

Golf Historical Society

Charlie Sifford

by John Jones - 2011 SCGA Hall of Fame program



Charlie Sifford at the 1964 Montebello Open

Charles Sifford's love for the game began as a caddie at the Carolina Country Club when he was 10 years old. With limited prospects for young black men in Charlotte in the 1930s, he moved north to Pittsburgh in 1939. There, Charlie discovered Cobb's Creek Golf Club and black golfing legend Howard Wheeler, who introduced him to the United Golf Association tour and the world of playing golf for a living. Wheeler had previously been a caddie for Bobby Jones, and was a multiple UGA National Negro Open winner.

In 1943, Sifford was drafted into the Army and sent to Okinawa with the 79th Signal Heavy Construction team. After the war, and back in Philadelphia in 1946, Charlie met Teddy Rhodes, who introduced him to World Heavy-weight Champion Joe Louis, which led to a job with singer and bandleader Billy Eckstine as his personal golf pro. For the next 10 years, Sifford toured with Eckstine, traveling the country and playing golf on the UGA tour with Rhodes. At the time, African-Americans were blocked by the Professional Golf Association's "Caucasian Clause" of 1943, barring non-whites from playing in PGA events.

In 1957, after 10 years with Eckstine and with five UGA National Negro Open titles of his own, Sifford moved to Los Angeles and shortly after, at 35 years of age, finally won his first big Southern California PGA tournament, the 1957 Long Beach Open, winning in a playoff against Eric Monti. The winnings from that event gave Charlie enough money to put a down payment on a home in Los Angeles for his wife, Rose, and son, Charles, Jr.

When baseball great Jackie Robinson wrote an editorial in the New York Post questioning why Sifford was not invited to play in the Crosby at Pebble Beach or the Desert Classic in Palm Springs, Eckstine invited Charlie to play at Hillcrest Country Club in Los Angeles with the Attorney General of California, Stanley Mosk. When they told Mosk about the Caucasian Clause in the PGA's constitution, Mosk wrote to the PGA and demanded they remove the clause or not hold any more golf tournaments in California.

Within months the PGA gave Charlie an approved tournament player card for 1960, when he

officially joined the tour as its first black golfer. By November 1961, the PGA removed their Caucasian Clause and the door finally opened for non-white golfers to play on the tour. Of course it was never easy for Sifford, as he faced continued racism throughout his career on the PGA tour, though hardly ever from other golfers.

By 1964, Sifford became the first official African-American member of the PGA tour and the first African-American winner on the tour when he won the Greater Hartford Open in 1967 and the prestigious Los Angeles Open in 1969. Sifford also won the PGA Senior Championship in 1975. The significance of Sifford's achievements has not been lost. In 2004, he was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame, just the 104th athlete and first African-American to receive the honor. He was awarded an honorary degree from the University of St. Andrews in 2006 and the Old Tom Morris Award by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America in 2007. Then, in early 2009, came the creation of the Charlie Sifford Exemption, which allows for the invitation of a player to the Northern Trust Open (formerly the Los Angeles Open) who represents the advancement of golf's diversity.

Charlie Sifford Honors:

21 Professional Wins

Six UGA National Negro Titles

First African American inducted into the WGHF (2004)

Senior PGA Champion (1975)

Los Angeles Open Champion (1969)

Greater Hartford Open Champion (1967)

Gardena Valley Open Champion (1959, 1964, 1966)

Long Beach Open Champion (1957)



Charlie Sifford with 1969 LA Open Winner's check



Charlie Sifford and John Jones at 2011 SCGA Hall of Fame

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