Trailblazing: A Historical Overview of the Advocacy Work of Four Legendary Black Golf Professionals

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Abstract
African-American trailblazers are crucial in the game of golf as unlike some of the other mainstream sports, such as football, baseball, and basketball, the sport of golf has been historically entrenched in patriarchy and white privilege. The article analyzes the pioneering efforts and trailblazing endeavors of four legendary black golfers in this regard—Ted Rhodes, Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder, and Tiger Woods. Each of these black trailblazers has taken varied approaches in fighting for racial inclusivity in golf, from more implicit and non-confrontational tactics to more radical and militant ones. The article focuses on the racial discrimination experienced by each trailblazer, the strategies each took to fight injustice and racial inequality and advocate for equal participation in golf, and their successes and failures of breaking down barriers for future black players. Consideration in the article is also given to the phenomenon of trailblazing and how golf needs African-American trailblazers such as Tiger Woods to transition the exclusive sport to a game that is more easily accessible by all races and genders.

Keywords
Tiger Woods, Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder, Ted Rhodes, Trailblazing, racism in golf

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Introduction

On April 13, 1997, legendary black golfer Tiger Woods won his first major championship at the renowned Masters Tournament. It was an inspiring and historically significant moment, not only in the fact that the 21-year-old Woods won by a record-breaking 12 shots, but mainly that he was the first black golfer in history to have recorded a victory in one of professional golf’s major championships. Many black professionals had tried valiantly before Woods to win a major championship but to no avail such as Lee Elder, Calvin Peete, and Jim Thorpe. During his post-round speech following his victory at the Masters, Woods took time to pay tribute to three legendary African-American golfers who he felt had paved the way for black golfers such as himself, including Ted Rhodes, Charlie Sifford, and Lee Elder (Dawkins, 2004). While each of these three black golfers has been credited in the media and sports literature for helping to pave the way for future black golfers, very little is known of what these black golfers did specifically to advocate for racial inclusivity in golf and pave the way for a fellow black golfer and superstar like Woods. While Woods has been criticized by some for failing to promote racial inclusivity in the game and become the torchbearer for multiracial golfers in his own right (Barbie, 2012; Cashmore, 2008; Grover, 2016; Sanders, 2002), there have been many instances in which Woods has been an ambassador for racial inclusivity, and much like Rhodes, Sifford, and Elder, has made great strides in paving the way for future golfers of racialized backgrounds.

This article explores the trailblazing endeavors of four legendary black golf professionals—Ted Rhodes, Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder, and Tiger Woods. Consideration is given to the upbringing and early careers of all four men, their trials and tribulations while playing professional golf, their experiences with racial discrimination, and their advocacy work in promoting racial inclusivity in a sport that has been primarily played by the white privileged elite. Consideration is given to the varied approaches that each black golfer took to advocate for racial inclusivity in golf—from the more implicit and non-confrontational approach used by Rhodes to the more militant and radical tactics employed by Sifford. Elder took a more hardened approach to racial discrimination than Rhodes but was not as radical or militant in his style as Sifford. While Woods has been criticized for his laissez-faire approach to racial inclusivity (Barbie, 2012; Cashmore, 2008; Grover, 2016; Sanders, 2002), an argument can be made that Woods, much like Rhodes, has taken a more implicit and non-confrontational means in speaking out against racial discrimination and advocating for more inclusion in the game of golf. Consideration in this article is also given to the phenomenon of trailblazing,
including an overview of the term in sports contexts, what it takes to be labeled as a trailblazer, and the vital importance of trailblazing endeavors in terms of transitioning golf from a game historically entrenched in patriarchy and exclusivity to one that is more inclusionary and accessible to all races and genders.

**Trailblazing**

A trailblazer can be defined as a person who blazes a trail to guide others and is also akin to a pioneer or someone who is a leader in a particular field. Typically, a trailblazer does something that nobody else has done previously such as a black golfer who wins a major championship for the first time and shows to others (i.e., fellow black golfers) that it is possible to accomplish a certain feat. There is very little literature in academia on the existence of the term “trailblazer,” but some individuals have been referred to as a trailblazer because of one historical endeavor or another (Ballard et al., 2003; Canale, 2000; Toulon, 2020). In the context of sports, Jackie Robinson has been referred to as a trailblazer for being the first black man to have integrated professional baseball in 1947 (Canale, 2000). Female black golfer, Althea Gibson, has also been credited for being a trailblazer as she was the first amongst black women to have competed on the LPGA Tour in 1964 (Ballard et al., 2003). More recently, in 2016, black football player, Colin Kaepernick, has been deemed a trailblazer for standing up against racial inequality and police brutality by taking a knee during the American national anthem before the start of National Football League games (Toulon, 2020). The four black golfers that will be introduced in this article—Ted Rhodes, Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder, and Tiger Woods—have also been labeled as trailblazers because of their efforts in advocating for more racial inclusion in golf and for accomplishing feats that no black golfers had accomplished previously.

Trailblazers like Tiger Woods are essential in golf today to transition the game from one historically entrenched in patriarchy and privilege to one that is more inclusionary and more easily accessible by racialized individuals, women, and youth. African-American golfers, in particular, still face many obstacles in gaining notoriety and playing the game at the highest level. Several of them struggle with a lack of finances and resources to compete at the professional level which contributes to mental stress (Rosselli & Singer, 2017). A lack of access to quality training facilities and championship-caliber golf courses in which to hone their games also prevent many aspiring black golfers from transitioning successfully from the amateur to the professional level (Rosselli & Singer, 2017). Without access to top-notch training facilities and golf courses, black golfers likely have difficulty improving their
games to compete against non-racialized golfers who have been fortunate enough to have access to such facilities. Ted Rhodes, Charlie Sifford, and Lee Elder struggled with acquiring the necessary financial resources and accessing championship-caliber golf courses during their early careers several decades ago, so, surprisingly, these obstacles have not yet been removed for black golfers.

Black golfers today are also challenged with playing the game at the highest level because many lack the insider knowledge and professional networks that aspiring white golfers possess (Rosselli & Singer, 2017). While an aspiring black and white collegiate golfer may possess similar skills, a white golfer likely has more contacts with sponsors and coaches and access to superior collegiate golf programming than a black golfer possesses. Even though an aspiring black golfer may be highly skilled, many are seen as illegitimate, meaning that potential sponsors and collegiate coaches do not believe they possess the necessary skills to play successfully at the collegiate level; and consequently, sponsors and coaches are less likely to provide them with financial sponsorship and playing spots in top-notch collegiate golf programs (Rosselli & Singer, 2017). Many black collegiate players are likely to be cast aside by potential sponsors and collegiate golf programs because golf is highly entrenched in white privilege. In other words, white golfers are typically seen as being capable of professional success with black golfers relegated to more servile positions such as caddies. Even though Tiger Woods has helped pave the way for black youth to become professional golfers, much more is needed to be done at the junior and amateur levels so aspiring black players can attain the resources necessary to play competitive golf on an equal playing field to their white counterparts.

Despite having a history firmly entrenched in racial exclusivity, the Augusta National Golf Club has become a leader in promoting more inclusion in the game and providing aspiring black golfers with the financial means and opportunity to play the game at the highest level. The anointing of Lee Elder as an honorary starter at the 85th Masters in 2021 demonstrated the club’s commitment to inclusivity and ended the tradition of anointing former major championship winners who came from non-racialized backgrounds as honorary starters (Feinstein, 2020). Augusta’s commitment to racial inclusion and access can also be seen in the club’s role in hosting more tournaments for women and youth, including hosting the Augusta National Women’s Amateur and the Drive, Chip, and Putt National finals—a junior golf competition for boys and girls aged 7 to 15. In 2020, Augusta also announced that it would be funding scholarships for aspiring black golfers at Paine College and funding a new women’s golf team (The Masters Press Conference, 2020). These endeavors are vital in transitioning Augusta’s image of a club firmly
entrenched in racial and gender exclusivity to one that is more inclusionary and accepting. These endeavors are also vital in promoting and growing the game for racialized individuals, women, and youth and allotting them opportunities to access the game that have been historically inaccessible.

**Methods**

To derive themes for the article, the numerous accomplishments, tactics, and personalities of each golfer were explored. Upon initial review, Ted Rhodes is not an obvious trailblazer given his lack of PGA credentials but is still very deserving of trailblazer status given the fame that he found on the United Golfers Association (UGA) and the fact that he attempted to play alongside whites and challenge the discriminatory regulations put forth by the PGA of America (Demas, 2017; Sinnette, 1998). His reserved demeanor should not be confused as being passive to racial inequality; rather, he can be categorized as a calm and courageous trailblazer who joined legal lawsuits against discriminatory PGA regulations and pushed fellow black golfers forward in their pursuits as a coach and mentor when he could no longer compete. In contrast, Charlie Sifford’s tactics can be categorized as more militant and radical than Rhodes and the other black trailblazers. As the article will indicate, Sifford rarely backed down from fighting for racial equality in golf and even took on the powerful Augusta National Golf Club and its qualifying criteria for the Masters Tournament when no black golfer had done so before. While Sifford’s tactics and his outspoken nature bore him many enemies, he was the golfer who perhaps pushed the needle the farthest in advancing the game for black golfers.

The research indicates that Lee Elder can be categorized as a resilient and determined trailblazer. Elder has denounced racial exclusivity throughout his career, and his foundation’s outreach has provided educational programming and opportunities to black youth (Whigham, 1990). During his career, Elder has been more outspoken of racial discrimination than Tiger Woods, but this could be because Elder has endured more explicit discrimination than Woods who was brought up in an era when blacks were provided PGA Tour membership and had much easier access to professional tournaments. Woods himself can be categorized as a steadfast and restrained trailblazer. Woods did not have to endure the amount of racial abuse and hatred that earlier black golfers had to endure, but as the article will indicate, he has not been immune to racial discrimination either (Straubel & Barbie, 2012). While he has received much criticism for not being as outspoken about exclusivity as his critics have expected (Barbie, 2012; Cashmore, 2008; Grover, 2016; Sanders, 2002), Woods has seemingly let the philanthropic endeavors of his foundation speak
Several important sources were accessed in researching the pioneering endeavors of the four African-American golf trailblazers. Some of the secondary sources that proved invaluable were George Kirsch’s *Golf in America*, Pete McDaniel’s *Uneven Lies*, Calvin Sinnette’s *Forbidden Fairways*, and Lance Demas’s *Game of Privilege*. Each of these sources provided valuable insights into the careers and trailblazing endeavors of all four black golfers. Lance Demas, in particular, has researched the topic of African-American golfers in sports history extensively, and his work on privilege in sport has earned him numerous awards. Marvin Dawkins has also written extensively on the subject of equity within sports, and his work, which was referenced in the article, offered important insights into race relations in golf and the historical struggle and legacy of African-American golfers.

To access primary sources on the topic of African-American golf trailblazers, the author conducted extensive online searches for works published during each golfer’s respective career and personal autobiographies and reflective interviews with the golfers after their careers ended. Charlie Sifford’s personally authored book with Jim Gullo, *Just Let Me Play*, was referenced throughout the article and proved to be an invaluable primary source. While one must be wary of the possible bias in Sifford’s book, his accounts are largely corroborated by numerous scholars, including the above-mentioned golf historians. Guy Yocom’s *Golf Digest* interview with Lee Elder in 2019 was an insightful and telling exchange as Elder discussed his difficult upbringing, the racial discrimination he faced while playing on the PGA Tour, and his feelings toward the Augusta National Golf Club. Equally informative was Oprah Winfrey’s interview with Tiger Woods in 1997 shortly after he won the Masters Tournament. During the interview, Woods, who usually displays a reserved demeanor, revealed his thoughts on race, racism, and the discrimination that he has had to endure. On a final note, Teresa Walker’s 1997 interview in *The Seattle Times* with Ted Rhodes’s daughter, Peggy White, was enlightening as she offered first-hand knowledge of her father’s mild-mannered personality and trailblazing endeavors.

**Ted Rhodes: The Calm and Courageous Trailblazer**

Despite growing up in relative poverty in Nashville, Tennessee, Ted Rhodes persevered to become one of the best black golfers of all time. Like many black players of his generation such as Bill Spiller and Howard Wheeler,
Rhodes began the game as a caddy, practiced honing his skills, and despite being prohibited from playing competitively on the PGA, became a fixture on the UGA (Glenn, 2007). Rhodes was disallowed membership on the PGA because of the association’s Caucasian clause—a discriminatory and economically hindering regulation inserted into the PGA’s formal constitution in 1943 that prohibited black golfers from accessing professional membership (Kirsch, 2009). The number of times that Rhodes was permitted to play against white golfers was few and far between. When Rhodes was permitted entry to professional tournaments, it was typically events that were not sanctioned by the PGA, such as the U.S. Open and the Canadian Open (Demas, 2017; Gullo, 1993). Rhodes was past his prime when the Caucasian clause was rescinded in 1961, so the discriminatory regulation had detrimental effects on Rhodes’s ability to participate and potentially succeed on the PGA (Dawkins, 2004; Kirsch, 2009). While the record books may indicate that Byron Nelson, Sam Snead, Ben Hogan, and Jimmy Demaret were the most successful golfers during the 1940s and 1950s, Rhodes and other top black golfers may have been included on that list if permitted to compete.

Ted Rhodes was well-known among black golf enthusiasts but perhaps was not as well-known by the mainstream media until Tiger Woods acknowledged his contributions to the game in his victory speech at the 1997 Masters (Walker, 1997; Wynn, 1998). Woods said, “I wasn’t the pioneer. Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder, and Ted Rhodes played that role. I said a little prayer and said thanks to those guys. You are the ones who did it for me” (as cited in Carter, 2005, para. 4). Sifford won twice on the PGA Tour, and Elder recorded four tour wins and is widely known as the first black golfer to have integrated the Masters, but Rhodes’s contributions were not as apparent, which makes the acknowledgment by Woods a bit surprising. Many are unaware that Rhodes was denied access to golf courses while growing up in Nashville during the early 1920s and instead learned the game in a public park using discarded clubs, a tree branch as a flagstick, and a makeshift green (Demas, 2017; Kirsch, 2009; Sinnette, 1998). Municipal golf courses in Nashville were often off-limits to black golfers like Rhodes at the time, and black-only golf courses were not yet established in the city (Demas, 2017). When Rhodes came into his prime, golf courses and tournaments were still difficult to access for African-Americans. In 1939, for example, a reported 20 golf courses in the United States were available for blacks to play while over 5,000 courses were available for white golfers (Glenn, 2007). This discrepancy made it undoubtedly challenging for black golfers like Rhodes to gain access and play the game.

Unlike Charlie Sifford who was more militant and radical in advocating for inclusion in the game, Ted Rhodes was more of a calm and courageous
trailblazer. Perhaps this had much to do with his personality which has been described as non-confrontational and non-temperamental (McDaniel, 2000b; Sinnette, 1998). In his personally authored book, “Just Let me Play,” Charlie Sifford remembered Rhodes as too gentlemanly and too kind to fight against racial discrimination and advocate for his constitutional rights (Sifford & Gullo, 1992). While Rhodes was never all that outspoken about racial injustices in professional golf, he did not remain tight-lipped nor give in to racial discrimination either as some have suggested. Following a top-60 finish at the 1948 Los Angeles Open, Rhodes and fellow black players Bill Spiller and Madison Gunther rightfully qualified for the tour’s succeeding event—the Richmond Open, in Richmond, California (Demas, 2017). Despite legitimately qualifying for the Richmond event on their merit, tour officials informed the black trio that they would be evoking the Caucasian clause and barring their participation in the tournament. Instead of accepting that decision, Rhodes and the other black players consulted with Jonathan Rowell, a California-based attorney, and proceeded to launch a $315,000 lawsuit against the tour and the Richmond club for barring their participation (Demas, 2017; Sinnette, 1998). The lawsuit demonstrated that despite his non-temperamental personality, Rhodes was capable of advocating for equality and fighting against discriminatory policies in golf.

The Richmond lawsuit had both positive and detrimental consequences for Ted Rhodes and his fellow black players. Many PGA events that were previously “open” golf tournaments altered their entrant status to become “invitations,” meaning that all golfers would be invited to a tournament instead of a tournament being open to any golfer who rightfully qualified (Demas, 2017; Sinnette, 1998). This policy was made to prevent black players like Rhodes from legitimately accessing tour events and seemed to be in retaliation to the Richmond lawsuit. It was also a ploy by the PGA to essentially distance itself from enforcing the discriminatory Caucasian clause and gave power to the host golf clubs and sponsors to invite black golfers at their discretion—which they were unwilling (Sinnette, 1998). The benefit of the lawsuit that Rhodes helped file was that it brought more awareness to the discriminatory injustices in professional golf. California essentially became a battleground following the Richmond lawsuit and transitioned the focus on segregated golf from the Deep South to the more liberal state of California (Demas, 2017). This allowed increased scrutiny to be placed on key California golf tournaments that were disallowing black golfers from participation, such as the Bing Crosby Pro-Am and the San Diego Open (Demas, 2017; Kirsch, 2009; McDaniel, 2000b; Sinnette, 1998). The increased scrutiny also demonstrated that golf was the last of the major sports that were still segregated and brought into question why blacks were prohibited from PGA membership
when they had already been integrated into professional basketball, baseball, and football (Demas, 2017).

While Ted Rhodes was prohibited from playing on the PGA during the prime of his career, he gained notoriety for coaching and mentoring black golfers so they could succeed on the main tour when finally allotted the opportunity in 1961. Rhodes developed close relationships with many black professionals, including Charlie Sifford, Jim Dent, and Althea Gibson, who became the first black woman to compete on the LPGA Tour in 1964 (Demas, 2017; Wynn, 1998). Perhaps the biggest influence that Rhodes had on a black golfer’s career was that of Lee Elder. Elder was first introduced to Rhodes by boxing legend Joe Louis, who frequently played golf with Rhodes and employed him as his golf instructor and chauffeur (Demas, 2017; Glenn, 2007; Sinnette, 1998). Rhodes took Elder under his wing and traveled with him on tour (Rosenberg, 2021). Rhodes never coaxed Elder to aggressively speak out against the racism that he endured; instead, he advised Elder to ignore racial remarks, proposing, “Don’t dwell on whatever is going wrong. Double bogey? Forget it. Missed cut? Forget it. Racial slur from a stranger calling your hotel room? Forget it” (as cited in Rosenberg, 2021, para. 19). Rhodes was not outward in his approach to fighting racial discrimination but believed it was best to employ non-confrontational tactics in advocating for racial inclusivity in golf.

An argument can be made that Ted Rhodes’s approach was similar to the strategy employed by Tiger Woods’s father—Earl Woods—when raising and nurturing his son. Like Rhodes, Earl had faced much racial discrimination in his life and knew that his son Tiger would face the same (Murray, 2017). Instead of teaching his son to tackle racism head-on, Earl taught Tiger to ignore racial remarks and focus solely on his golf game—a similar strategy that Rhodes had shared with Lee Elder. Earl believed that getting upset about a racial remark would be akin to letting the remarks get the best of oneself and believed that Tiger needed to be mentally strong to be a championship golfer (McDaniel & Woods, 1997; Murray, 2017). Earl resorted to tactics such as dropping clubs and imitating bird noises during Tiger’s swing and even hurled profanities at his son and called him a little nigger to get a reaction (McDaniel & Woods, 1997; Murray, 2017). While these tactics may seem controversial, Earl forced Tiger to ignore the distractions and racial abuse. Many might argue the strategy that Earl and Rhodes took was akin to ignoring the racism that they endured, but in actuality, it was an implicit tactic that allowed one to be mentally strong and courageous and not let racism detract from one’s golf game and purpose. One could argue this was an advantageous approach as seen in the success that Elder found on the main tour once eligible and the celebrated and historic career of Woods.
Charlie Sifford: The Outspoken and Militant Trailblazer

Charlie Sifford was perhaps one of the more radical and outspoken black golfers who advocated for racial inclusivity and the right to play professional golf without racial impediments. Born in 1922 in Charlotte, North Carolina, Sifford like many other black players learned the game by caddying and had to endure much racial discrimination before finally being allotted PGA membership in 1961 (Sifford & Gullo, 1992). Before the early 1960s, Sifford was only permitted to play in a handful of PGA events and had to play the majority of his season in minor league events and tournaments designated specifically for black golf professionals, including events hosted by the UGA (Johnson, 1969). When the discriminatory Caucasian clause was finally rescinded in 1961, Sifford became the PGA’s first full-fledged African-American member—an important pioneering feat for black golfers.

As a result of this trailblazing endeavor, some have compared Charlie Sifford to fellow black athlete Jackie Robinson—the man who integrated professional baseball in 1947 (Sifford & Gullo, 1992). The comparison is understandable given that both black men had been the first to attain membership in their respective sports; however, the comparison between Sifford and Robinson is highly inaccurate. Robinson had a large contingent of supporters while attempting to integrate professional baseball including his Brooklyn Dodgers’ teammates and the team’s General Manager, Branch Rickey. Robinson was also a huge fan favorite and was highly popular amongst black youth. Sifford, on the other hand, battled the discriminatory PGA and its tournament sponsors with very little support in the 1960s, and he did not have the fanfare and support that Robinson was fortunate to possess while attempting to integrate baseball. Sifford even adamantly rejected the comparison to Robinson arguing that it was inaccurate to suggest that “the doors to blacks have been opened as effectively in golf as they have in major league baseball” (as cited in Sifford & Gullo, 1992, p. 108). While Sifford may have underestimated the importance of his trailblazing accomplishments by refusing to be compared to the likes of Robinson, it is unfeasible to compare the trailblazing endeavors of both men, given the elevated level and persistence of discrimination in golf compared to baseball.

Unlike his predecessor, Ted Rhodes, who employed more of a non-confrontational approach in advocating for racial inclusivity in golf, Charlie Sifford used more radical and militant tactics to advocate for black participation in the game. He partnered with Stanley Mosk, the California Attorney General in 1959 to lobby the PGA to drop its discriminatory Caucasian clause and was eventually granted temporary membership because of the pressure
Mosk placed on the PGA, including threatening to bar the association from holding professional golf tournaments in the state of California (Dawkins, 2004; Sifford & Gullo, 1992). Sifford also threatened PGA tournaments with lawsuits that prohibited him from playing throughout his career, including events held in Houston and New Orleans (Sifford & Gullo, 1992). Sifford continued to face restrictions that disallowed him from playing when he began competing on the Senior PGA Tour in the 1980s. Instead of accepting these restrictions, Sifford launched lawsuits against tournaments such as the Vintage Tournament and the Legends of Golf for employing questionable qualifying regulations that prohibited Sifford from playing despite the fact the black golfer was among the top 20 all-time money winners playing on the Senior PGA Tour and had finished in the top 20 on the tour’s money list from the previous season (Sifford & Gullo, 1992). These lawsuits demonstrated that Sifford actively confronted the discrimination that he endured, and unlike Rhodes, was more forceful in advocating for black participation in golf.

What seemed to differentiate Charlie Sifford from other black golfers of his generation was his sheer determination to play golf despite the numerous discriminatory regulations imposed on black golfers throughout the 1960s. While Ted Rhodes was never outward in his approach in battling racial discrimination and Lee Elder refrained from launching lawsuits against discriminatory tournaments and sponsors, Sifford rarely backed down. Sifford’s outward approach to fighting racism in golf had both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage was that Sifford’s fight against the PGA and its discriminatory membership clause and tournament policies attracted much media attention (Sifford & Gullo, 1992). Black newspapers such as the *New York Amsterdam Post* and celebratory black columnists like Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis who retained large followings wrote columns in support of Sifford and criticized discriminatory policies implemented by the PGA (Dawkins & Farrell, 2008; McCaffrey, 2020; Robinson, 1963). The disadvantage of Sifford’s approach was that his aggressive style seemed to irk many tournament sponsors who refrained from inviting the black golfer to their events. This resulted in Sifford often having to threaten legal action to participate in tournaments that he was rightfully qualified for but not necessarily welcome to attend (Sifford & Gullo, 1992).

Charlie Sifford’s radical tactics and his threats of legal recourse, unsurprisingly, had little effect on the golf tournament that he perhaps desired to play in the most—the Masters Tournament at the Augusta National Golf Club. Sifford’s tournament victories and the fact that he persevered under the most trying of racial circumstances should likely have resulted in an invitation to the world’s most prestigious tournament. But the truth was Sifford never received an invitation to play in the Masters at Augusta throughout his
distinguished career (Hauser & Purkey, 2005). Augusta officials failed to invite Sifford to their tournament even though he possessed the credentials required to receive an invitation in the eyes of many critics (Geltner, 2012; Reed, 1991; Robinson, 1963). Sifford played consistently well on the PGA Tour during the 1960s and recorded tournament victories in Puerto Rico in 1964, Hartford in 1967, and Los Angeles in 1969 and finished in the top 60 on the tour’s money list for 14 consecutive years (Kirsch, 2009). Despite these notable accomplishments, Sifford never received an invitation to play in the Masters.

Augusta’s refusal to invite Charlie Sifford to their tournament angered him mightily. In his biography, “Just Let Me Play,” Sifford referred to the Masters as the “worst redneck tournament in the country, run by people who openly discriminate against blacks” (as cited in Sifford & Gullo, 1992, p. 172). Sifford’s tactics of outwardly criticizing Augusta seemed to have detrimental consequences and did little to advance his cause with the club that responded, “Every USA golfer, regardless of his racial background, has an opportunity to qualify for a Masters Tournament invitation and we doubt that anyone seriously expects us to change these qualification regulations in order to accommodate one particular person” (as cited in McDaniel, 2000b, p. 111). While Sifford’s aggressive approach was effective in eliminating some of the barriers that prevented black golfers from playing on the PGA, it was an approach that failed to resonate with Augusta National who never issued Sifford an invitation to play in their prestigious tournament.

**Lee Elder: The Resilient and Determined Trailblazer**

Like his mentor and predecessor, Ted Rhodes, Lee Elder had a challenging upbringing. Elder was born into poverty in Dallas, Texas, and at the young age of 9 years old was forced to endure the untimely deaths of his mother and father—both within 3 months (Kirsch, 2009; Sinnette, 1998; Yocom, 2019). Following the passing of his parents, Elder transitioned between different homes of relatives before finally settling to live in Los Angeles with one of his aunts who provided her young nephew with a motherly influence and much-needed familial stability (McDaniel, 2000b; Yocom, 2019). Elder dropped out of high school before graduating, and like Charlie Sifford, worked as a caddie to make ends meet before eventually touring the country with a prolific hustler and con artist named Titanic Thompson (Kirsch, 2009; McDaniel, 2000b; Yocom, 2019). The Elder and Thompson duo earned a significant amount of money through hustling, enough so that Elder could afford the fees for the PGA Tour’s qualifying school in 1967 (Yocom, 2019).
Like Rhodes and Sifford, Elder was also barred from PGA membership in his early career and spent several years on the UGA honing his game and accumulating wins. In 1966, Elder had the best year of his career on the UGA winning 18 of the 22 tournaments he entered (Sinnette, 1998; Whitaker, 1985). When Elder eventually qualified for the PGA, he nearly recorded a victory at the 1968 American Golf Classic after a sensational duel with Jack Nicklaus. The tournament needed several playoff holes before Nicklaus eventually defeated Elder with a birdie on the fifth extra hole (McDaniel, 2000b; Sinnette, 1998). Despite the loss, the second-place finish proved that Elder could play competitively on the main tour and challenge one of the game’s best players. Elder’s runner-up finish at the 1968 American Golf Classic was also a pivotal moment for black golf as it was essentially the first time in history that an unheralded black golfer went toe to toe with a white PGA superstar (Demas, 2017; Kirsch, 2009; McDaniel, 2000b).

Much like Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder was the recipient of racial discrimination and abuse throughout his playing days. During his time on the UGA, Elder and his fellow black players had to plan their routes carefully when traveling in the southern regions of the country, especially in states such as Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, which were notorious for black kidnappings even into the early 1970s (Yocom, 2019). When Elder began playing on the PGA in the mid-1960s, he was barred from clubhouses and was forced to change his shoes and eat his meals in golf course parking lots or the caddie quarters (Lentati, 2015). Elder was also the recipient of many threatening letters and phone calls during his playing days—several of which threatened Elder’s life if he showed up at tour events or continued to play despite warnings to cease (Hack, 2008; McDaniel, 2000b; Yocom, 2019). An argument can be made that Elder was very resilient for having to endure such racial abuse throughout his career. Despite all of the racial hatred that he endured and credit to his resiliency, Elder went on to have a very successful career, which included four PGA Tour wins, participation in the Ryder Cup, and an impressive 2.5 million dollars earned between the PGA and Senior PGA Tours (Sinnette, 1998).

Perhaps one of Lee Elder’s greatest accomplishments was his inclusion as the first black golfer to play in the Masters Tournament—a major championship that he qualified for on his merit in 1975. The host club of the Masters—the Augusta National Golf Club—had a reputation for perpetrating serious acts of implicit and explicit discrimination against members of the African-American race throughout its history (Sampson, 1998; Shipnuck, 2004). The club’s first chairman—Clifford Roberts—infamously stated during his tenure that his club was for white golfers only and that blacks would be prohibited from club membership and playing in the Masters as long as he
was the chairman (O’Kelly, 2012). Roberts’s explicitly racial remarks were somewhat truthful as blacks have historically comprised the majority of the club’s employees and caddies. It is rumored that Roberts never hired white applicants so blacks could hold the majority of laborious positions at the club (Sampson, 1998), essentially epitomizing servile conformity between whites and blacks.

Unlike Charlie Sifford who advocated valiantly for his acceptance into the Masters at Augusta National, Lee Elder never outwardly advocated for his inclusion in the event. Rather, he preferred to qualify for the Masters on his merit instead of receiving a special invitation. Elder even rebuked assistance from several prominent U.S. congressmen who had drafted a letter to Clifford Roberts in 1973 insisting that it was time a black golfer receive an invitation to the famed tournament (Demas, 2017). Despite never advocating for his participation, Elder did not remain tight-lipped about the racial discrimination that he felt took place at Augusta. In a 2019 Golf Digest interview, Elder explained that he was disappointed with Augusta’s behavior toward blacks and that he purposefully delayed accepting his first-ever Masters’ invitation in 1975 to implicitly protest the injustices that took place against African-Americans at the club (Yocom, 2019). If Elder had declined the invitation from Roberts, it would have been a historically powerful rebuke from a black athlete (Demas, 2017). However, a rejected invitation would also have been detrimental to Elder’s career and a missed opportunity for a black golfer to finally integrate the tournament, so not surprisingly, Elder eventually accepted the opportunity to play in his first-ever Masters.

Lee Elder’s approach to racial inclusivity seems to have been in contrast to Charlie Sifford’s approach. While Sifford directly challenged the racial discrimination that he endured in the form of letters, public criticism, and lawsuits, Elder used more implicit tactics to demonstrate that racial discrimination resonated with him, such as delaying his acceptance of a Masters’ invitation (Yocom, 2019). Elder’s strategy to never explicitly challenge the invitation process to the Masters seems to have been successful as he was reportedly given a warm welcome by Clifford Roberts when arriving at the 1975 event (McDaniel, 2000a). Roberts, for example, personally met Elder’s limousine upon arrival, walked the black golfer to the registration area, and expressed sorrow that Elder had not qualified for the Masters earlier, saying “The only quarrel I have with Lee is we’re sorry he didn’t do it sooner” (as cited in Shipnuck, 2004, p. 25). Elder was also invited to play in five additional Masters’ tournaments following the 1975 event,2 which suggests that his more implicit tactics in advocating for racial inclusivity seem to have been more successful in gaining entry to the Masters than Sifford’s radical ones.
Lee Elder’s venture to South Africa during the country’s Apartheid era also exemplified the tactics that he chose to fight racial discrimination and injustice. The black golfer was urged to play in the 1971 South African PGA Championship by Gary Player—a white native of the country and Elder’s good friend (Barton, 2007; Demas, 2017; Werden, 1971). Elder’s venture to South Africa was much more than simply playing golf and earning money. Elder demonstrated his fortitude and hardened approach to discrimination by refusing to play in events in South Africa unless the crowds were desegregated and black fans were allowed to watch the tournaments and enter the clubhouse. Elder also advocated for fellow black professionals to be admitted to the tournaments if he was to make an appearance (Barton, 2007; Werden, 1971). A simple venture to play golf in segregated tournaments and with segregated galleries would have demonstrated that Elder was simply interested in earning a paycheque in South Africa. However, by making these aforementioned demands, Elder demonstrated that his trip to South Africa in 1971 was much more than playing golf and earning money; rather, it was an opportunity for a black golfer to take a political stand against discriminatory policies and advocate for racial equality and inclusion through sport.

As his trip to South Africa revealed, Lee Elder has always been a strong advocate for racial inclusion and in creating opportunities for disadvantaged and minority youth. Three years after returning from South Africa, Elder and his wife started the Lee Elder Scholarship Fund, which is a non-profit organization that financially assists minority youth to attend and remain in college (Whigham, 1990). The Elders began the scholarship fund to give back to their community and provide assistance to minority youth that might not otherwise possess the monetary means to attend post-secondary studies. Elder and his wife also began the Elder Sports Management Instructional Institute—a 3-year program to assist minority youth to register for training in sports marketing and management (Whigham, 1990). Through his various philanthropic endeavors and advocacy work, Elder has demonstrated his commitment to racial inclusion and in creating meaningful opportunities for racialized youth.

**Tiger Woods: The Restrained and Steadfast Trailblazer**

Tiger Woods has accomplished many historical firsts for a black golfer, including becoming the first black golfer to win a professional major championship, the first black golfer to have reached number one in the world, and the first black golfer to have been named the PGA Tour Player of the Year. Woods arrived on the golf scene in the mid-1990s and took the golf and
sporting world by storm. He was a gifted athlete with star power and flamboyance; and most importantly, he was black. Unlike in baseball, basketball, and football, the sport of golf was primarily without players from racial minorities. When Woods won the Masters in 1997, many people thought he would bring down the racial barriers at the famed Augusta National Golf Club and transcend the sport by opening up the game to more blacks and other visible minorities (Cashmore, 2008). Woods himself battled racism his entire life, including fending off racism as a kid while growing up in Southern California (Barbie, 2012; Londino, 2006; Sampson, 2002). Even when Woods ascended to the professional ranks, he endured racism from his fellow professionals. At the 1997 Masters, American pro golfer Fuzzy Zoeller was quoted in an interview as saying, “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 tell him not to serve fried chicken next year. . .or collard greens or whatever they serve” (as cited in King, 2006, p. 343). Zoeller was criticized for his racist comments, lost two major sponsors, and was forced to apologize (Gearan, 1997). Perhaps the comments were uttered in frustration as Zoeller had finished the tournament with a score of 78 while Woods had dominated the rest of the field. The remarks could also have been said in jest as Zoeller was known on tour to be a jokester (Gearan, 1997). Zoeller would likely not have apologized for his racial tirade if the comments would not have created backlash nor resulted in the golfer being cast aside by sponsors. Aversive racists such as Zoeller, however, tend to bend over backward to deflect from racism (Son Hing et al., 2005), so an apology whether genuine or not was issued by Zoeller to save face.

While Tiger Woods showed disappointment in Fuzzy Zoeller’s remarks at the 1997 Masters, he largely pushed the issue aside. Some thought Woods would attack the “cherished beliefs, values, and practices of what was considered a white man’s sport” (Cashmore, 2008, p. 624). Some have argued Woods has consistently ignored racial intolerance in golf throughout his long, storied career and has done little to negate the racism that exists in the sport despite making a household name for himself (Cashmore, 2008). Some have argued that despite his ethnic makeup, Woods’s demeanor is that of a typical white, privileged, professional golfer (Barbie, 2012; Cashmore, 2008), and it is that type of person who is generally unsympathetic and unperturbed to the racial intolerance perpetrated in the game of golf. Some critics also feel Woods exudes a lack of moral consciousness when it comes to racism. Sanders (2002) argues, “Because he has made it, he feels it is up to every other individual to make it on their own. There is no sense of social responsibility, moral accountability, or righteous indignation. He sees no color. He
knows no race” (p. 8). Other critics like Grover (2016) point to Woods’s father—Earl Woods—who taught his son to ignore racial remarks and concentrate solely on his golf game. Grover (2016) feels Earl was very demanding of his son, forceful, and disciplined. She notes Tiger’s training sessions were regimented and Earl was obsessed with making Tiger perfect. Grover (2016) believes this teaching helped Tiger to concentrate and remain focused on golf and likely helped him to achieve legendary status, yet it also resulted in him often pushing discriminatory controversies aside for the betterment of his golf game.

Tiger Woods was the recipient of similar racial attacks following the 1997 Masters (Straubel & Barbie, 2012). Although he tends to feign disappointment in the perpetrators and usually downplays the incidents, there is plenty of evidence to refute the accusations that Woods has ignored racism and has never rallied against the racism directed toward him. Following his record-breaking victory at the Masters, Woods made it a point to acknowledge the black golfers whose pioneering efforts made it possible for minority golfers such as himself to play on tour. Included in Woods’s tribute were Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder, and Ted Rhodes (Dawkins, 2004). The trials and tribulations of Sifford and his efforts to gain access to mainstream tour events were well understood by golf enthusiasts, and Elder was widely known as the first African-American golfer to play in the Masters. The tribute to Rhodes was a bit surprising as many golf enthusiasts were not aware of his accomplishments in the game (Dawkins, 2004). Rhodes was never permitted to join the PGA because he was black, and his many feats including winning over 150 times on the UGA went essentially unnoticed and unacknowledged by the mainstream media (Kirsch, 2009). Woods’s tribute to Rhodes demonstrated his understanding of the golfer’s important legacy, and by acknowledging his efforts, Woods ensured his great impact on the game would not go overlooked.

During his successful 1997 season, Tiger Woods also appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show to discuss his personal experiences with racism and the racism that exists in golf. During the show, Woods conveyed disappointment that Augusta National had only invited a black member to join the club 7 years before his historic victory at the Masters. Woods also revealed to Winfrey that he has received a lot of hate mail over the years and insists on reading it because “it reminds me of what I have to do. As you know golf has been an elitist sport. . . I’ve been kicked off golf courses numerous times, been called some pretty tough words to my face” (Woods, 1997). During the show, Woods revealed his thoughts on race, including the revelation that he considers himself to be multiracial and not black nor African-American entirely but Cablinasian—a mixture of Caucasian, black, Native American, and Asian
because his father is of African and Native American ethnicity and his mother is of Thai and Caucasian heritage (Woods, 1997). This terminology eventually led to the U.S. Congress passing Bill 830—the “Tiger Woods” bill, which amended the U.S. Census to allow individuals to check more than one racial category from a possible 126 categories of race and ethnicity (Ahmann, 2005; Nishime, 2012). The Cabilasian terminology did not sit well with many African-American activists who believed Woods was ignoring his African-American identity by asserting his multi-ethnic background (Nishime, 2012). While some may argue Woods was rejecting the communal African-American heritage with the Cabilasian reference, one could also contend he was simply stating the accuracy of his multi-racial makeup and honoring the racial composition of his parents by voicing his remarks.

Tiger Woods’s Nike advertisements, which first aired in 1996, also signified his support for more inclusionary practices in golf. One particular ad titled “Hello World” explained to the audience that Woods had accomplished numerous feats as a junior and amateur player including winning three straight U.S. Amateur championships and playing in his first-ever Masters at only 19 years of age (Woods, 2006). Despite all of his early accomplishments, the ad noted that Woods was still banned from playing at certain courses in the U.S. because of the color of his skin. The “Hello World” ad was powerful and pointed out the exclusionary practices that continued to exist at some American private courses in the mid-1990s. Following the airing of the ad, Nike revealed that its research team had conjured up a list of 23 private golf clubs in the country that excluded African-Americans from membership (Cashmore, 2008). Despite critics arguing that Woods has ignored racism and has not been the torchbearer for racial inclusion in the game like they thought he would be, there is plenty of evidence to suggest the contrary—that Woods has often spoken out against the racism directed toward him and has been an ambassador for racial inclusion in the sport. Woods has not been as outspoken against racism as Charlie Sifford was and perhaps not as vocal in advocating for racial inclusivity like Lee Elder; however, his ventures such as the Nike ads and his efforts with the Tiger Woods Foundation, which has served more than 165,000 underprivileged minority youth and amassed more than 150 million dollars for educational programming (Beall, 2020), suggest that racial intolerance in golf resonates with him.

**Conclusion**

Besides Tiger Woods, who has recently been sidelined due to injuries sustained in a car accident in 2021, only two black golfers—Harold Varner III and Cameron Champ play regularly on the PGA Tour, and only one female
black golfer—Mariah Stackhouse—plays full-time on the LPGA Tour (Haq, 2021; Jeter, 2020). Further research, therefore, is needed to uncover the limitations and the systemic oppressions that prohibit black golfers from playing golf at the highest level and what can be done to ensure these oppressions are dismantled. The exorbitant cost of playing competitive golf, including the cost of quality equipment and accessing top-notch golf courses and facilities in which to hone their games likely prevent many aspiring black golfers from achieving the level of success that the above mentioned black golfers have been fortunate to achieve (Rosselli & Singer, 2017). Further research is needed to strategize how best to alleviate the financial barriers that prevent many aspiring black golfers from playing the game at the highest competitive level and accessing the scholarships and collegiate playing opportunities that many are denied in large part due to their race (Rosselli & Singer, 2017). Unlike the other mainstream sports of baseball, basketball, and football, golf is primarily without black role models nowadays, especially given the absence of Woods. Therefore, black golfers must be provided the opportunity to play at the highest level so future black players have role models to idolize and golf can be seen as a credible sport for black youth to participate.

This article offers a modest sampling of the trailblazing endeavors of four legendary black golf professionals. Ted Rhodes, Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder, and Tiger Woods were chosen to profile as their names are recognizable and their pioneering accomplishments and advocacy work are most notable. There have been numerous black professionals, male and female, however, who have strongly advocated for racial inclusion in the game that deserve recognition, such as Bill Spiller and Althea Gibson. A limitation of this research study was that it profiled the golfers who have been very successful in their careers and omitted black golfers who may have been strong advocates for racial inclusion in the game but are not household names. Therefore, scholars of sport and African-American history are encouraged to engage in further research to profile and publicize the trailblazing endeavors of other black golfers and to facilitate more research on how the game of golf can foster diversity and inclusion and welcome people of all backgrounds.

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1. Lee Elder played in 34 Major Championships; his best finish was a T11th at the 1974 PGA Championship and the 1979 U.S. Open. Calvin Peete played in 25 Major Championships; his best finish was T3rd at the 1982 PGA Championship; Jim Thorpe played in 27 Major Championships; his best finish was T4th at the 1984 U.S. Open.

2. In addition to playing in the 1975 Masters, Lee Elder also played in the Masters Tournament in 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, and 1981. His best finish was a T17 in 1979.

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