1957), Rhodes moved back to Nashville and devoted himself to teaching and mentoring younger players; his list of talented pupils included Sifford, Lee Elder, Althea Gibson, and Jim Dent. In 1969 he died

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at age fifty-five. “Ted Rhodes was like a father to me,” Elder said the next day. “He took me under his wing when I was 16 years old and completely rebuilt my golf game and my life.” One month later Nashville renamed its Cumberland Municipal Golf Course the Ted Rhodes Golf Course.68

Charlie Sifford recalled how the same humbleness that endeared Rhodes to his black fans and fellow competitors also helped history overlook his accomplishments. “Teddy Rhodes was the black Jack Nicklaus,” he wrote. “His only fault was that he was far too soft-spoken a person, too much a gentleman, to make waves and try to force his way onto the white tour.”69 Sifford drew mentorship from Rhodes and the tour’s other top player of the 1940s, Howard Wheeler, to help him dominate the UGA during the 1950s and become its all-time greatest player. Sifford was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1922 and raised in a strict Baptist family. His father worked at a local fertilizer plant. At age ten he began caddying at the Carolina Country Club, and by thirteen he was earning as much in tips from the white club members as his father made at his job. He was also the best golfer on the course, caddie or member, shooting in the 60s. While much of Sifford’s earnings went to his mother, he kept some to nurture his favorite hobby: cigars. He began smoking them at age twelve and never quit despite repeated school suspensions. For the rest of his life he was rarely seen on a golf course without one.70

In the South, white country club members often turned a blind eye, or even openly approved, when young black caddies, but not black men, occasionally played the course. When Sifford turned seventeen, some members started to complain about seeing him on the links too often. “I was made to understand that I might be in physical danger out there on the golf course,” he recalled. “It was okay for me to whack balls around the course when I was a black caddy playing with the other black caddies, or when I was carrying a member’s bag. But now I was becoming serious about my game and I didn’t want to live with playing only when somebody threw me a handout.” The club’s owner, sympathetic and insistent that Sifford had a potential future in golf, convinced him (and his parents) that he should drop out of school and live with his uncle in Philadelphia: “He told me that there were good golf courses up there that wouldn’t have any trouble allowing me to play.”71

Arriving in Philadelphia in 1939, Sifford met accomplished black players like Howard Wheeler and became a fixture at Cobbs Creek. During the war he served in the army (and saw action at the Battle of Okinawa) and soon after began serving as Billy Eckstine’s personal valet/golf
instructor and entering as many professional tournaments as he could. He played a UGA event for the first time in 1946 (the UGA National in Pittsburgh) and took over the tour in 1951, winning four of the six tournaments he entered, including his first UGA victory in Atlanta’s Southern Open.\textsuperscript{72} He went on to match Howard Wheeler’s record by winning the national championship six times (1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, and 1960), including a record five-straight UGA Nationals. Like Ted Rhodes, Sifford signed an endorsement deal with Burke Golf and in 1956 began performing exhibitions around the country marketing his own signature line of Burke golf clubs to African Americans.\textsuperscript{73} He was not as eccentric as Wheeler but more extroverted than Rhodes. “Sifford wears conservative sports clothes, scorns neckties and likes informality,” wrote one sportswriter. Nothing embodied that informality more than his cigars, which became
his signature with fans in the late 1940s. Sports pages and UGA publications were filled with references to the “cigar-smoking stylist” who was “seldom seen either on or off the course without a cigar firmly clenched in his teeth.”

The UGA provided Sifford some national recognition and helped certify him as the top black golfer in the country; however, his success in the 1950s also exposed the tour’s limitations. In terms of the golf courses themselves, the discrepancy between white and black professional golf was often a chasm that exceeded that of other sports. Sifford and his fellow competitors usually honed their skills on the nation’s public links, including popular municipal courses in poor shape. Trying to break into white tournaments at nicer courses meant tackling more than just racial discrimination; it also meant altering one’s game dramatically for faster greens that still “held better,” well-watered fairways, and different sand textures. By 1950, supporters of Ted Rhodes were adamant that he and other black pros would be even more competitive with whites were they allowed to practice on and get better acquainted with the type of courses that hosted PGA events. Sifford and other African Americans who later managed to cross over to the PGA in the 1960s and 1970s would fondly remember the UGA but always bemoaned the “lousy” course conditions they had to contend with.

There was also the problem of money, for UGA success failed to pay the bills. By 1956 Sifford still struggled to make ends meet and relied on occasional gambling, hustling, and generous support from patrons just to keep playing. He recalled that Billy Eckstine, who no longer needed a valet or golf instructor, kept him on his payroll anyway “to help me out.” Fans themselves also donated. In Los Angeles, members of the Cosmopolitan Golf Club and Western States Golf Association established the “Charles Sifford Trust Fund” to help him (and other black pros) keep playing and gain admission to white tournaments. The most Sifford ever earned winning one of his six UGA championships was $800, and he only totaled an estimated $17,000 in tournament earnings before 1961. UGA domination did not provide a living: “I really needed to make some money in golf,” he later wrote.

If a top player like Sifford struggled to make a living on the UGA tour, those with less success had even greater obstacles to overcome. Few were able to devote themselves full time to golf. Some worked in the industry—from caddies to course professionals and instructors—but others did not. Porter Washington, 1928 national champion, played for years on...
the tour while working as a chef in Boston, while 1940 champion Hugh Smith worked at an industrial plant in Georgia. John Brooks Dendy, 1932, 1936, and 1937 champion, was so financially strapped that he went back to serving as a locker-room attendant at the same Asheville, North Carolina, country club where he grew up caddying. By the late 1940s, Bill Spiller, the most outspoken professional on the UGA, loudly protested the lack of resources available to black players and the economic implications of a segregated PGA. Among the most talented black golfers (and despite the $14,000 he won from Joe Louis), Spiller could barely afford to travel to UGA events. He was furious when Sugar Ray Robinson abruptly canceled his 1951 tournament in New York after many players had already arrived. “I’m not certain I’ll be back East next year,” he told the press. “There’s no chance to make enough money to support one’s self during the tournament season.”

Unlike most UGA players, Spiller was a college-educated man who had tried (and failed) to make a living as a teacher, then worked as a railroad porter before dedicating himself full time to professional golf. This made his dejection over the lack of money in black tournaments, and his rage at the PGA, all the more palpable. Born in rural Tishomingo, Oklahoma, he moved to live with his father in Tulsa when he was nine. Spiller attended all-black Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, and sought work as a teacher after graduation. But he soured on a $60-per-month position at a black high school and soon headed to Los Angeles in search of better opportunities. In 1942 he was twenty-nine years old when a friend convinced him to try golf for the first time, perhaps the latest start for a professional player in the game’s history. Within four years Spiller had won several black tournaments in southern California and joined the small cadre of players, instructors, and celebrities in Los Angeles who supported black golfers, including Ted Rhodes and his white teacher, Ray Mangrum, as well as Jimmie DeVoe and Joe Louis. Through Louis, Spiller abruptly found himself playing alongside Hollywood’s white elite far from the segregated world of small-town Oklahoma. Yet he had a history of fierce resistance to discrimination (he carried a gun for much of his life after a white shopkeeper in Tulsa slapped him when he was a boy—“and he pulled it a time or two,” his son recalled). With a fierce temper and a willingness to debate anyone on issues of race and segregation, Spiller was a dangerous black golfer, well educated and unintimidated by the pageantry of white country clubs. He once confronted Fred Astaire when the entertainer snubbed him at L.A.’s Bel Air Club. “I’m in the locker
room putting on my shoes and Fred Astaire walks in and gives me a stare as if to say, ‘What the hell are you doing here?’” Spiller remembered years later. “If eyes could kill, I would have died right there. But I looked right back at him, didn’t bat an eye. He finally said, ‘Well, I guess maybe you’re supposed to be here.’”\(^{80}\)

Even with help from Joe Louis, Spiller struggled to make ends meet, taking a series of jobs in Los Angeles (including at a post office) that took time away from practicing and traveling to tournaments. Although he was not as successful on the UGA tour, his headstrong temperament made
him a key figure in attempts to integrate white tournaments during the late 1940s and 1950s, especially in California. While some players, such as Howard Wheeler and Ted Rhodes, were more hesitant to challenge segregation, Spiller became the UGA’s most vocal advocate demanding immediate desegregation in competitive golf. “Spiller was much more of an activist than Teddy or the other blacks,” wrote Charlie Sifford. “He complained loud and long to anyone who would listen about his rights to play the game, and he was known for picketing professional golf tournaments. . . . Spiller was always the most militant of the black golfers.”

After World War II a new generation of players also appeared in the UGA women’s division. Among them was Thelma (McTyre) Cowans, winner of five UGA Nationals (1947, 1949, 1954, 1955, and 1956). Cowans came from an athletic family and was one of the few UGA standouts who got their start playing golf in school. She excelled in a number of sports while at Atlanta’s Morris Brown College in the late 1930s and pressed the institution to form a women’s golf team after a doctor recommended she take up the game; the students played at New Lincoln Country Club. After relocating with her family to Detroit, Thelma and her sisters, Theresa and Dorcas, continued to play and joined the Detroit Amateur Golf Association, the organization UGA pioneer Marie Thompson had helped form a decade earlier. In 1946 she married Russ Cowans, the editor of the black Michigan Chronicle and a regular contributor of golf columns to the Chicago Defender. Her competitive golf career peaked as she moved to Los Angeles in 1949, joining the Vernondale Golf Club (which became Vernoncrest Golf Club in 1955) and playing alongside her sisters and entertainer Maggie Hathaway, L.A.’s biggest advocate for black golfers.

One of the UGA’s smallest players, Cowans was nevertheless a fierce competitor who ruffled the feathers of fellow golfers. She was unafraid to beat her own sisters, who also competed in UGA events with less success, and was known for a having a Napoleonic streak on the links. She had an icy relationship with Eoline (Jackson) Thornton, the 1951 UGA women’s champion who also lived in Los Angeles and played out of the Vernoncrest Club. The two women were not on speaking terms, even during the finals of the 1954 UGA National in Dallas, where they squared off in a tense match without saying a word to each other. The 1956 women’s championship was even worse, as Cowans sparked the largest controversy in the UGA’s competitive history. Paired against Baltimore’s Alma Arvin in the women’s final, Cowans arrived late to the course after Arvin had already completed nine holes. Citing USGA rules (which all UGA
The UTA Tournament (115 events were played under), the UGA initially declared Arvin the winner, but organizers reconvened and decided to restart the match. Cowans proceeded to win her sixth and final championship, but the victory came at a cost, with most of the other female players denouncing the decision and threatening to boycott future tournaments. Afterward she slowly distanced herself from competitive golf; however, no one could deny her talent. When Charlie Sifford won the 1957 Long Beach Open the following year, becoming the first African American to win a major integrated tournament, he credited the victory to a last-minute putting lesson from Cowans.84

Yet the most talented black woman on the UGA tour in the 1950s was Ann Moore Gregory, who won five UGA Nationals (1950, 1953, 1957, 1965, and 1966) and in 1956 became the first black woman to play in a USGA national championship. Born in Aberdeen, Mississippi, she worked as a maid for a white family while in high school and then left the South to live with her sister in Gary, Indiana. She was an accomplished tennis player, winning the 1937 Gary City Tennis Championship, who married LeRoy Percy Gregory in 1938 and initially balked at the amount of golf her new husband played. However, after he was drafted into the navy during World War II, she found solace on the links and joined the Chicago Women’s Golf Club. Her first UGA victory came in 1948, and in 1950 she won six of the seven tournaments she entered, including the UGA National.85 Just six years after barely breaking 100 on the golf course, Gregory was shooting in the 70s and setting course records at UGA events in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, and Indiana. She was particularly liked by fans who marveled at her relatively late start in golf and dramatic improvement.

The attention Gregory drew also highlighted how a shift in postwar gender ideals prompted female athletes to pursue their sports in a new social context. The black press celebrated how the humble housewife managed to juggle a full-time job in Gary, a family, and a burgeoning national golf career. As they did with the era’s most celebrated white female golfer, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, sportswriters and fans emphasized Gregory’s femininity in a way that echoed the new expectations levied on female athletes (and women in general) during the 1950s. Notably, these expectations were not trumped by her race. “Anyone looking for an example of what Negro womanhood can achieve in sports can turn to Mrs. Gregory,” exclaimed the Cleveland Call and Post.86 Fans were delighted when Gregory indicated she had no problem with her daughter shunning sports and instead learning piano at home: “My main thought . . . is my
little girl,” she told the Chicago Defender. “I will not let golf get between me and my family, although I love the game.”

Led by players like Gregory, Cowans, Wheeler, Rhodes, and Sifford, the UGA expanded its talent pool and fan base in the late 1940s and early 1950s, while attempts by its players to challenge white competitors also increased. In Chicago a dispute with the PGA led George May to end his annual Tam O’Shanter Open in 1958 but not before the event showcased black and white golfers squaring off in front of a national audience for most of the decade. Rhodes was tied for fourteenth in 1949, the best finish by a black man in the event’s history. White fans cheered the players, and children flocked to get Joe Louis’s autograph as he roamed the fairways.

Even Bill Spiller, who shared few positive stories of the PGA or its events, fondly remembered the appreciation of white fans at Tam O’Shanter. “While we’re having lunch a kid tapped me on my shoulder and asked for an autograph,” he recalled. “I said, ‘Mine?’ and he said, ‘You played in the tournament, didn’t you? Well, I want your autograph.’ Then I noticed there were about twenty kids lined up. Shows you the difference in how generations react. Kids have no prejudice. That was a good lesson for me.” The 1953 Tam O’Shanter Open broke barriers again when it aired on ABC, the first nationally televised golf tournament in American history. The black press even likened George May to Branch Rickey, the Major League Baseball executive credited for championing integration after he signed Jackie Robinson.

Yet the battle was far from over. Unlike in most professional sports leagues, in golf, tournaments drifted in and out of the purview of the game’s main governing bodies—the USGA and PGA—with distinctions between “officially sanctioned,” “co-sanctioned,” or “independent” events often blurred for both fans and players. When Robinson stepped onto the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers, no one questioned the extent to which it was a true Major League Baseball contest. Such was not the case in the world of professional golf. Reluctantly lending its name to the Tam O’Shanter Open, the PGA was nevertheless governed by an organization that had reaffirmed its commitment to segregation even as white fans cheered Howard Wheeler and Joe Louis in Chicago at an event it co-sponsored. The PGA’s informal ban on African American membership, which began with the organization’s inception in 1916, was codified in 1934 when it amended its constitution to limit membership explicitly to “professional golfers of the Caucasian race . . . residing in North or South America.” More tournaments appeared willing to drop barriers to black
participants, but the PGA had doubled down on segregation well before the war and was now more explicitly racist than it had ever been.

Moreover, the PGA constitution made it clear that the organization was not interested in pursuing any sort of “gentlemen's agreement” on segregation, restricting black players for tournaments in the South but welcoming them at northern events. Such an approach was popular in the sporting world during the 1930s and 1940s, including intercollegiate athletics. All of the black players (including the militant Bill Spiller) had not even hinted at trying to enter PGA tournaments in the South. “You fella’s aren’t going to Mississippi or Alabama anyway,” Texas pro Jimmy Demaret told Spiller when he supported Spiller’s attempt to integrate a PGA event in California. “I said he was right,” Spiller recalled. “I always appreciated Jimmy’s attitude.” However, with its Caucasian clause, the PGA was intent on banning black golfers at tournaments anywhere in the country.91

The curious case of one professional, Dewey Brown, exemplified the extent to which the PGA went to exclude African Americans from its membership in the 1930s and 1940s. Born on a North Carolina farm in 1898, Brown moved with his family to New Jersey and started caddying at age eight. He worked his way up through the ranks at Madison Golf Club (Madison, N.J.), Morris County Country Club (Morristown, N.J.), Shawnee Golf Resort (Shawnee-on-Delaware, Pa.), and the famed Baltusrol Golf Club (Springfield, N.J.). Brown became a respected golf course superintendent and skilled club-maker and was considered one of the finest in the nation: he built clubs for 1916 U.S. Amateur champion Chick Evans as well as President Warren G. Harding and Vice President Charles Dawes. His skills as a player and instructor were well known, and working at the leading private clubs in New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania brought him close to elite golfers and entertainers: he caddied for John D. Rockefeller and the Vanderbilt family and later played with Al Jolson, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Fred Astaire, Walter Hagen, and bandleader Fred Waring.

In 1928 Brown quietly sent an application, which did not mention his race, to join the PGA and was accepted, becoming the first African American in history to be admitted to the organization. His light skin reportedly helped him fly under the radar, and he may have passed for white with some golf acquaintances. Yet six years later, in 1934, the PGA added the Caucasian clause to its constitution and abruptly rescinded his membership: although the specifics remained a mystery (as they do today),
Brown was convinced someone brought his African ancestry to the organization’s attention. Unwavering, he continued working at the finest courses in the area, including Rockaway River Country Club (Denville, N.J.) and Knoll Golf Club (Boonton, N.J.). In 1947 he purchased the Cedar River Golf Club in Indian Lake, New York, which he ran until his death in 1973.92

The blatant exclusion of Dewey Brown and the addition of the Caucasian clause in 1934 signaled how far the PGA would go to prohibit black participation. Nevertheless, local organizers and hosts held considerable power over their own tournaments, including events cosanctioned by the PGA. Joining George May’s Tam O’Shanter Open, two other events were quietly allowing black players to qualify by the mid-1940s: the Los Angeles Open at Riviera Country Club and the Canadian Open, held at various courses in Canada. In 1944 Jimmie DeVoe became the first African American to play in the L.A. Open, followed by Bill Spiller in 1945. Both were hardly noted in the press at the time, their participation overshadowed by Babe Didrikson Zaharias making the 1945 field, the only woman to ever qualify her way into a PGA event.93 Spiller was joined by Ted Rhodes in 1946, and for the next several years a number of black players, including Howard Wheeler and Joe Louis, participated in the tournament at Riviera, where they competed alongside white professionals with even greater success than at Tam O’Shanter. Spiller was tied with Ben Hogan one stroke off the lead after the opening round of the 1948 L.A. Open. Rhodes finished the tournament in twenty-first place, and Spiller was thirty-first; in 1950 Rhodes finished twelfth. Yet even when welcomed to play a PGA tournament regularly in Los Angeles, the men continued to face discrimination and awkward encounters. One year the three black players in the field were all paired together. “When I came out on the first tee I told the starter, ‘You know, something puzzles me. How come we all three got paired together, all the blacks?’” Spiller recalled. “He said, ‘You know how it is, we got some Texas guys to deal with.’ I said, ‘I thought this was the L.A. Open, not the Texas Open. If they don’t want to play with us, tell ’em to go the hell back to Texas.’ Well, the starter’s microphone was on all the time and, boy, the crowd heard all that, went wild, clapping and whistling. We could hardly get off the tee.”94

By finishing in the top sixty at the 1948 L.A. Open, Rhodes and Spiller automatically qualified for the following week’s PGA event in Richmond, California, outside Oakland. They were joined by a third black player, local qualifier Madison Gunter. However, after a practice round, they were in-
formed by an official that only PGA members could compete in the Richmond Open. Led by Spiller, the three players responded with a $250,000 lawsuit. For many fans it was the first time the Caucasian clause, now fourteen years old, became publicly known—more importantly, the PGA settled in court with what appeared to be a groundbreaking promise that it would no longer bar black players from tournament play.95

Unfortunately, it proved to be an empty gesture. Instead of opening doors for African Americans to access PGA events, the organization drew from the segregationist playbook and began employing semantics: “open” tournaments became “open invitationals” overnight. That summer Ted Rhodes and Solomon Hughes, with urging from Joe Louis, attempted to sign up for the PGA’s St. Paul Open in Minnesota only to be told the tournament was now an “invitational.” Black leaders in the city, including Whitney Young, future director of the National Urban League, protested and pointed out that tickets printed earlier for the event clearly indicated an “open” tournament.96

Access to the L.A. Open and the lawsuit over the exclusion of Spiller, Rhodes, and Gunter from the Richmond Open made California a battleground over race and the PGA, drawing the state’s high-profile tournaments and golf celebrities into a national debate over segregation far from the Deep South. In 1949 Joe Louis penned an angry letter to Bing Crosby after Spiller and Rhodes were barred from Crosby’s popular PGA tournament at Pebble Beach. The black press criticized the singer for standing by silently, “without even lifting his famous voice in protest.”97 In the wake of the Richmond Open decision, George May traveled from Tam O’Shanter in Chicago to California and lashed out at the PGA, the USGA, and white golfers, whom he claimed were not comfortable playing alongside black competitors: “those narrow-minded hot-shots from the South, refusing to play with the Negroes.” He even called one out by name (Ben Hogan) and confronted PGA president Ed Dudley in person to protest the Caucasian clause. “They don’t want the fellow from the wrong side of the tracks to get into golf, they want to restrict the game and keep it for the rich men,” said May. “Y’know what those groups are afraid of? They fear a Negro will come along and win one of the tournaments.”98

Tensions boiled over again in 1952 after Spiller, Louis, and California amateur Eural Clarke were banned from the PGA’s San Diego Open. Spiller qualified for the tournament while its sponsors, San Diego’s Chevrolet dealerships, invited the boxing champ to compete as a celebrity amateur. Spiller, sensing a controversy with the PGA and knowing that

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Louis’s involvement would draw more attention, encouraged the Brown Bomber to accept. Sure enough, shortly before the event the three were approached at the San Diego Country Club and told they were not allowed to play per PGA membership rules. Now assured that the PGA had lied in its settlement over the Richmond Open four years earlier, Louis this time responded with his harshest public comments yet. Encouraging the sponsors to cancel the tournament (and offering them double the charity money if they complied), he formally announced his retirement from boxing and declared a “war on Jim Crow in golf.”99 Louis indicated that the PGA’s new president, Horton Smith, had personally called to inform him of “the ban on nonwhites” as PGA players and officials made their way to San Diego from the previous week’s event (the Bing Crosby Pro-Am at Pebble Beach). Smith, a Missouri native, was an accomplished professional player in his own right: he won the first-ever Masters in 1934 and again in 1936.

But Louis was “the champ”—a black boxer immensely popular with white fans—and this time the gloves were off. Calling Smith “another Hitler,” the Brown Bomber went after the PGA leader. “Smith believes in the white race like Hitler believed in the super race,” he railed. “It’s about time this ban is brought into the open.”100 Louis contacted his friend, the white radio host Walter Winchell, who broadcast the story on his national radio program; support for Louis’s stand poured in from around the country. It was clear the symbolism of professional golf had shifted dramatically from the optimism of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Golf now appeared to be one of the lone holdouts over racial inclusion: “This is the last major sport in America in which Negroes are barred,” said Louis, who called the snub the first time he had ever experienced racial discrimination in sports.101 The Atlanta Daily World agreed that the PGA had made golf “one of the last frontiers of athletic discrimination in the United States,” as did the Pittsburgh Courier: “If negro and white Americans can play baseball, football, basketball, and other games together, what can there be against them playing golf together?”102

Lost in the public feud between Louis and Smith was the fact that the real instigator was the most militant black pro golfer in history, Bill Spiller. Amidst the tension he managed to shoot 77-75 and qualify outright for the San Diego Open. Yet when Smith arrived at the club and arranged a private meeting with Louis and tournament officials, Spiller was not invited: everyone (including Louis) feared how he would react. “I was the guy doing all the rebelling and I think they didn’t know how to talk to me be-
cause I wasn’t a yes man,” Spiller later said. White pro Jimmy Demaret spotted him on the grounds of the San Diego Country Club and told him about the meeting. Spiller walked in, and the tension immediately escalated. “You’re Bill Spiller aren’t you? Is there something you want to say?” Smith exclaimed. Spiller unleashed years of frustration that prevented him from ever having a real golf career: “I know and you know that we’re going to play in the tournaments. We all know it’s coming,” he said. “So if you like golf the way you say you do, and I do, I think we should make an agreement so we can play without all this adverse publicity. And take that Caucasians-only clause out of your constitution so we can have opportunities to get jobs as pros at clubs.” Smith responded that golf was a social game and the PGA had to be “careful who we put” on club jobs. The confrontation threatened to devolve into a fight. “Mr. Smith,” said Spiller. “I heard a rumor that you said if you were as big as Joe Louis, you would knock me down. Well, if I hated someone that much, I wouldn’t let size bother me.” He was offended by the way Smith and the PGA condescended to black professionals. “I said he should talk to me like a man,” Spiller later remembered of the encounter. “Not a kid who doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

The PGA responded with a predictable solution: the beloved amateur Louis would play the San Diego Open on a sponsor’s exemption (alongside Smith himself), while the professional Spiller was out. It was a clear public relations maneuver. Fans and the press would see the Masters winner and PGA president play a friendly round of golf with a beloved black athlete, overshadowing the blatant segregation of black professional golfers from a tournament in southern California. On the event’s opening morning Spiller did his best to publicize the injustice, staging the first (and only) sit-in in the history of professional golf. He sat on the first tee with his clubs and prevented the tournament from starting until he was dragged away by Louis and friends. Louis then proceeded to play one of the more awkward rounds in golf history with Smith (the man he had called “another Hitler” days before) as Spiller fumed, feeling betrayed by Louis for agreeing to play the tournament without him.

The shunning of Spiller was quickly forgotten, but the PGA still took a major blow in the press. Fan support for Louis marked the first time the PGA was hit hard by a public relations backlash over segregation. Jackie Robinson and other celebrities voiced their support, while telegrams from sympathetic fans and labor organizations (including the Congress of Industrial Organizations) poured in. Louis was “Still the champ!” pro-
claimed one black newspaper, which praised the boxer for not forgetting “his beginnings in prejudiced-ridden Alabama” and trying “to slug away at one of the last bulwarks of prejudice in sports—that which exists in golf.” Smith and the PGA began to relent under the pressure. After playing alongside Louis, the president announced that the PGA’s tournament committee had unanimously voted to remove its tournament barrier to black pros. Local hosts and sponsors would still be allowed to ban players, but the PGA itself would not step in. It was a promise similar to the one made in 1948, but this time it would hold until the removal of the Caucasian clause in 1961.

Over the next few weeks black players were invited to the 1952 Phoenix Open and Tucson Open. At the Phoenix Country Club Louis and Spiller were joined by Rhodes, two other black amateurs, and Charlie Sifford. The black players were all paired together and told to tee off first, early in the morning before many of the white professionals and fans had even arrived. Sifford removed the flagstick from the first hole and discovered that “somebody had been there before us. 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.” Informed by club officials that the black players would not be allowed to use the locker rooms, Spiller insisted, “I am going into that locker room and I am going to take a shower.” Rhodes and the others—arguing, as Sifford recalled, that the players “had to move slowly and not make waves if we were going to play any more white tournaments”—tried to talk him out of it to no avail. Ten minutes later Louis had to physically drag Spiller out of the shower after a club official insisted he was in danger: “He suggested that somebody might try to drown Bill.”

Gaining admission into a pro golf tournament thus proved to be the first of many barriers, and the racism players faced at sites around the country—on both white and black golf tours—turned the standard geography of segregation on its head. The players faced blatant abuse at PGA stops in California and Arizona in the 1950s, while the UGA’s Cleveland Open ran into problems after players charged the city with closing Highland Park’s locker rooms to prevent African Americans from using them. Meanwhile, the UGA happily announced in 1954 that Dallas’s Cedar Crest Golf Course provided a warm welcome for its first UGA National in the Deep South, opening its facilities completely for black players and fans.

Black competitors also received better treatment from country club
facilities, clubhouses, and surrounding communities at events in Canada, and several times in the 1950s Rhodes, Spiller, and Sifford played three PGA cosponsored tournaments north of the border: the Montreal Open, the Labatt Open, and the Canadian Open. Spiller once finished fourteenth in the Labatt Open, his best-ever performance at a PGA event. Tournaments in Canada not only drew top PGA golfers and welcomed black players but also took place in cities where African Americans could easily arrange transportation and lodging. Unique to other sports, professional touring golfers faced the difficult challenge of making (and funding) their own travel plans in order to get to tournaments. Black players faced the added uncertainty racial segregation provided; gaining admission to a golf tournament was fruitless if they failed to find local drivers, hotels, and restaurants near the course willing to serve them. Sifford ate and slept in his car many times while playing white events: “I don’t know how many times I heard: ‘Nigger, if you don’t get away from here I’m going to call the police,’” he told Ebony. As Canada’s most prestigious event, the Canadian Open was thus worth the expense for black golfers to get there. Rhodes and Sifford played several times starting in 1953; Rhodes even drove all the way from Los Angeles to Vancouver for the 1954 Canadian Open. Yet it was Sifford’s record-setting performance in 1955 (where he first met Arnold Palmer) that eclipsed these other Canadian appearances, allowing a more racially inclusive nation to help black golfers make headlines in their own country and infiltrate the PGA.

Back in the United States, most PGA events did not invite African Americans until after the organization desegregated in 1961; however, black players continued to find sporadic opportunities in the 1950s. Rhodes was denied access to the 1952 Western Open in St. Louis; but in 1956 he joined Sifford in reintegrating the tournament, and they became the first black players in the event since Pat Ball in 1931. The barrier likely fell because the 1956 Western Open took place at San Francisco’s Presidio Golf Course, a facility owned by the U.S. Army. Rhodes finished twenty-fourth in the 1954 Insurance City Open in Connecticut, a precursor to the Sammy Davis Jr.–Greater Hartford Open. After Solomon Hughes was again denied entry to the St. Paul Open in 1951, he and Rhodes were finally allowed to compete in 1952, and in 1953 Rhodes was even tied for the lead after the first round. By 1955 Sifford and Rhodes were playing up to ten white events a year, including a series of PGA stops in the Midwest: the Miller High Life Open in Milwaukee and the Fort Wayne Open in Indi-
ana (where they were joined by Spiller), along with the St. Paul Open and the Rubber City Open in Akron, Ohio, the PGA’s first event at famed Firestone Country Club.\textsuperscript{115}

Although the UGA supported these attempts to desegregate white events and established a “Discriminatory Practice Committee” to advise its players and publicize instances of discrimination, white tournaments were not always the most attractive option for black golfers.\textsuperscript{116} During his spectacular 1949 season Rhodes received an invitation to the PGA’s $5,000 Cedar Rapids Open in Iowa, scheduled for the same weekend as the UGA’s $4,000 Joe Louis Open. Louis himself applauded the invitation and encouraged Rhodes to play the white event that week, yet Rhodes turned down the PGA and instead showed up in Detroit, where he won for the second straight year. Black players appreciated the social significance of access to white tournaments, but they were also professionals seeking events they believed gave them the greatest chance at winning the most money.\textsuperscript{117} Moreover, some black tournaments were organized as celebrations following integration, symbolic events that continued to draw black professionals for many years. In 1964 a federal court ordered Georgia to integrate the Jekyll Island Club, a state-owned resort on the Atlantic coast. Earl Hill, who had caddied for whites at the club in the 1920s, immediately organized a tournament for black golfers at the site. From 1964 until the early 1980s, the Southeastern Golf Tournament (nicknamed “The Classic”) drew top black golfers such as Rhodes, Jimmie DeVoe, Zeke Hartsfield, Charlie Sifford, and Lee Elder. The tournament also included performances from a number of entertainers; singer Otis Redding helped raise funds for the inaugural event, and in subsequent years Jerry Butler, Wilson Pickett, and Percy Sledge all performed. The Classic’s late arrival and persistent success proved that desegregation would not necessarily mean the end of important black golf tournaments. On Jekyll Island the opposite was true: integration provided a new opportunity for black professional golfers to gather in the South at their own event.\textsuperscript{118}

Along with successfully integrating some PGA events, UGA players also continued to enter USGA tournaments after World War II, especially the U.S. Open. In 1948 Rhodes qualified for the event at L.A.’s Riviera Country Club and finished fifty-first, becoming the first African American to play in a U.S. Open since John Shippen in 1913. The following year he played again at Chicago’s Medinah Country Club.\textsuperscript{119} Compared with the PGA, with its explicitly racist constitution, the USGA was more accommodating on paper; however, clear barriers remained for black players. Push-
ing forty years old, Howard Wheeler continued to try to qualify for the U.S. Open, finally making it in 1950 at Philadelphia’s Merion Golf Club. Yet playing in one of the world’s top golf tournaments turned out to be a lonely experience for him: Wheeler was virtually shunned, playing practice rounds alone after he could not find a partner. When he qualified again the following year, Wheeler traveled to Detroit’s Oakland Hills Country Club and had difficulty finding any help from officials. He could not even figure out when he was supposed to tee off: one representative told him to check the newspapers, but his name never appeared in the published list of players. Wheeler, knowing he had qualified, showed up at the course anyway and was finally given a late tee time, but he missed the cut by one stroke.120

UGA women also entered white events more frequently after the war, although not until Althea Gibson in 1963 would a black woman play in a Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) event. Along with participating in the Tam O’Shanter Open, UGA women put on exhibitions against white players, mostly in California. Thelma Cowans moved to Los Ange-
les in 1949 and played public matches against her new friend Betty Hicks. Hicks was a talented white player who won the 1941 U.S. Women’s Amateur and was named the Associated Press female athlete of the year. Women also led the way in integrating important local events in the region, such as city tournaments in Pasadena and Long Beach. In 1952 Eoline Thornton made headlines when she upset white golfer Allene Gates, actor Johnny Weissmuller’s wife, at the Pasadena City Championship. That same year the UGA’s top female, Ann Gregory, asked the Chicago Women’s Golf Club to apply for membership in the USGA in order to make her eligible for the U.S. Amateur and the U.S. Open. The group was accepted, and Gregory played the 1956 U.S. Women’s Amateur at Meridian Hills Country Club in Indianapolis, Indiana, becoming the first black woman to play a USGA-sponsored event. Her first-round opponent, Carolyn Cudone, was a dynamic player who went on to win five straight U.S. Women’s Senior Amateurs. “There was a mob at the first tee,” Cudone later recalled of her match with Gregory. “A lot of them were reporters. I was shocked by the crowd’s size because in those days, first-round matches didn’t often draw so many people.” But on that occasion tension percolated around Meridian Hills. A white worker at the course warned Cudone’s father that his daughter “better win today” or the two would not be welcomed back. “I teed off first and got off a good shot that got a big cheer from the crowd,” she said. “Ann’s shot went at least 20 yards longer than mine but got only a tiny cheer.” The two battled back and forth (Gregory was 2-up on the back nine) before Cudone narrowly prevailed 2 and 1. “My husband said I didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell,” Gregory quipped as she shook Cudone’s hand. “I guess I fooled him.” Gregory went on to play in several more U.S. Amateurs and U.S. Opens.

For both men and women who pursued professional careers, playing in PGA or USGA tournaments only worsened the degradation they subsequently faced when restricted from minor, local events. No matter how elite the player, the level of discrimination did not always correlate with a golf tournament’s stature or preeminence, a unique aspect of competitive golf. One assumes that Jackie Robinson, having played in Major League Baseball, would have been welcomed back to the minor leagues or a local park game. And yet in 1959 Howard Wheeler—by then a veteran of two U.S. Opens who played with top white players at private courses around the country—was banned from Philadelphia’s minor Italian American Open at Roosevelt Municipal Golf Course, right in his hometown. In fact, organizers canceled the event after the city warned that Wheeler and a
fellow black golfer were legally entitled to play.¹²⁴ Slights like these could be worse (and more disrespectful) for a black professional than trying to get into the nation’s elite events. The fight for UGA players to integrate the PGA and USGA had come a long way, yet the pace of change was not keeping up with the rest of the country. By the time Jackie Robinson announced his retirement from baseball in 1957, he was urging fans to turn their attention to a new game. “Golf is the only sport in which a Negro does not have an equal chance today,” he told a national television audience on NBC’s Meet the Press. “There are cases where Negroes are allowed to participate in golf tournaments but in the great majority of tournaments they are not allowed in them.”¹²⁵ Robinson was one of many high-profile black athletes, from Jesse Owens and Joe Louis to Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley, who would turn their attention (and public comments) to golf as they aged. “Golf had come to mean to me what running had in my youth,” wrote Owens of his devotion to the game in the 1950s and 1960s.¹²⁶

All of these instances in which black players entered white tournaments helped draw more attention and respectability to the UGA. From its origins in the 1920s, the organization attracted steadily more press
coverage and a broader fan base, including whites. Echoing the recording of the 1925 tournament at Shady Rest by Fox News, Paramount Pictures filmed coverage of the 1935 Southern Open in Atlanta, including an entire exhibition match between John Brooks Dendy, Zeke Hartsfield, and Howard Wheeler. The company intended to screen the footage in its theaters around the country, although it is unclear if that happened (and none of the footage survived). By the late 1940s, results from UGA tournaments were widely broadcast. Final-round coverage of the 1949 Joe Louis Open aired on network television in Detroit; the black press hailed it as “the first time in sports history a negro-sponsored event” was televised. Coast-to-coast coverage of the 1955 UGA National in Detroit was provided by WJR radio, the city’s CBS affiliate and one of the largest stations in the country. The struggle to get white golf on radio and television by no means outpaced the UGA. The first nationally televised golf tournament was the 1953 Tam O’Shanter Open, an event ABC reluctantly broadcast only after George May paid the network to do so. Regular PGA coverage did not come until later in the 1960s; in 1956, for example, the national television networks carried only five and a half hours of golf coverage during the entire year. Broadcasters balked not only at the slow pace but also at the expense (televising a golf match cost more than twice as much as a National Football League [NFL] game).127

In addition to media coverage, the UGA attracted support from prominent celebrities, entertainers, and politicians. Leaders in Chicago and Detroit were particularly involved. When Chicago hosted the UGA National for the first time in 1930, festivities included a speech by Albert B. George, one of first black judges elected to a municipal bench. Three years later Oscar De Priest, the first African American elected to Congress from outside the South, and the first in the twentieth century, presented the winner’s trophy to champions Howard Wheeler and Julia Siler.128 Support from white political leaders came quickly as well. In 1932 former Illinois governor Len Small praised attempts to host more black golf tournaments in his state. Michigan governor G. Mennen Williams was on hand at the 1949 UGA National in Detroit, while Detroit mayor Albert Cobo honored the city’s 1955 UGA National by declaring “National Golf Week.” Chicago mayor Edward Joseph Kelly also welcomed UGA golfers, and when Cleveland hosted its second UGA National in 1951, Mayor Thomas Burke attended the festivities.129

The UGA even called on and received the support of the federal gov-
ernment when the organization attempted to bring the 1942 UGA National to Washington, D.C. Three years after the black women of the Wake Robin Golf Club successfully petitioned U.S. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes for access to Potomac Park, they sought to host the championship in Washington for the first time at Anacostia Park. Ickes not only approved the plan but offered to present the winner’s trophy himself. Unfortunately, the event was canceled due to World War II (no UGA National took place from 1942 to 1945).130

Appearances by politicians and welcoming governments helped legitimate the UGA and link the symbolism of African American competitive golf to the advancement of black political clout. But celebrities in sports, music, and entertainment really helped draw more fans to the world of black golf. The earliest celebrity UGA supporters were popular athletes from other sports who took an interest in golf, including a number of black boxers. Harry Wills, not Joe Louis, was the first famous boxer to support the tournaments. The top black boxer of the 1920s, Wills attended the 1926 Shady Rest event at the height of his popularity, the same year he struggled with boxing’s color line to arrange a fight against white champion Jack Dempsey. Two other black boxers eventually lent their names to UGA events: the Joe Louis Open in Detroit and the Sugar Ray Robinson Open in New York City. Predominately black golf clubs were also useful locations for boxers in training; Chicago’s heavyweight champion Ezzard Charles set up his camp at Sunset Hills in the late 1940s.131

Athletes in football, baseball, and track lent their support to the UGA as well, including University of California standouts Kenny Washington and Jackie Robinson, both of whom enjoyed golf and attended tournaments. After he graduated and before he integrated the modern NFL in 1946, Washington joined Joe Louis at L.A.’s Griffith Park for tournaments hosted by the city’s black golf clubs (the same golfers hosted the UGA National at Griffith Park in 1939).132 Jackie Robinson developed an even stronger passion for the game. As a youngster he sneak ed onto Pasadena’s private courses to steal golf balls and sell them back to players. By the time he arrived at the University of California, he had borrowed a friend’s set of clubs and played for the first time, shooting 99: “If I had a set of my own, there’s a game I’d really like to take up,” he told reporters on the day he enrolled. By the end of his college tenure, he had won the Pacific Coast Intercollegiate Golf Championship and was shooting in the mid-80s. When he integrated Major League Baseball in 1947, he reported
that golf was his “favorite hobby,” which helped endear him to his white teammates. His fellow Brooklyn Dodgers signaled their acceptance of Robinson by inviting him to join them on the links.¹³³

Musicians and entertainers echoed prominent athletes in supporting UGA events. Many of the same Jazz Age celebrities who first took up the game continued to play alongside a new generation of black music and film stars. Sammy Davis Jr. loved golf and played with Hollywood’s white elite as his popularity rose in the 1950s. Once while on the course, comedian Jack Benny asked Davis what his handicap was: “I’m a one-eyed Negro who’s Jewish,” he deadpanned. Davis attended UGA events (including the 1954 championship in Dallas) and in 1970 lent his name to a tournament hosted by New Jersey’s black-owned Freeway Golf Course. That tournament was so successful it was moved to Hartford, Connecticut, and eventually became the Sammy Davis Jr. Greater Hartford Open, a PGA Tour event from 1973 to 1988.¹³⁴ The list of white entertainers who sponsored UGA events was equally impressive. That support escalated when the UGA National came to Los Angeles in 1939, where various competitors were awarded trophies donated by a bevy of Hollywood stars. The
list included African Americans such as actress Louise Beavers but also many white celebrities, including Al Jolson, Johnny Weissmuller, Frank Capra, Alan Mowbray, Preston Foster, Frank Borzage, and Edgar Allan Woolf. Another sponsor, Bing Crosby, was notable because he was later embroiled in the controversy over integrating PGA tournaments after the war. Crosby and Bob Hope played a large role in advancing the visibility of professional golf in the West and increasing television coverage of the tour; Crosby had just hosted his first Bing Crosby Pro-Am two years prior in 1937, a tournament that was soon held annually at Pebble Beach and became one the most successful for the PGA. In 1939 the UGA received an overwhelmingly positive response in California, foreshadowing how tournaments in the state—including the L.A. Open, the San Diego Open, and the Bing Crosby Pro-Am—became postwar battlegrounds over the PGA’s exclusion of black professionals.

The UGA worked to secure corporate sponsors along with the support it received from prominent white and black community leaders, politicians, and entertainers. For most of their history, UGA events received local support from relatively small, black-owned businesses. But by the 1950s, tournaments secured sponsorship from larger corporations, an indication not only of the UGA’s growing visibility but also of the gradual integration of corporate America and postwar attempts to solicit black consumers. Moss Kendrix, a Morehouse graduate who established a public relations firm, was hired by Coca-Cola in 1948 to establish an advertising campaign targeting the “Negro market”; he was the first African American to secure a major corporate marketing account in U.S. history. An avid golfer, Kendrix saw opportunity in UGA sponsorship. He and white representatives from Coke attended the UGA National from 1953 to 1955 in Kansas City, Dallas, and Detroit, the company providing trophies at all three tournaments. It was the beginning of a long-standing relationship between the entities, and Coke continued its sponsorship well into the 1960s. Not surprisingly, when the company’s first “Negro market” ads debuted in 1955, they featured images of young black men wielding golf clubs (Kendrix had personally recruited the students from Morehouse and Clark colleges).

Not to be outdone was Coke’s major Canadian rival, the Seagram Company, which sent a representative to award Charlie Sifford the 1955 championship trophy in Detroit right when it, too, began running golf-themed advertisements in black newspapers. Marketers certainly used golf in black advertisements to invoke middle-class aspiration, just as they did
Sure as a golf course has 19 holes...

Part of the enjoyment of golfing is getting together with friends at the Clubhouse, famous as the 19th hole.

All of the enjoyment you could ask for in a whiskey drink is yours when you order Seagram’s 7 Crown: famous for having pleased more millions than any other whiskey in the world.

Say Seagram’s and be Sure


in white advertisements. Yet the growing popularity of UGA tournaments and golf in the black community was quite real, challenging historians to rethink the 1950s “Negro market” campaigns as purely aspirational. “Part of the enjoyment of golfing is getting together with friends at the Clubhouse, famous as the 19th hole,” read one 1954 Seagram’s whiskey ad in the Chicago Defender. Considering that Chicago had already hosted the
UGA National a record five times (and would go on to host three more before 1975), surely Seagram’s and Coke were not so much peddling fantasies but, rather, targeting actual black golfers. This was certainly the case by 1976, when Anheuser-Busch and American Airlines sponsored the fiftieth UGA National at San Diego’s Torrey Pines Golf Course.137

Corporate sponsorship and the attendance of prominent individuals helped expand UGA tournaments into larger, multiday events. By including a “full social program” for participants and fans—banquets, dances, musicians, and speeches—Chicago’s three UGA Nationals in the 1930s set a precedent for future gatherings to combine the golf tournament with a wide range of other events for the black community.138 While the UGA never recorded attendance, it is clear that more fans showed up as the tour grew in stature. As early as 1936 the UGA National at Philadelphia’s Cobbs Creek drew so many observers that the city’s mounted police were called in to hold the gallery back. The 1951 championship drew a record 400 golfers (prompting the UGA to close the tournament to more entrants) and an estimated 5,000 fans to Cleveland’s Seneca Golf Course. Earlier that year the UGA’s Southern Open in Atlanta was held on the same weekend as the NAACP national convention, which arranged to bus delegates from the conference to the New Lincoln Country Club. There fans enjoyed a barbeque, shook hands with Joe Louis, and watched Charlie Sifford win his first professional tournament.139 UGA events also attracted white fans to the links, especially after celebrities like Louis began to compete. One quarter of the gallery at the 1941 UGA National was white after Louis announced that Massachusetts governor Leverett Saltonstall agreed to let the event take place at Boston’s Ponkapoag Golf Course, an exclusively white club.140 As the number of fans increased, so did the number of players who signed up to compete in events, prompting some tournaments to limit entries and enforce stricter qualifying standards. The record for participation was the 1959 UGA National, which featured over 500 golfers competing on three different courses in Washington: East Potomac Park, Langston, and Dupont.141 Although most UGA tournaments took place in the Midwest and Northeast, tour stops in other regions pointed to growing interest from players and fans nationwide. In the 1930s a strong contingent of western clubs, particularly in California, led to the 1939 UGA National taking place in Los Angeles. The Moulin Rouge resort in Las Vegas, the first integrated hotel-casino in U.S. history, was scheduled to host the 1956 UGA National before the venue abruptly closed.142 And although holding tournaments

THE UNITED GOLFERS ASSOCIATION (133)
in the South was a major struggle, the tour nevertheless managed to do so—most notably with Atlanta’s annual Southern Open; UGA Nationals in Dallas (1954), Memphis (1962), and Miami (1967); and tournaments in Louisville, Dallas, Houston, and Jacksonville, Florida. The significance of holding UGA events in the heart of the segregated South was clear. Organizers of the Houston Open successfully petitioned the city to let them host the three-day event at white-only Memorial Park Golf Course, ending the tournament on June 19: “the traditional Emancipation Day celebration for the negroes of Texas.”

In addition to newspaper coverage and fan attendance, the UGA successfully increased its visibility via specialty publications like the United Golfer, its own organ. Established in 1930, the monthly newsletter reported organizational news, provided updates on tournament results, and kept readers informed about legal challenges to segregation on municipal courses around the country. Another important publication was Tee-Cup, a magazine established in Los Angeles by the Western States Golf Association after its founding in 1954. Produced by J. Cullen Fentress, sports editor for the black newspaper California Eagle and president of L.A.’s Cosmopolitan Golf Club, Tee-Cup reported widely on the world of black golf, particularly western tournaments and challenges to discrimination on California courses. It included a regular column on golf rules from Jimmie DeVoe, the Harlem professional who by then had permanently moved to Los Angeles and finished fifth at the 1953 UGA National, as well as comprehensive coverage of UGA tournaments and profiles of its stars. The magazine was a second, de facto UGA organ highlighting developments on the West Coast in the late 1950s. Fans also learned about the tour’s importance in numerous other sporting publications. This included a prominent 1953 essay by Joe Louis in Our Sports, a magazine devoted to African Americans and sports. That year Jackie Robinson served as a guest editor and solicited Louis to write an article on golf. The result was a piece in which Louis revealed his love of the game, called efforts to integrate professional golf “my toughest fight,” and recognized the power of the UGA to help push the PGA toward accepting integration.

The UGA’s visibility among black and white fans nurtured the careers of black golf professionals and ultimately prompted the PGA’s acceptance of African Americans. However, the tour’s significance went further: it also changed the game and its meaning in American culture, presenting a fundamentally different vision of professional golf. Unlike most sporting institutions formed under segregation, the UGA remained committed to
its vision of a truly race-blind golf tour, a sentiment echoed by pioneering black competitors. As early as 1922 the *Chicago Defender* indicated that all amateurs were invited to its national tournament, including whites: “Owing to the fact that many players of color were denied the right, illegally, to play in the so-called ‘city’ tournament, the bars are down and any person can play in the first national amateur golf championships regardless of race, creed or color.” Although there is no evidence that white players competed in 1922, the statement foreshadowed a hallmark of black professional golf and subsequent UGA tournaments. Unlike baseball’s Negro Leagues, which did not experiment with the occasional white player until the 1950s (facing decline after Robinson’s integration of Major League Baseball), the UGA was never an “all-black” golf tour, and its events were always open to everyone. Charles Halarack, a white man, took fourth place at the 1938 UGA National in Chicago.

Michigan’s UGA tour stops were particularly race blind: in 1954 the winner of Flint’s Vehicle City Amateur was Don Jarrard, a white professor at Flint Community College and former captain of Michigan State University’s golf team. The popularity of Joe Louis (and his willingness to fund a large prize purse) drew many white golfers to the Joe Louis Open. When Ted Rhodes won the event in 1949, he beat a field that included five white PGA players. Walter Speedy fought racism at Chicago’s municipal courses and exclusion from the city’s golf tournaments in the 1910s, so it was poignant in 1954 when the female winner of the Walter Speedy Memorial Tournament was Lois Drafke, a sixteen-year-old white amateur from suburban La Grange High School. The eventual integration of the PGA and the USGA only accelerated this long-standing inclusion: by 1967, 75 percent of the 300 youth enrolled in the UGA’s junior division were white, as were 10 percent of its players by 1974. Perhaps the most symbolic moment of integration—and one that signaled the end of the UGA as a “black” professional golf tour—came in 1971 when a white man, Jack Price, won the UGA National.

Another notable UGA gesture to integration was its name, which did not include “colored” or “negro” but instead invoked the race-blind notion of “united.” Its founders chose to adopt such a stance from the beginning, at a time when many black organizations (including the NAACP) specifically invoked race in their titles. By the 1950s some African American sportswriters were calling on black sporting leagues, like baseball’s Negro American League and Negro National League, to drop “negro” and “colored” from their names. In 1950 Fay Young of the *Chicago*
A 1956 cover and advertisement from Tee-Cup magazine promoting programs for junior black golfers in southern California (Tee-Cup).

He wants to play, too—but...

...it takes strict supervision and top-grade instruction to get young boys and girls off to the right way playing golf. It takes strict supervision because they should be taught a little more than the game of golf, itself. How to conduct their own meetings, golf etiquette, good sportsmanship, and honesty are some of the things.

THE LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY JUNIOR GOLF ASSOCIATION is made up of interested individuals of the community, people who care, giving their time and services free.

...RAISING MONEY FOR PROFESSIONAL INSTRUCTIONS, TROPHIES, GOLF CLUBS and TOURNAMENTS WILL HAVE TO BE DONE THROUGH COMMUNITY DONATIONS.

...YOUR DONATIONS TELL THEM THAT THEY CAN PLAY. IT TELLS THEM TOO THAT THEY ARE LIVING IN A COMMUNITY THAT CARES.

Los Angeles Community Junior Golf Association

1939 West Jefferson Boulevard, Los Angeles 39, California

To aid in the progress of the Junior Golf Program, this advertisement is financed by THE RIGHTEOUS EVENINGS and PIONEER WEDNESDAY.
Defender pressed black leagues to welcome white players by noting the number of whites competing in the Joe Louis Open. In 1953 three UGA clubs in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, directly asked the NAACP’s national office for advice on whether to continue calling their events “negro” tournaments. On the other hand, some observers saw the irony of organizations branding themselves race neutral amidst the ongoing segregation and discrimination that warranted their creation in the first place. In 1957 Langston Hughes poked fun at the issue via his fictional character Jesse B. Semple, the working-class Harlemite popular with Hughes’s readers: “‘It is time to encourage integration,’ Joyce come telling me. Well, them women have got a integrated name for that club, but nary a white member as yet. Just like the Colored Golfing Association changed its name to the Associated Golfing Association—but I don’t hear tell of no white players associated with them up to now. Them same Negroes are still playing golf with the same other Negroes as before. . . . Who is fooling who with all this name changing lately, I want to know?”

The UGA was different not only in terms of its name or the racial makeup of its players and fans but also in the way its golfers played the game. Competitors like Wheeler, Sifford, and Rhodes introduced a unique aesthetic to professional golf—styles, practices, words, and gamesmanship that fans had not yet seen in the world of white competitive golf. Scholars recognize how Negro League baseball players brought a different look to the national pastime. Barnstorming teams entertained fans with comedic tricks like “shadowball,” and players employed tactics rarely seen in white baseball. Some argue that black players like Jackie Robinson employed bold, improvisational base-running that echoed jazz music, “jazzing the basepaths” in a way white fans had never seen. From Howard Wheeler’s cross-handed grip and trick-shot performances to Ted Rhodes’s colorful wardrobe and Charlie Sifford’s iconic cigar-chomping, UGA players likewise injected professional golf with a unique aesthetic. Handing out awards for the best-dressed golfer at its events, the tour emphasized that the way its players looked mattered, including the way they differed from white professionals on the course.

In addition, while male-centered bantering, gambling, and hustling were long associated with golf (including common interactions between white players and black caddies going back to the nineteenth century), UGA players combined these antics with professional golf in a way that white professionals rarely had to. Nearly all of the top UGA players—Hartsfield, Wheeler, Spiller, Sifford, Elder, and Rhodes—brought with
them a long tradition of hustling and gambling, often forged as caddies and young players trying to scrape together a living in a game that offered them little potential to earn “respectable” money. Lesser-known competitors took it further, like George Wallace Jr., known as “Tater Pie” or “Potato Pie.” Originally from Atlanta, the illiterate Wallace was a legendary golf hustler who traveled around the country in search of high-stakes cash games: he once spent a week in Oklahoma winning $60,000 from a wealthy oilman. “Tater Pie was a professional gambler,” said Rafe “Ray” Botts, a fellow UGA player who went on to participate on the PGA Tour after integration. “He was a country boy and talked funny. He always had a pocketful of money. He wouldn’t expose his game until it was too late for his opponent. He was like a ghost. It was like, who is this guy?”

At times UGA organizers (and the black press) attempted to combat the perception that black players were rampant hustlers. The tour banned gambling at the UGA National after one sportswriter criticized it for allowing “wide open” gambling at the 1956 event in Philadelphia. “This has become a nationwide disgrace,” he charged, “and unless something is done about it, the players will be witness to a murder on the links someday.” The press also urged black players (professionals and amateurs) to abide by course rules and follow proper etiquette, especially when sharing public courses with whites. “Let’s leave the vile and obscene language at home, golf is a gentlemen’s game,” one reporter implored. Black sportswriters in Pittsburgh publicly denounced “foul-mouthed” players on municipal courses. “Some Negroes, sporting golf clubs, are taking the basement language of Fullerton Street to district golf links,” charged the Pittsburgh Courier in 1956. “This Negro, whose language is a constant mixture of profanity, vulgarity and obscenity, is obnoxious wherever he is found, but he is particularly harmful when, taking advantage of openings that have been made for respectable Negroes, he carries his gutter language to places and among people where such language is offensive and stigmatizes the entire group.”

Yet critics faced an uphill battle on the issue of gambling, especially among UGA golfers. In an era with few lucrative prizes or endorsements available to even the most talented black players—in an expensive sport that required them to shell out thousands of their own dollars in travel and lodging expenses to participate on tour—gambling was a way of life, and most UGA pros made more money on the side than they ever did in golf tournaments. “While guys like Ben Hogan and Sam Snead and Lew Worsham were getting headlines every week for dueling at PGA tourna-
ments on the best courses in the country, Spiller and Rhodes and Wheeler were playing for bets on public courses, shooting their 63s and 64s for the benefit of some poor sucker whose money they were taking,” recalled Charlie Sifford. “It was hustle or be hustled.” Of the UGA champions, Zeke Hartsfield was particularly known for tricking unsuspecting bettors out of their money. “Zeke had his own unique way of getting back at the golf world for not being allowed to play in the pro tournaments: he was perhaps the world’s greatest hustler,” wrote Sifford. “Hell, even if they’d let Zeke play on the PGA Tour, he probably couldn’t have afforded it, because he made so much money by hustling.”

Stories of players like Hartsfield, Wheeler, Sifford, Spiller, and Rhodes became legendary partly because their accomplishments were hidden from white fans for so many years. But they were the players who made
the largest impression on the professional game and drew attention. For every Charlie Sifford there were hundreds of truly unknown African Americans who invested significant time and money, talented players who joined the UGA tour and attempted to be professional golfers in a society that denied them basic civil rights. For most, even their names are now lost.

Then there were UGA players like Alfred “Tup” Holmes, amateurs who never became professionals but still used the game to change America. In 1938 the Tuskegee University student won his first UGA amateur event, the Southern Open. In 1955 he won something bigger: the most important golf-related Supreme Court case in U.S. history.