Game of Privilege
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THAI PEOPLE DON’T GET HATE MAIL

Race and Golf in the Age of Tiger Woods

MAY 1997—LECANTO, FLORIDA
Charlie Sifford and Lee Elder watch Tiger Woods hit practice shots. The three men then stroll along a golf course, talking among themselves.

“Thank you, Mr. Sifford,” comes the voice of Woods. “Thank you, Mr. Elder. I won’t forget. You were the first. I refuse to be the last.”

They walk, slow-motion, down a “dreamy fairway” as Woods continues: “You are the man, Mr. Sifford. You are the man, Mr. Elder. I won’t forget. There’s a jacket in Augusta with my name on it. There’s a jacket in Augusta with your soul in it.”

The commercial, the third television spot in a massive advertising campaign launched by Nike, Inc., after it signed an endorsement deal with Woods, would debut the following month during the 1997 U.S. Open. The same words appeared in print ads as well, including black publications like *Ebony* and *Black Enterprise*.

Tiger Woods, soon to be the richest athlete in history and one of the most recognizable men on the planet, was a savvy, confident professional who embraced his immense talent and understood the significance of his story to the historical black civil rights movement. But he was also a twenty-one-year-old proud of his unique, multiracial family and insistent that no one but himself had a right to claim his racial identity.

Money (an estimated $40 million, to start) certainly helped solidify the message. But no amount could completely erase such a public contradiction: Tiger Woods called himself “Cablinasian”; Nike called him “Black.”¹
Almost 50 million people saw Tiger Woods win the Masters in 1997, by far the most to ever watch a golf tournament. Yet what viewers first embraced as a simple, compelling story has since grown increasingly hard to understand. The 1997 Masters—a triumphant, even unifying event in its day—with time has become a complicated moment in American history.

The uncertainty was always lying beneath the surface. By the time twenty-one-year-old Woods teed it up that weekend, won by twelve shots, and memorably embraced his father on the eighteenth green, at least thirty African Americans had already participated in thousands of PGA tour events in the previous forty-five years. Six had combined to win twenty-six times on tour (including Woods himself, who already had three victories under his belt). Four had already competed in the Masters a combined twenty-two times since Lee Elder’s debut in 1975, finishing as high as eleventh place in the tournament (again including Woods, who was making his third appearance). Augusta National had already integrated its membership as well, inviting the first African American to join the club seven years before. In short, 50 million people knew they were watching something special in April 1997, and somehow historic because of Woods’s race, yet despite the overwhelming media coverage there never was a consensus on why.

For some the 1997 Masters was the culmination of what came before, the pinnacle of a decades-long battle to provide African Americans full access to the nation’s most privileged game, a symbol, of course, for the modern civil rights movement. Yet for others the event was a celebration of the future, a watershed for what promised to follow: a flood of black golfers who would change the game. Not so much a culmination of the civil rights movement, it was instead a multiracial victory that questioned the traditional black/white binaries of the past, one of the first “postracial” moments in popular culture. The moment likely belongs somewhere between these two narratives, an ill fit for either. When they watched Woods, most of those 50 million spectators channeled figures like Jackie Robinson, and in doing so they pulled the 1997 Masters back to 1947, further than it ever belonged. But ensuing years have witnessed an intriguing shift: Woods, and the popular discussion of race he invoked, as a precursor to figures like Barack Obama, pushing the 1997 Masters forward, to 2017 and beyond.

Woods was unique to African American golf from the start. He had no experience with the two institutions that were key to the black pro-
professionals that came before him: caddying and the UGA. A child prodigy, he won his first amateur event—the Junior World Golf Championships (for boys ten and under)—at age eight and went on to win twenty more amateur tournaments, including three straight U.S. Amateurs from 1994 to 1996 and the 1996 NCAA National Championship while playing for Stanford University, before he turned professional at age twenty. In 1989, thirteen-year-old Woods participated in a pro-am with twenty PGA professionals and shot a score good enough to beat eight of them. By the time he was twenty-nine, the same age when Bill Spiller first picked up a club, Tiger Woods had already won forty-six PGA Tour events and been ranked the world’s number one golfer for over seven years. Although his family was not particularly wealthy, Woods had a thoroughly middle-class, California upbringing far removed from that of the generations of black pros who were introduced to golf as caddies in the South. The story of his early development in golf was thoroughly white, at least by the standards of the 1970s. “The white kids in the suburbs have nothing to do but take lessons,” lamented Howard University golf coach John Organ in 1973, two years before Woods was born. “Their parents give the kids lessons because they know, in this game, you’ve got to learn the basics early.”3

While Woods launched his career as a member of Stanford University’s golf team, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) struggled to keep their teams black. Eddie Payton, older brother of NFL star Walter Payton, took over the men’s and women’s golf programs at Jackson State University in 1985. Realizing that no HBCU had ever been invited to the NCAA golf championships, he helped establish the Minority Collegiate Golf Championship in 1987, an annual tournament that the PGA took over in 2006. Under Payton, the men’s team at Jackson State became the first HBCU squad to compete in the NCAA Men’s National Golf Championships in 1995, the same year that Woods, a freshman at Stanford, was named Pac-10 Player of the Year and an NCAA First Team All-American. In 1999 the women’s team at Jackson State became the first to compete in the NCAA Women’s National Golf Championships. But while millions soon debated whether Woods was “a black golfer,” far fewer noticed that Jackson State, like other HBCUs, no longer fielded “a black team.” Four of the five starters on Payton’s historic 1995 squad were white. “Some people question why we don’t have more black kids,” he said soon after. “If we did, we wouldn’t be competitive.”4 At the 2012 PGA Minority Collegiate Golf Championship, neither the winning men’s team (the University of Texas Pan-American) nor the women’s (Bethune-Cookman University)
had a single African American on its roster. Bethune-Cookman’s team featured white students from Austria, Denmark, and Great Britain. Renee Powell once pressed a sponsor to donate golf equipment to three HBCUs in order to help colleges “where minority kids were struggling,” only to be surprised when she discovered that all of the golfers were white. Some celebrated this shift as a positive sign of integration. “Payton’s teams
are rainbow coalitions of whites and blacks, Americans and foreigners,” *Sports Illustrated* proclaimed in 2009. And many players agreed with that sentiment. “All the brothers get accepted to the big white schools to play basketball,” one of three white Australians on the Jackson State team said in 1996. “Here all the white guys get accepted to play golf. What’s the difference?”

Nevertheless, the declining number of African Americans on black college golf teams seemed to challenge the notion that the 1997 Masters was a turning point for race and golf. Woods himself, matriculating in predominately white schools, communities, and golf programs, avoided such debates over the future of historically black institutions such as HBCUs and their golf teams. (“Still got the letter I sent him,” Payton recalled of his efforts to recruit Woods. “Never really had a chance, but it was worth trying.”) Moreover, by the time Woods was born in 1975, the most important historically black institution for professional golfers, the UGA, was nearly finished as a pro golf tour, though it continued to organize events into the 1980s. The black players on the PGA Tour during Woods’s early life were the last to come through the black tour, but there were still a number of them. They included winning professionals from the 1960s like Pete Brown, who played on the PGA and Senior PGA circuits into the 1990s, and Lee Elder, who as late as 2004 was still playing senior events. A handful of others, including brothers Jim and Chuck Thorpe, parlayed UGA success in the 1970s into PGA appearances. Jim won 27 of 33 UGA tournaments in 1970, and Chuck took 25 of the 32 UGA events he entered from 1971 to 1973. Chuck played sporadically on the PGA and Senior PGA tours until the late 1990s, while Jim enjoyed a far more successful PGA career. “The first time I played with Arnold Palmer, I literally could not get my ball to stay on the tee,” he recalled. “And knowing he was watching me just made it worse.” Nevertheless, Jim won three times on the PGA Tour in the mid-1980s, earned $2 million, finished tied for fourth at the 1984 U.S. Open, and competed in the Masters six times, finishing in the top twenty in 1985. He subsequently had even more success on the Senior PGA Tour from 2000 to 2007, winning thirteen events and earning an additional $14 million; by 2007 he ranked seventh in career earnings on the senior circuit.

Bobby Stroble and Charlie Owens were the last two players to parlay UGA success into PGA careers. In 1975 Stroble finished third at one of the last UGA Nationals, subsequently competing in 19 events on the PGA Tour and 133 more on the Senior Tour. Owens won 23 of the 41 UGA
events he entered, including the 1974 and 1975 UGA Nationals, and went on to play more often in PGA events; in 1986 he even won 2 tournaments on the Senior Tour. His unorthodox play also drew considerable attention. Like Howard Wheeler decades before, Owens played with a cross-handed grip, and during the 1980s he was the first PGA Tour pro to use a long “belly” putter in competition, a controversial club that became common in the 1990s and 2000s.9

Thus, rather than Woods’s victory at the 1997 Masters, perhaps his birth in 1975 was the real watershed moment in the history of black professional golf. The decline of the UGA in the early 1970s corresponded with the height of black participation on the PGA circuit, with as many as eleven African Americans participating at once. George Johnson played 177 events from 1968 to 1985. Jim Dent, the former Augusta caddie, played 450 from 1970 to 1989 and then made $9 million on the senior tour over the next twenty years, winning 12 times. Like Jim Thorpe, Dent was placed among the top ten all-time earners among seniors. The two men were even mistaken for each other at senior events. Thorpe was paired with Tom Watson and tied for the lead heading into the final round of the 2001 Senior PGA Championship when the starter stepped to the microphone and introduced him to the gallery as Jim Dent. “Why the hell couldn’t he say Tiger Woods?” Thorpe blurted back.10 (The joke, of course, was clear, but the irony lost on the gallery that day was that Woods would never be mistaken for a fellow black competitor because there would be no other black competitors.) Another African American pro, Walter Morgan, played the Senior Tour from 1991 to 2004 and won three times. Led by Morgan, Thorpe, and Dent, there was thus a period in the 1990s and early 2000s when a group of black players was a major force on the senior circuit, another important fact the Woods narrative overshadowed.

Woods was certainly a child prodigy who drew special attention because of his race as well as his skills. By age five he had appeared on more television shows, including That’s Incredible, CBS Sports, and The Today Show. In 1982 he received a feature spread in Ebony. “This is one of the first Black golfers with natural skills whose parents have the means to get pro instructions that even exceed those afforded Jack Nicklaus in his formative years,” Earl Woods proudly said of his son. “We are willing to pay the price.” Representatives from CBS Sports told him they were committed to covering his son’s development “all the way to the 18th green at Augusta Country Club.” Tiger was six.11 Soon other African American publications, from Jet to Black Enterprise, were following the child’s de-
Thus the story line was formed by the time Woods turned ten in 1985: he could be an African American golfer on the PGA Tour more special than the dozens who came before him. Why? Because he had the potential to one day lead the tour and be the best player in the world.

Never mind that ten-year-old Tiger could already turn on the television and watch a black man dominate the PGA Tour. Although distinguishing the top player was a controversial science, Calvin Peete was certainly among the contenders. He won eleven times from 1982 to 1986, more than anyone else. The unofficial McCormack Golf Rankings listed him among the top ten golfers in the world in 1984, as did the inaugural Official World Golf Ranking when it debuted in April 1986. Moreover, only five of the ten on that first Official World list had been playing full time on the U.S. tour. (The top three, Bernhard Langer, Seve Ballesteros, and Sandy Lyle, all played full time in Europe.) By the end of that season, Peete had tallied twelve career PGA Tour victories and earned $2 million, placing him seventeenth on the all-time earnings list. He also beat Jack Nicklaus for the 1984 Vardon Trophy, awarded to the player with the lowest stroke average for the season. “I’ve passed that stage of wanting to establish myself as an excellent black player. I want to be recognized as a professional golfer,” he said after winning the prestigious Players Championship in 1985. Peete’s status as the hottest player in golf was hampered only by his inability to win one of the four major tournaments (which limited his world-ranking points as well). But he came close, finishing eleventh at the 1986 Masters, fourth at the 1983 U.S. Open, and third at the 1982 PGA Championship. Remarkably, not once did he play in the British Open, perhaps the only top-ten player in modern golf never to play one of the major championships in his career. Only five other people had secured more PGA victories since World War II without winning a major.

Not only was Calvin Peete the best African American on the PGA Tour before the arrival of Tiger Woods, but he also had a compelling life story that the Los Angeles Times dubbed “one of the most remarkable in all of sports.” A native of Detroit, Peete was born in 1943 and grew up in crushing poverty, one of his father’s nineteen children. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade. He fell out of a tree when he was twelve and severely fractured his left elbow; for the rest of his life he was unable to straighten the mangled arm. From working on farms and orchards in Florida to selling clothes and jewelry out of his station wagon, Peete never saw a golf club until 1966, when he was twenty-three. That summer friends invited him to a fish fry but ended up taking him to the links...
instead. Two years later he joined the millions of television viewers who watched Lee Elder and Jack Nicklaus duel down the stretch at the 1968 American Golf Classic. “That really inspired me,” he said. “A black man going against the greatest player of all time.”\(^\text{15}\) Seven years later he made it through on his third trip to PGA qualifying school, earning a tour card in 1975 at age thirty-two; he still had never even heard of the Masters, but five years later in 1980 he became the second African American to play the tournament. Unlike Lee Elder before him and Tiger Woods later, Peete refused to play nice when it came to “honoring” Augusta National or its tournament. After shooting a deplorable 87 during the third round of the 1983 Masters, he angrily insisted the event meant no more to him than any other. “Tradition, they can keep it,” he fired back at a reporter. “Asking a black man about the tradition of the Masters is like asking if he enjoyed his forefathers being slaves.”\(^\text{16}\)

Peete’s incredible story paralleled that of the older generation of black professionals who struggled to overcome long odds. His late arrival to golf rivaled that of Bill Spiller, and his background was the antithesis of Woods’s. “His story is Dickensian in its down-and-out beginnings and American in its particular obstacles and eventual rewards,” proclaimed the New York Times after his passing in April 2015 (which was overshadowed by the response to Charlie Sifford’s death two months earlier).\(^\text{17}\) Because a high school diploma was required to join the American Ryder Cup squad, Peete had to pass an equivalency test in 1982 in order to participate, going on to be a member of the 1983 and 1985 teams. Yet nothing symbolized the humble beginnings and extreme obstacles more than his own withered arm. A fundamental tenet for right-handed golfers is that one’s left arm must remain straight, yet with a permanently bent left elbow and without golf lessons, Peete fashioned a swing that was deadly accurate. For ten consecutive seasons (1981–90) he led the PGA Tour in driving accuracy, a feat no other player has come close to matching. He remains the straight-est driver in tour history. Ironically, just as black journalists were beginning to tout the promise of young Tiger Woods, they were also heralding Peete’s reign atop the tour. Publications like Jet and Ebony celebrated the man who went “from migrant worker to the Masters,” and various black clubs and organizations honored his achievements.\(^\text{18}\)

Juxtaposed with Woods’s, Calvin Peete’s success counters the popular understanding of race and golf that appeared after 1997. An alternative counternarrative begins to emerge: It is Peete’s career, and not that of Woods, that marks the pinnacle of black golf in American history. The
Calvin Peete competes in the 1983 Bob Hope Desert Classic in Palm Springs, California (AP Photo/Lennox McLendon).
peak of black engagement with the game occurred during the 1970s and early 1980s, represented by the number of black professionals playing PGA events, the brief period of rapid economic growth in the black community, and the social optimism surrounding the game immediately after integration in the 1960s. And a moment like the Sunday in July 1982 when Ebony celebrated Jim Thorpe and Calvin Peete for winning two tournaments on the same day (Thorpe the Canadian PGA Championship, Peete the PGA’s Greater Milwaukee Open) reflects the broader historical context of black golf better than Woods’s victory at the 1997 Masters. “In recent years, changing lifestyles have seen the emergence of Blacks on the golf course,” Black Sports magazine announced two years before Woods was born, in a 1973 golf fashion spread that proudly insisted that “the Black man’s usual panache can prevail on the greens as prominently as it does elsewhere.” A broader context of black optimism in the early 1970s fueled the idea that African Americans were transforming golf with “that unmistakable spirit indicative of the Black peacock.”19 The head of the fledgling UGA, Porter Pernell, agreed with such a sentiment: “The opportunities for young golfers are unlimited,” he said. “They have more recognition, and it’s much easier for them to play than it was five or ten years ago.”20

In some ways, then, the crisis of race and golf in the 1990s was not the long-term, historical lack of black access to the game but, rather, a more immediate concern: a new generation of African Americans threatened with losing the level of access their community had already fought for and obtained by the 1970s. This is the key context to understanding the rise of Woods. When Woods was born in 1975, nearly a dozen black players could tee it up on the PGA Tour. By the early 1980s that number was halved, and by 1997 there was one. Many black fans and players, including Calvin Peete, felt as if they were slowly watching the game slip away. “Black golfers are an endangered species on the PGA Tour,” Peete told Sports Illustrated in 1990 as he neared retirement. “In three to five years we will probably be extinct.”21 The emergence of Woods would make his statement both ironic and accurate.

Many African Americans saw this decline at the elite level as a reflection of a broader loss of access to golf, itself a symptom of growing racial discrepancies in wealth, lagging wages, and the deterioration of predominately black neighborhoods. There are no definitive studies that quantify whether the number of black golfers kept pace in the 1970s and 1980s, and the statistics that do exist are complicated by the fact that the popularity of golf in general grew rapidly during the period. More likely
the total number of African American players continued to grow while their overall ratio declined. In 1990 *Sports Illustrated* cited one study arguing that the number of black golfers had tripled during the 1980s to nearly 500,000. The National Golf Foundation (NGF) reported 649,000 “African-Americans actively playing golf in 1990,” up from 360,000 four years earlier.\(^{22}\) Yet despite those impressive gains, black golfers were still losing ground; the same study noted they constituted just 2.3 percent of players in the United States.

Whether or not the actual numbers supported their assertion, many black fans perceived the dwindling number of African Americans on the PGA Tour as reflecting broader trends. Publications like *Ebony* affirmed the connection, both highlighting the decline of black professionals and encouraging more readers to play the game. “Black kids now live three blocks away from golf courses,” Peete told the magazine in 1982. “The exposure is there.”\(^{23}\) Not only did some see the decline of golf as indicative of troubling changes in black neighborhoods; they also lamented the loss of a way to combat rising crime, urban decline, and racial unrest. The investigations launched by President Lyndon Johnson’s Kerner Commission, charged with uncovering the causes of the 1960s race riots, included interviewing city recreation departments and probing the cost of municipal golf (in Cincinnati, Ohio, the head of the department insisted that “prices were very reasonable” and “many of the young Negroes if they were interested in golf could afford to play with no problem”).\(^{24}\)

It is no coincidence that the height of black presence in PGA events during the mid-1970s coincided with the emergence of junior golf programs aimed at black youth in the inner cities. Many pros, such as Lee Elder and Charlie Sifford, noted that golf lacked programs for serious black players and was falling behind other sports at high school and university levels. As evident in the rise of Arthur Ashe, even tennis had done a better job establishing organizations to reach black youth, particularly in the South. Elder organized his own youth program and began to talk openly about making golf affordable to African Americans. “Many black kids look up to Elder as an example,” reported Tony Fusaro, the golf coach at historically black South Carolina State College in 1973.\(^ {25}\) Later Calvin Peete established a scholarship fund specifically for potential black college golfers, while Earl Jackson’s IGT established a junior flight to promote youth play on its golf excursions. Another advocate for junior golf, Lenwood Robinson Jr., emerged in Chicago; from 1975 to 1979 his Chicago Urban Junior Golf Association attracted hundreds of black youth
and forged a landmark alliance with the city’s main golf body, the Chicago District Golf Association. A larger organization soon formed in Phoenix, Arizona. Founded by Bill Dickey, a black real estate executive, the National Minority Junior Golf Scholarship Association went on to provide more than 1,000 scholarships (and $3 million) to minority golfers over the next thirty years. Efforts like these, which percolated in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, marked what Golfweek dubbed a “grass-roots minority golf movement.” Moreover, such junior programs tended to be more inclusive than caddying because they encouraged the participation of black girls as well as boys.

As courses that traditionally catered to urban black neighborhoods began to struggle with financial difficulties and rising crime rates, golf advocates who came to their defense found themselves engaged in much broader social commentary. “It seems there is no neutral territory that is safe from youthful killers in this city,” Maggie Hathaway lamented in 1974 after two teenagers in south Los Angeles robbed a foursome on Western Avenue Golf Course, shooting and killing one. In Cleveland, one Call and Post reader urged the black community to use golf in the fight against urban decline: “It is rare to see a youngster who has taken up the game of golf who has a criminal record. He is generally too involved in the progress of his game that he doesn’t have time to think of criminal activity. . . . [Young blacks] may never become professional golfers, but it will make better citizens out of them. They can find out what kind of human beings they really are, how they can adjust to pressure, and how they can concentrate on the game of golf regardless of what their concerns and goals in life may be.”

Not everyone was on board with public golf as a useful response to urban decline and deindustrialization, especially regarding money. By the 1970s Atlanta’s black leaders were fighting over whether to repair Bobby Jones Municipal, the historic course involved in Holmes v. Atlanta. Maynard Jackson, the first black mayor of a major southern city, insisted there were better ways to spend dwindling development funds in order to serve Atlanta’s “poorer neighborhoods.” Yet his biracial city council objected, passing an ordinance that forced him to fix the course. While most golfers, black or white, saw some positives in bringing more black players to the game (especially in distressed neighborhoods), there were plenty of cynics. “The sentiment commonly held in the golf universe is that getting more inner-city minorities can only be a good thing,” wrote Scott Stossel in the New Republic after Woods emerged. “One could ar-
gue that there is something implicitly racist about all this. What no one is openly stating is the belief that, if only this effete ‘white’ game can be imported to the inner-city, then black kids can be ‘civilized’ in a socially appropriate way. . . . In this view, the imposition of golf represents a kind of cultural imperialism.”31

For generations, black caddies symbolized this critique of golf as white imperialism. By the 1970s, however, those who wanted to recruit more African Americans to the game cited one major factor inhibiting their efforts: the decline of caddying. “I learned by caddying, but now we ride in golf carts,” said Howard University golf coach John Organ in 1973, as black colleges strived to recruit more talented players.32 The critique grew stronger in the ensuing decades. At a 1993 SCLC event, Calvin Peete warned that removing caddies from the game was severely limiting opportunities for young African Americans to play. Jim Thorpe, Tiger Woods, and numerous other professionals eventually agreed: “It really bothers me to know there were more black players on the tour in the late 1960s and early ’70s than there are today,” Thorpe said in 2007, citing “the loss of caddie programs” as one factor.33 For various reasons, including the advent of the golf cart and a desire to lower costs, caddying declined in popularity at courses around the country. On the PGA Tour players began to employ their own full-time caddies who traveled with them, rather than relying on local caddies at each course. The Masters was one of the last tournaments that prohibited players from bringing their own caddies; the requirement that participants use one of Augusta National’s baggers was dropped in 1983. For years fans had recognized and celebrated the unique knowledge Augusta’s caddies brought to the tournament and its players. When Art Wall Jr. dramatically came from behind to win the 1959 Masters over Arnold Palmer, he publicly attributed the victory to his black caddie for the week, Henry Hammond.34 If the embrace of Earl and Tiger Woods on the eighteenth green nearly forty years later was meant to invoke a racial transformation at Augusta, most viewers failed to notice a more dramatic shift. When Tiger was a child, fans still saw only black caddies at the Masters; now nearly every bagger was white (including Tiger’s). Sportswriters in 1997 fawned over the fact that “black Augusta caddies” and “African-American employees” watched intently as Woods conquered the tournament (just as they had celebrated Lee Elder when he integrated the event), but they, too, did not recognize the significance: Augusta’s black caddies were now standing and watching, not caddying.35

Even more insulting was the fact that as caddying declined in popu-
larity after the 1970s, the job itself became more respected, lucrative, and white. “Caddying, once perceived as a menial job, has become a vocation for the college-educated and failed professionals who are lured by the astronomical purses driven by Woods's immense popularity,” announced the *New York Times* in 2012. A few African Americans bridged this transformation and benefited from the profession’s newfound respect and money. As late as 1976 almost thirty PGA pros still employed black caddies. Carl Jackson began bagging at Augusta National in 1958 at age eleven, working his first Masters three years later when he was fourteen. Jackson went on to caddie at the tournament a record fifty-four times until 2014, because 1984 and 1995 winner Ben Crenshaw continued to employ him rather than bring in an outsider. Crenshaw also worked with another black caddie, Emile Smith, who received residual payments from appearing in Buick commercials with his boss in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Smith even rejected an offer to be in commercials for Canon, Inc. “They only wanted to offer up-front money,” he told *Sports Illustrated* in 1981. When Raymond Floyd won the 1982 PGA Championship, the local press playfully noted that his longtime black caddie, Dolphus Hull, earned more money that week than famous golfers like Tom Watson or Jack Nicklaus did for making the cut. Hull insisted he deserved the share of Floyd’s winnings: “He’s the one who’s swingin,’ not me, but I’d say I’m 15 percent of his game.” Yet few black caddies were left by the time the money (and fame) increased dramatically in the 1990s.

For African Americans it was a bittersweet development; “Where did the black caddies go?” Maggie Hathaway lamented. On one hand, the dwindling number signaled expanded opportunities for young African Americans and the end of a demeaning, symbolic profession that helped keep generations of black people in their place. Carl Jackson, the legendary Augusta caddie, saw some of these positives. By 2012 he was caddie-master at a club in Arkansas (where all but one of the caddies was white) and insisting that young black golfers could now aim higher. “It would be my suggestion to try to be the player,” he said. Yet Jackson and other African Americans still noted what the *New York Times* called a “bitter irony”—that “when the prize money was modest, they were the standard; when the money became huge, they became disposable.” Many in the black press agreed. “As a result of bypassing the opportunity to caddy, aspiring African American golfers are missing out on the opportunity of a lifetime,” warned *Black Enterprise*, “to network and improve their game as golfers by watching and assisting other, more established, players.”

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Even for those uninterested in playing, caddying had been a niche industry that helped some African Americans uplift their families. “Rabbit” Dyer grew up in a poor household in the Hollygrove neighborhood of New Orleans and started bagging at Metairie Country Club when he was nine. Later he caddied for Gary Player and managed to buy a house for his mother and put his son through Princeton University. The decline of the black caddie, while indicative of racial integration and social advancement, nevertheless allowed whites to turn a symbol of racial servitude into a more lucrative opportunity. Nothing symbolized the finality of this appropriation—and provided yet another image more accurate than the 1997 Masters—than the moment in 2015 when Woods’s former white caddie, who made an estimated $11 million assisting him from 1999 to 2011, complained that the job made him feel like a “slave.”

Also lost in the hysteria surrounding the 1997 Masters was the fact that Augusta National and the PGA had already been forced to make substantial changes in response to recent protests against racial discrimination. It began seven years earlier, shortly before the 1990 PGA Championship at Shoal Creek Club in Birmingham, Alabama. Designed by Jack Nicklaus and opened in 1977, Shoal Creek was the state’s top course and a private club with no African American or female members. The site had hosted numerous important tournaments, including the 1984 PGA Championship and the 1986 U.S. Amateur. But this time controversy erupted a month before the event after the club’s founder, Hall Thompson, told a Birmingham newspaper that Shoal Creek would “not be pressured” into inviting black members. “I think we’ve said that we don’t discriminate in every other area except the blacks,” he clarified. Black sportswriters and golf fans immediately responded with calls for a boycott. “Hall Thompson has told us what we already know,” proclaimed the Cleveland Call and Post. “That at the core of exclusion in American society there remains racism. . . . The nation’s country and private clubs are and have been the nation’s strongest bastion of white power and exclusivity.” Both the SCLC’s national head, Joseph Lowery, and its Birmingham chapter president, Rev. Abraham Woods, warned that Shoal Creek would be targeted by protests during the tournament, as did the NAACP. A majority of black golfers around the country voiced their approval as well; in New Jersey, the vice president of the historically black Freeway Golf Course, James Hughes, reported that its patrons supported the response. Some black fans also called on Jim Thorpe, the only African American scheduled to participate in the event, to boycott as well. (Thorpe responded that
Calvin Peete, who had played his last major championship two years earlier, did not challenge Thorpe’s decision but was more supportive of the protest, insisting that Thompson’s statements “were directed not just at people in Birmingham, but all blacks in general.”

Yet the Shoal Creek controversy became an unusual moment in the history of racial integration and popular sports: the PGA would be forced to adopt a policy prohibiting tournaments at all-white private clubs because of action from groups like the SCLC and the NAACP, angry corporate sponsors, and black golf fans—but not actual black PGA players, who were virtually gone by 1990. In their place were a few white golfers whose supportive voices would have to serve as ironic substitutes. Most notable was South African Gary Player: “If I was in those peoples’ shoes I would also demonstrate.”

Birmingham’s SCLC leader, Rev. Abraham Woods, was spokesman for the protest. Woods and Mayor Richard Arrington (the first African American to hold that position) met with Thompson in the tense weeks leading up to the tournament, as a series of sponsors—IBM, Toyota, Honda, and Anheuser-Busch—announced they were pulling $2 million in television ads from coverage of the event on ABC and ESPN, an implicit acknowledgment that by the 1990s companies sponsoring the PGA Tour derived 25 percent of their revenue from African Americans. Finally, just days before the event, Thompson and Shoal Creek capitulated and struck a deal with the SCLC: the club gave membership to its first African American, Louis Willie Jr., and in exchange Woods called off the demonstration. The 1990 PGA Championship went on as planned with no disruption. (It turned out to be a generally unexciting tournament; little-known Australian golfer Wayne Grady was the winner, and Jim Thorpe missed the cut.) Notably, the PGA would never return to Shoal Creek, although four years later in 1994 Tiger Woods participated with the Stanford University golf team in an intercollegiate tournament at the club. A freshman at the time, Woods and his teammates discussed the controversy (some jokingly called the club “Soul Creek”) as demonstrators once again gathered outside the gates, the first time Woods played an event targeted by racial protest. After Woods shot 67 to win the tournament, Hall Thompson greeted him as he walked off the eighteenth green: “You’re a great player, I’m proud of you. You’re superb.”

For some observers the Shoal Creek protest was a minor affair that exposed racial tokenism and exemplified how the historic civil rights orga-
nizations were floundering by the 1990s. As historian Glenn Eskew notes, all of the Birmingham leaders, including Abraham Woods, involved in the controversy had participated in negotiations when the SCLC’s Birmingham movement caught the world’s attention in 1963. The man Shoal Creek invited for membership, Louis Willie Jr., had no interest in golf and worked closely with businessman A. G. Gaston, the city’s noted black moderate who initially rejected King and the SCLC in 1963. For Eskew, the image of Abraham Woods and SCLC demonstrators now threatening to lie down in front of golf carts to achieve tokenism at Shoal Creek revealed “the absurdity of the entire affair,” how movement activists had turned to “desegregation of country clubs by multinational corporate pressure,” and the ultimate “legacy of bourgeois reform.”48 Indeed, all of Birmingham’s private country clubs had an estimated 6,000 white members and 2 black members in 1990; now, with the integration of Shoal Creek, there were 3 blacks. By 2005 one prominent black lawyer in town estimated the club still had only a handful of African Americans (former U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice became a member in 2009). “This hardly sounds like the stuff of social revolution,” Sports Illustrated announced weeks after the controversy. “And it certainly is small change when compared with the uprisings that raged in the streets of Birmingham during the spring and summer of 1963. . . . The summer of 1990 in Birmingham has seen another kind of revolution altogether, one that has been utterly peaceful, yet powerful enough to threaten one of this country’s last bastions of white supremacy—the private golf club.”49

The protest was indeed a “powerful” moment in the game’s history, one that rippled through the world of golf and recalled the significant fight to integrate Birmingham’s municipal links in the 1960s and Shuttlesworth v. Gaylord. Not only did the PGA Tour never return to Shoal Creek; it also announced that none of its tournaments would ever again take place at a private club unless it was racially integrated. Some sites, like Baltusrol Golf Club in New Jersey, responded immediately by integrating their memberships, while others balked. In Monterey, California, the 250-member Cypress Point Club refused to invite an African American and was promptly dropped from helping host the AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am (formerly the Bing Crosby National Pro-Am). Also dropped were Butler National Golf Club outside Chicago, which had hosted the Western Open for seventeen years, and Old Warson Country Club in St. Louis, scheduled to host a senior tour event the following year. (Old Warson admitted its first black member soon after in 1991, by 2012 Butler Na-
tional had also integrated, and Condoleezza Rice has been a member of Cypress Point since at least 2013.) Overall, at least eleven country clubs initially chose to remain exclusively white and forgo hosting PGA or USGA events, although some of these, including the Merion and Aronimink Golf Clubs in Pennsylvania, integrated within a few years.

Moreover, the PGA was forced to make such a dramatic gesture at a time when some public schools in the South still refused to confront blatant racism in golf and caved to discrimination at private country clubs. In 1981 the NAACP in Monroe, Louisiana, denounced St. Frederick Catholic High School for agreeing to bench the two black players on its golf team for a match against public schools at all-white Morehouse Country Club. The Louisiana High School Athletic Association refused to intervene, and ten years later state officials again offered little reaction when the school was asked to bench its black golfers for a 1991 match at Caldwell Parish Country Club. This time St. Frederick supported its players and boycotted the event, but to the outrage of its supporters, the two public schools it was scheduled to face went ahead and competed anyway. One was the all-white golf team at nearby Jena High School, where fifteen years later racial tension and violence sparked national protests after six black students (the “Jena Six”) were convicted of beating a white classmate. The PGA’s decision in Birmingham also helped publicize and embolden the numerous other local battles to integrate America’s country clubs that flared in the late 1980s and early 1990s. African Americans filed discrimination complaints and lawsuits targeting sites across the country, including Friendly Hills Country Club (Whittier, Calif.), the Olympic Club (San Francisco), and the Highland Golf and Country Club (Indianapolis).

Most significant for casual golf fans, the Shoal Creek protest also led directly to racial integration at Augusta National. Not only was Hall Thompson Shoal Creek’s founder; he was also a member at Augusta, and the controversy in Alabama directly prompted discussion among the membership over whether or not it would join Shoal Creek and invite its first African American member. The debate was reported to be tense, unique to the club: unlike the others, Augusta National had complete control over the Masters and was not beholden to the PGA Tour’s new policy banning tour stops at all-white clubs. (Granted, the tour could still have imposed a number of other penalties, like disassociating itself from the Masters or desanctioning the event as a major, but it threatened nothing of the sort.) Nevertheless, two months after the protests—and for the first time in its

Thus, lost in the attention surrounding Tiger Woods’s victory at the 1997 Masters was the fact that another Woods—Rev. Abraham Woods, head of the SCCLC in Birmingham—had played the key role in prompt- ing Augusta National to integrate its membership seven years earlier. The idea of the 1960s Birmingham movement transitioning into a 1990s protest for “bourgeois reform” certainly warranted some cynicism; but no one could discount that golf had played an important role in the original movement, and now the threat of direct, mass action had prompted an immediate and lasting response from the PGA Tour and the USGA. Pro- claimed one New York Times sportswriter, “1990 will go down as the year in which golf was finally held accountable for the racially exclusionary membership practices of many of its private clubs.” Arthur Ashe used even loftier words, calling the success of the Shoal Creek protest “a waters- shed in the social dynamics of America.” Indeed, since 1990 Americans have no longer been able to turn on their televisions and watch U.S. golf tournaments take place at all-white country clubs.

Of course, despite the uncertainty of its meaning and the misleading narratives that surround it, the 1997 Masters remains an indelible mo- ment in the history of race and sports, one that historians will likely re- interpret for generations. And Tiger Woods is a singular athlete in history. His more recent fall from grace—involving a series of injuries, poor play, a high-profile divorce, and tabloid scandals from sex addiction to rumors of performance-enhancing drugs—is, sadly, among the more common elements of his celebrity. Athletes from Jack Johnson and Babe Ruth to Joe Louis and Lance Armstrong have lived such tumultuous public lives and faced similar declines in fan support for over a hundred years. The historical uniqueness of Woods was his ability to seamlessly transition from child prodigy to richest athlete in history. Few children in Ameri- can life—be it in sports, politics, or society—have ever matched, or even exceeded, the level of expectation that surrounded young Tiger. And no other athlete has ever dominated and changed his or her game the way he did in the late 1990s and early 2000s. “He is the prohibitive favorite for as long as he lives,” quipped a fellow competitor, Tom Lehman, after the 1997 Masters.

Woods was heralded by supporters who insisted that his emergence
marked the beginning of a sea change in golf. He had unique potential to dominate the game, but more importantly, his significance lay in the fact that a generation of minority players promised to emerge in his wake. Many black fans and sportswriters joined this chorus, which peaked after the 1997 Masters in an optimistic surge that, in hindsight, proved woefully misguided. “Tigermania” on this front meant much more than Woods. “This young man has lit the torch for golf,” proclaimed one Atlanta Daily World editorial. “One decade from now, we [African Americans] should have at least 10 such players with the developed talent of Tiger Woods to compete in pro golf.” Black journalists announced the potential “end of white supremacy” in the game, while many black fans (and some pre-dominately black high schools) reported a dramatic surge in the number of youth interested in playing. “There are already reports of young Blacks taking up golf,” noted the Philadelphia Tribune days after the 1997 Masters. “The spectators at golf tournaments are quickly transforming from a sea of mainly white faces to an increasing rainbow of colors.” The Los Angeles Sentinel announced that the victory was an “unparalleled moment” in history: “World Has New Black Superhero,” it headlined.

Along with fans and the press, plenty of golf insiders and former players were also caught up in the moment. William Powell wrote that Woods was a “victor for all times” who “transcended” generations: “Tiger has made a quantum jump for the sport of golf and in the process [broke] every barrier in [his] path.” Lee Elder hinted that the 1997 Masters made Woods a civil rights figure as significant as any other athlete in history. “It might have more potential than Jackie Robinson breaking into baseball,” he said. “No one will ever turn their head again when a Black walks to the first tee.” Though Charlie Sifford and Woods had a closer relationship, Sifford was more measured and skeptical, in keeping with his style. He grew frustrated with the hype surrounding the 1997 Masters and ridiculed the comparisons to other integrating figures. Starting in the 1960s Sifford had long rejected those who labeled him the “Jackie Robinson of golf,” and not always out of deference. “My job is tougher than Jackie's ever was,” he said in 1961. “First off, he had a set salary. I have no sponsor and have to finance my own way. . . . Additionally, Robinson had a team backing him up. I'm playing alone.” Thirty-five years later, the flood of attention and questions about Woods, Robinson, and Sifford quickly grew annoying. “I'm hot again 'cause of Tiger Woods,” Sifford told one reporter shortly after the debut of his Nike ad with Woods. “Everybody wants to make a big deal about it, 'cause Tiger Woods is involved. But
there’s nothing in it for me, is there?”64 Jim Thorpe, another of the older black PGA pros, was among the few at the time who predicted that Woods would never match Jack Nicklaus’s record eighteen major championships (which, as of 2017, he has not). “This isn’t anything like Jackie Robinson,” he said. “That road’s been paved. . . . Tiger’s got it made.”65 Nevertheless, even the most cynical observers found themselves caught up in Tiger-mania. “Golf . . . is beginning to look more like America: diverse, multicultural, and middle class,” admitted the liberal New Republic in an essay outlining the major socioeconomic and racial barriers that remained in the sport, as well as the tokenism of racial integration at private country clubs. Still the magazine proclaimed that there was “no longer a single, obvious golfer type” now that “Woods has helped make golf cool.” More affordable than watching professional hockey, golf was “no longer a rich man’s game.”66

The emergence of Woods indeed corresponded with an increase in the number of African American golfers during the 1990s. Estimates were hard to nail down but pointed to substantial growth. A 1994 report from the NGF indicated that the number of African American players had doubled in the previous ten years and reached nearly 700,000. Four years later the National Minority Golf Foundation claimed the number had grown to 4 million during the six-year period surrounding the rise of Woods. Even if that number is inaccurate, or if participation subsequently dropped after 2000, the proportion of African American players seems to have increased in the twenty years since the 1997 Masters. A 2014 estimate indicated that there were 1.3 million black players in the United States out of 25.7 million total. That would mean a ratio of over 5 percent, less than the proportion of Americans who identified exclusively as black on the 2010 U.S. Census (13 percent) but more than double the NGF’s 1990, pre-Tiger estimate that 2.3 percent of U.S. golfers were African American.67 Of course, the direct relationship between Woods and levels of black interest in golf, as opposed to broader factors such as economic growth, was never clear. (No one spoke of a “Calvin Peete effect” helping triple black participation during the 1980s, for instance.) But the promises attached to Woods were unprecedented, especially his potential to draw more popular black interest. “With his participation in junior golf clinics, his immense media following, and his stunning ability, he should do more to bring minorities into golf than anyone ever,” proclaimed the black American Legacy.68 In November 1997, seven months after Woods won the 1997 Masters, the World Golf Foundation partnered with the PGA
Tour, the LPGA, the PGA, the USGA, and the Masters to establish the First Tee, a youth golf organization that has worked with more than 10 million young people through in-school and after-school programs. Three years later Joe Louis Barrow Jr. (son of the famed boxer) became its chief executive officer, one of golf’s few black executives.69

Woods certainly did inspire a surge of interest in golf, including among African Americans, and he overwhelmingly became the face of the game. A 2014 report estimated that the PGA Tour stood to lose $15 billion per year (and suffer a 30 percent drop in television ratings) without his participation, especially at major events like the Masters and even after his popularity dropped after 2009. Yet within a decade of the 1997 Masters, the promises of Tigermania were starting to crumble, and the flood of elite minority players turned out to be more like a trickle. The number of African Americans taking up golf likely doubled in the 1990s (and may have grown much more than that), but the blatant, visible lack of minorities on the PGA Tour highlighted the discrepancy between the hype generated by the 1997 Masters and reality. Some observers channeled the discussions surrounding Charlie Sifford and black PGA players in the late 1960s, arguing that Woods’s success failed to have a broader effect because African Americans still lacked ownership in the game, as there were few black-owned golf courses and equipment manufacturers. Others noted the irony that women’s golf and the LPGA Tour experienced one of the more dramatic racial shifts in sports history, as a tide of Asian and Asian American females took up golf and dominated the professional circuit. One year after the 1997 Masters, far fewer Americans were paying attention when twenty-one-year-old Se-Ri Pak, the lone Korean player on the LPGA Tour, won the 1998 LPGA Championship. Within ten years there were forty-five Koreans on the tour, along with numerous other Asians and Asian Americans, such as Michelle Wie; eventually the LPGA was generating more television revenue in South Korea than in the United States. Pak had “changed the face of golf even more than Tiger Woods,” wrote one sportswriter.70 Perhaps future historians will craft a very different narrative of race and sports, one that situates Woods as the leading Asian American player at a time when the Asian Diaspora dramatically appropriated and transformed modern golf.

Here Woods offered yet another unique contribution to history, for black athletes with such popularity had never insisted they weren’t black. From the beginning, both Earl and Tiger hesitated to talk with the press about race. Earl’s own sporting achievements paralleled the postwar civil
rights movement far more than his son’s golf career. At Kansas State University in 1952 he became the first African American baseball player in the Big Seven Conference. Traveling with the team, he often had to room separately at segregated hotels; his coach once refused to play a game in Mississippi after the opposing coach asked that Earl stay on the bus. After college he joined the army, and as for many black veterans during the period, his military service provided new opportunities to confront segregation. He joined the first generation of black servicemen who successfully fought for full integration in the military, including recreational activities. As late as 1963, nine years after Earl enlisted, a federal report noted that 19 percent of golf courses adjacent to army installations and 29 percent adjacent to navy facilities remained racially segregated. Nevertheless, Earl was introduced to golf at age forty-two while stationed at Brooklyn’s Fort Hamilton in 1972. Just three years before his son’s birth, he took up the game at Dyker Beach Golf Course, formerly the Bath Beach Club. (He learned at the very course where some sixty years earlier the first African American golf pro, John Shippen, had offered lessons.) At age three, Tiger would also play for the first time on a course adjacent to a military facility; after the family moved to southern California, he shot 48 over nine holes at the Seal Beach Navy course in Cypress.

As evident in his 1982 remarks to Ebony, Earl clearly identified his son as black and attached significance to Tiger’s race. Moreover, he began teaching his son at a unique moment when black sportswriters optimistically mused that a transformative golfer was poised to emerge from the community. Unlike in the past, this black player promised to benefit from the early start that whites had enjoyed. “Who knows, maybe you’ll discover a black Arnie Palmer or Babe Didrikson wandering about the streets of Watts,” Maggie Hathaway told black parents in Los Angeles in 1969. New York City’s Black Sports put it even more bluntly in 1973, right as Earl took up the game in Brooklyn and two years before Tiger’s birth: “Let’s hope someone will ‘get it going’ because there are thousands of young Blacks who could learn to play golf. Maybe one day very soon, one could win the Masters; one could be the equal or better of Jack Nicklaus. But unless a lot more is done to practically snatch little Black babies from the crib to put them on the greens—no one will ever know.” Earl certainly considered his son’s achievements in this vein, and he continued to do so until his death in 2006. “I wanted Tiger to have black friends,” he said. “I would have liked it if he had a black caddie. But hell, he’s a suburban kid.” (Woods did employ an African American caddie when he com-
peted in his first Masters as an amateur in 1995, but he never did so as a professional.)

Like his father, Tiger also at times publicly affirmed those who celebrated him as an African American whose accomplishments belonged in the historical narrative of black civil rights. Woods first met Charlie Sifford in 1991, shortly after the Shoal Creek protests, and when Sifford published his memoir the following year, a seventeen-year-old Woods offered a generous cover blurb: “The pain, suffering and sacrifice experienced by Mr. Sifford in being a lonely pioneer for black golfers on the PGA Tour will never be forgotten by me. His successes and personal conduct will provide a blueprint and inspiration for myself and other aspiring black tour players.” Woods later provided the foreword for Pete McDaniel’s 2000 book Uneven Lies: The Heroic Story of African-Americans in Golf, while both he and the Tiger Woods Foundation, established with his father in 1996, supported scholarships honoring black pioneers like Sifford and William Powell. Woods also visited courses that were historically important to black golfers, like Cedar Crest in Dallas, and gave speeches to minority junior golf organizations (though much to the chagrin of some, neither Woods nor President Barack Obama ever visited the most historic course: Washington’s Langston Golf Course).

Woods also made several overtures as public interest peaked at the 1997 Masters. When it became clear he was going to win by a wide margin, reporters and tournament organizers quickly contacted Lee Elder in Florida and flew him to Augusta for Woods’s final round that Sunday. At the press conference following his victory, Woods praised a tearful Elder and the other black players who came before him. “I was the first one to ever win, but I wasn’t the pioneer,” he said. “Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder, Ted Rhodes—those are the guys who paved the way for me. I was thinking about them last night and what they’ve done for me and the game of golf. Coming up 18, I said a little prayer of thanks to those guys.” Augusta National’s lone black member, Ron Townsend, embraced Earl Woods on the course and congratulated him on his son’s achievement. In subsequent years Tiger freely shared personal stories of encountering racism in his life, most notably a harrowing tale from childhood that he publicly retold on multiple occasions and that was published in basketball star Charles Barkley’s collection of conversations with prominent Americans, Who’s Afraid of a Large Black Man? According to Woods, on his first day of kindergarten in Anaheim, California, he was lashed to a tree by older students, spray-painted with racial slogans, and pelted with rocks. Woods
was accused of fabricating the incident (his former kindergarten teacher hired attorney Gloria Allred and demanded he retract the story, which he did not).79

Nevertheless, there were also early signs that Woods was unwilling to accept the simple, traditional notion that he was a black athlete confronting white supremacy in sports. “Golfer Tiger Woods Says He’s Not Black,” Jet bristled in April 1995 after Woods, then a freshman at Stanford, debuted at Augusta National. “[He] recently began correcting people who call him Black.”80 Woods also drew criticism when he declined to meet Jackie Robinson’s family and President Bill Clinton right after the 1997 Masters. As many reporters noted (especially in the black press), his victory came two days before the fiftieth anniversary of Robinson’s debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers and the integration of Major League Baseball in 1947. Like most American presidents, Clinton was a huge golf fan and telephoned Augusta that Sunday to congratulate Woods and invite him to fly with the president to New York for a commemoration event at Shea Stadium. Woods declined and instead appeared at the opening of two celebrity restaurants in Florida and South Carolina; then he traveled to Cancun, Mexico, for a vacation. “It would have been better to ask me before,” he said of Clinton’s invitation.81 The White House downplayed the decision—“the president certainly understands,” Clinton’s spokeswoman said—and Clinton had lofty words for Woods’s achievement: “Have your dreams and live for them,” he told the crowd. “Think about Tiger Woods.”82 (Ironically, the president was still on crutches after injuring himself in a fall at golfer Greg Norman’s house.) But the twenty-one-year-old Woods had seemed to snub both the U.S. president and Jackie Robinson, a significant moment that spoke to his uneasiness with the Robinson comparison and hinted that perhaps his politics were more in line with the conservative country club scene. One black sportswriter called out “sport’s new Wunderkind” for his lack of “common sense.”83 However, it was more than just the rash judgment of an overwhelmed young man. The following year Woods surprised a predominately black crowd in Atlanta (and the black press) when he criticized Clinton at an event honoring Alfred “Tup” Holmes. “The Tiger Woods Foundation is all about hope. We need to give kids hope,” he said. “Look at today’s society. We have crime, we have our president. Unfortunately, our role models are few and far between these days.”84

Most Americans first encountered Woods’s racial identity one week after the 1997 Masters, when he appeared on the popular Oprah Winfrey
Show and introduced a term no one had ever heard of. “Growing up, I came up with this name: I’m a ‘Cablinasian,’” he told Winfrey, who asked if it bothered him when people referred to him as African American. “It does,” he responded. Woods noted that the word, a blend of Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian, was his chosen racial identity. “I’m just who I am, whoever you see in front of you.” The remark immediately touched a nerve, with passionate reactions prompting a conversation about multi-racial identity more prolonged than any American pop culture had ever produced. Although most African Americans reacted negatively, many came to young Woods’s defense, including some older fans who had celebrated him as a Jackie Robinson–like figure but now affirmed his decision to spurn the labels of “black” or “African American.” Earl Woods spoke up for his son. “If you’re seven-eighths Irish and one-eighth Indian, you’re Irish,” he told Golf Magazine. “If you’re seven-eighths Irish and one-eighth black, you’re black. Why is that?” At age eighty-six, Maggie Hathaway not only lived long enough to see Woods win the 1997 Masters (she died in 2001) but also continued to support him in the black press. “The national press hounds him about his race, whether he is black or white,” she told the Los Angeles Sentinel. “He should say both.” Other black editors insisted the remark was not the sign of a young man “struggling with racial identity” but, rather, proved that Woods had “matured in his thinking about race” and was thus poised to represent the future struggle for civil rights better than anyone. “Tiger Woods represents the new race paradigm in our culture,” read one editorial in the Philadelphia Tribune. “Living proof that we must, at long last, begin to define the issue beyond Black and white.” One fan, calling himself “of total African American heritage,” wrote a letter to the Los Angeles Sentinel defending Woods from his black critics. “Tiger knows the struggle to be black in America. Let’s not cause him to be racially attacked from two fronts,” he warned. “Those blacker than thee, love to point fingers.”

Yet these supporters were a minority; future historians will likely be surprised that a public figure as late as 1997 faced such severe criticism for making a relatively simple assertion about his race. Woods was hit with a negative popular backlash that began immediately and continued for years. Comedians like Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle mocked the idea that he (or any other black person) could deny he was African American, while diverse black publications—from the Philadelphia Tribune to Reggae Roots International—criticized the assertion and insisted that Woods was “black, like it or not.” Even his close friend Charles Barkley
pressed him to embrace a more traditional identity: “I tell him that Thai people don’t get hate mail, black people do,” he said. (Indeed, Woods first received racist correspondence while at Stanford and continued to do so after he turned professional.) After Augusta National began renovating its course in 2002, Barkley led a vocal group of fans who accused the club of racism and “Tiger-proofing” the links to prevent Woods from winning more Masters.

Critics who pressured Woods to embrace a traditional black identity pointed to the traditional racism that remained in elite golf. After winning a PGA Tour event in 1994, white South African pro David Frost was asked if the rise of Nelson Mandela would lead to more black players in golf-crazed South Africa. “Blacks like the active sports,” he responded. “Golf’s too still for them.” (Seven years later Earl Woods would raise eyebrows when he compared his son to Mandela.) Although Jack Nicklaus financially supported Maggie Hathaway’s programs for minority golfers in Los Angeles and was long praised by Sifford, Elder, and other black players, he also responded to a question about race and golf in 1994 by insisting that “Blacks have different muscles that react in different ways.”

But the remarks that drew the most attention came shortly after the 1997 Masters, when white pro Fuzzy Zoeller joked to CNN about what Woods might serve at the following year’s Masters Champions Dinner: “He’s doing quite well, pretty impressive. That little boy is driving well and he’s putting well. He’s doing everything it takes to win. So, you know what you guys do when he gets in here? You pat him on the back and say congratulations and enjoy it and tell him not to serve fried chicken next year. Got it... Or collard greens or whatever the hell they serve.” Zoeller, unlike Gary Player, was also among the white players who responded apathetically to the Shoal Creek protests seven years before: “I think our job is to go down there and play golf,” he said in 1990. “I don’t have anything to do with politics.”

For many observers, “Cablinasian” was therefore not the thoughtful musings of a young man considering his own identity; it was a weak, immature, and even selfish response to classic white racism. “Let me respectfully point out to Mr. Woods that it wasn’t his Asian ancestry, his Indian roots or, Lord knows, his Caucasian-ness that drew Mr. Zoeller’s nasty humor,” wrote one black journalist. “Rather it was the fact of being black.” The Philadelphia Tribune dryly noted that Zoeller “did not include” Thai food in his comments, while black and white sportswriters chided Woods for making his own racially charged jokes, which Gentle-
men’s Quarterly printed in an unflattering feature just before he won the 1997 Masters.98 But arguably the most powerful rebuke came from Joseph Lowery, head of the SCLC. Seven years after the organization founded by Martin Luther King Jr. had fought to integrate Shoal Creek, Augusta National, and all other PGA Tour sites, Lowery dubbed Woods a “growing cub” and, once again, reminded the young golfer that Zoeller’s suggested menu “did not include chicken chow mein, just chicken.”99 Lowery and the SCLC continued to press for racial equality in golf and to celebrate Woods, but by 2000 they were resigned to the fact that he would not provide a prominent voice for any of the historic civil rights organizations.

Such criticism on the left continued to mount as Woods dominated golf into the new millennium, overshadowing the times he did indeed embrace the legacy of black civil rights. Lost in the reaction to “Cablinasian” was the rest of the 1997 Oprah Winfrey Show interview, which featured a heartfelt conversation with the daughter of Ted Rhodes and Woods insisting again that he had faced racism while growing up, alluding directly to the kindergarten story: “I got kicked off golf courses numerous times and was called some pretty tough names,” he said. “[I was] tied to a tree, had rocks thrown at me. I was bleeding when I came home. Pop said, ‘That’s the way it is; you’re in a neighborhood where you’re the only one.’”100

Uncertain about the relationship between Woods and racial equality in golf, fans soon got a clearer understanding of his position on a related issue after activists turned their attention to gender discrimination at America’s country clubs. In 2002 the National Council of Women’s Organizations, headed by political psychologist Martha Burk, launched a protest against Augusta National’s all-male membership. Burk was joined by several historic civil rights groups, including Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow PUSH Coalition and King’s oldest son, Martin Luther King III. Unlike the Shoal Creek controversy, this movement did not achieve an immediate response from Augusta National or the PGA, and, notably, it garnered far less popular support. Not until 2013 would Augusta National admit its first female members (former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and financier Darla Moore). Maryland’s Burning Tree Club, longtime choice of many golfing presidents, still has no female members and does not even allow female guests. Burning Tree has turned away women from Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor to female secret service agents. (During the 2012 presidential campaign, both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney called on the club to reverse its policy, while House Speaker John Boehner came under fire for joining.)101
Woods first stepped into the fray at the 2002 British Open, held at Scotland’s all-male Muirfield Links. Asked about the exclusion of women, he made it clear where he stood: private clubs that excluded females “were entitled to set up their own rules,” he said. Once again his critics responded forcefully. Black political scientist Ron Walters lamented that Woods, now racked with “cultural confusion,” had officially become “a terrible wasted resource” for African Americans and equality. As opposed to athletes like Charlie Sifford, Muhammad Ali, and Arthur Ashe (men “secure in their identity and connected with the legacy of civil rights,” wrote Walters), Woods had instead chosen to join the other preeminent black athlete of his day in taking a different course. “Rather, he appears, like Michael Jordan, to be cautious in doing anything that would interfere with the economics of his position,” Walters concluded. “The pressure of fan appeal, the endorsements for consumer products, the public appearances, the reception of his peers and the golf establishment, all challenge him to accept its culture.”

Woods indeed seemed to follow Jordan’s model of presenting a public image that was relatively conservative, apolitical, and silent on the issue of race. The two met shortly after the 1997 Masters, and Jordan brought Woods into his inner circle of friends, which included Charles Barkley. And both men shared a common source for much of their income: Nike, Inc. Jordan’s landmark 1984 endorsement deal with the company netted him more money than any athlete in history (by one estimate it continues to earn him $100 million per year). “[Tiger] looked to pattern himself after Michael,” said a former Nike executive in 2001, “and the way Michael so carefully stays in that gray area—that in-between area where everything is neutral.” Woods signed a $40 million, five-year deal when he turned pro in 1996, far more lucrative than any golfer had ever received. In 2001 he renewed for more than $100 million, and estimates place his subsequent 2006 and 2013 Nike contracts in similar realms.

Nike made both Jordan and Woods the richest athletes in history, but there was one important difference: it joined the diverse chorus of civil rights groups and fans who insisted that Woods was black. The company launched a furious advertising push soon after he signed in 1996. The most memorable national television spot from the campaign is still considered a landmark advertisement in the industry. It featured diverse children from around the world repeating the simple phrase “I’m Tiger Woods.” Often mistaken as Nike’s debut ad with Woods, “I’m Tiger Woods” was actually the second of three national spots the company pro-
duced surrounding the 1997 Masters. More notable was the first, which clearly referenced Woods as African American and celebrated him as golf’s Jackie Robinson. It ran on ESPN while Woods made his professional PGA Tour debut at the Greater Milwaukee Open in September 1996 and again throughout that weekend’s NFL games on Fox and ABC’s Monday Night Football. Set over images of Woods winning his U.S. Amateur titles, the ad featured him delivering a short monologue: “There are still courses in the U.S. I am not allowed to play because of the color of my skin. Hello world. I’ve heard I’m not ready for you. Are you ready for me?” Critics assailed both Woods and Nike over the ad’s bold assertion that Woods faced the same kind of historical discrimination as African Americans before him. One Washington Post columnist demanded that Nike provide a list of courses where Woods was not allowed to play because he was black, dubbing the campaign “discordant, dishonest and even vile.” Jim Thorpe, the only other African American on tour in 1996, also expressed dismay at the lines (which he assumed Nike had “come up with”): “I personally don’t think Tiger’s ever been turned away from a golf course because of the color of his skin.” Calvin Peete and Jim Dent both agreed: “I really don’t think Tiger knows what race is all about,” Dent said.

Woods promptly defended both the ad and his relationship with Nike, insisting he had personally approved the entire project. Earl Woods undoubtedly influenced the affair as well, though it was difficult to know to what extent. Earlier that year he had hired attorney John Merchant to serve as Tiger’s lawyer and work with sponsors. Four years before, Merchant had become the first African American to serve on the USGA’s Executive Committee, and he also served briefly as head of the Tiger Woods Foundation. But Merchant was fired in December, three months after the ad debuted; Tiger said the decision was his, while Merchant insisted he was dismissed by Earl. Regardless, the controversy surrounding race and Nike’s relationship with Tiger likely played a role in the shake-up. According to one report, Merchant was under the impression that $1 million of the $40 million from the Nike deal would go to support junior golf, specifically the National Minority Golf Foundation that Merchant helped establish. Earl intervened and asked that he be given the money directly so he could personally decide what was distributed to junior or minority golf. Merchant also claimed later that he forcefully warned Tiger to avoid Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley. “I told him, ‘Stay away from that son of a bitch [Jordan],’” he told Vanity Fair in 2010, “because he doesn’t have anything to offer to the fucking world in which he lives except play-
ing basketball, which he did yesterday. . . . Are they his black role models? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Nike pressed on unperturbed while Tiger’s inner circle clashed. Rather than shy away, the company continued to explore race during the next two years of the campaign. While “I’m Tiger Woods” made no direct allusion to black civil rights, a third television spot—the July 1997 commercial featuring Woods, Lee Elder, and Charlie Sifford—delivered a less confrontational message but one still firmly linking Woods (and his race) to the historic movement. Unlike any of its Michael Jordan campaigns, Nike’s presentation of Woods thus invoked overtly political advertisements (albeit mild) and a corporate campaign that branded his racial identity. The result was the systematic removal of Woods’s Asian heritage (and his Thai-Chinese mother, Kultida) from his public image, the very thing the golfer himself said he feared when he introduced “Cablinasian” and asked the media to recognize his multiracial heritage. Nike put Woods and his saga on the minds of people around the world, but it was an incomplete story. Few fans heard, for example, that Kultida (“Tida”) spoke Thai to him until he developed a stuttering problem in first grade, spent her own countless hours supporting his golf dreams, or handmade the iconic tiger head cover—with “Love from Mom” stitched in Thai—that they noticed in his bag. Few even knew what Tida looked like, even as images of Tiger and Earl flourished in the global media, starting with their embrace at the 1997 Masters (which she attended as well). Today Tiger is the most identifiable athlete in the world, but most fans would still struggle to recognize an image of his mother. In the words of Asian American studies scholar Leilani Nishimi, the Nike campaign helped him become an “undercover Asian.”

While Nike worked with Woods to limit the influence of “Cablinasian” on his endorsements and golf career, his call for multiracialism did help produce at least one major change. During the 1997 Oprah Winfrey appearance, Woods also discussed the uneasiness he felt as a child when forced to complete forms demanding he check one box that best described his race. “So I checked off African American and Asian,” he said with some defiance. “Those are the two I was raised under and the only two I know.” In this vein the discussion of “Cablinasian” and racial classification could not have been timelier. One day before, the U.S. Congress had held a hearing to explore the federal government’s measurement of race and ethnicity, featuring testimony from representatives of the Census Bureau and the Congressional Black Caucus. Soon Wisconsin Repub-
lican Tom Petri introduced H.R. 830, which sought to add a “multiracial” category on the U.S. Census. Petri called it the “Tiger Woods Bill,” and many conservatives joined him in championing the cause. “Tiger Woods is not alone in wanting the racial background of both his parents and all his relatives reflected in how people describe him,” said a representative from the right-wing American Enterprise Institute. Meanwhile, the Congressional Black Caucus and most black organizations (including the NAACP and the SCLC) initially opposed the move, once again criticizing Woods for playing into the hands of conservative politics. “Individuals like Mr. Woods who designate themselves as multiracial on the census form will not reduce by any amount the discrimination they will face,” announced black congresswoman Carrie Meek (D-Fla.). Joseph Lowery, head of the SCLC, reacted even stronger: “Tiger’s self-entitlement sends . . . a helpful message in the controversy surrounding the proposal to add a mixed or ‘multiracial’ category in the U.S. census,” he warned. “The census is not a social register.”

Although the “Tiger Woods Bill” failed to pass the House, by the end of 1997 proponents were starting to win over the naysayers. Black organizations began to support the change, calmed by Census Bureau reports predicting it would not lower the government’s official count of “black Americans” and, in fact, had the potential to increase it. While the idea of a “multiracial” category was ultimately rejected, starting with the 2000 Census Americans were allowed to select multiple racial categories for the first time in history. Woods was the major pop culture figure in this debate, and he helped spark what many now recognize as a dramatic change in popular attitudes on multiracialism and identity. “Cablinasian,” the idea of a young man crafting his own race, is not nearly as controversial as it was twenty years ago. “If Tiger Woods said that today, I don’t think he would get the same flak,” sociologist Ann Morning, who specializes in racial classification, said in 2013. “There has been a sea change in American thinking. . . . We’re no longer looking at Barack Obama or Mariah Carey and automatically saying: ‘Those are black people.’”

In fact, without Tiger Woods the world might not have discovered that President Obama decided to mark just one box on his 2010 census form. (“It is official: Barack Obama is the nation’s first black president,” proclaimed the New York Times.) In typical fashion, Woods has since talked little about the issue and never indicated how (or if) he responds to the census. Few have even bothered to ask, another testament to how quickly attitudes changed regarding the concept of race as personal (and even
private) preference. “I think he feels like, you know, it’s a cross of so many things,” Woods’s agent responded when asked about the new census in 2002. “He wouldn’t say, ‘This is how I feel.’ Or, ‘This is what my single heritage is.’ I think Tiger feels like it’s a wide array, a wide grouping.” According to those comments, Woods likely joined the 1 million other California residents (and 2.4 percent of Americans nationally) who marked more than one box in 2000. Perhaps this, and not a stroll with Elder and Sifford down Nike’s immaculate fairways, will be his ultimate legacy.