

Trotter Review

Volume 5
Issue 3 *Trotter Institute Review*

Article 6

9-23-1991

Sports Notes

Wornie L. Reed
University of Massachusetts Boston

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reed, Wornie L. (1991) "Sports Notes," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 6.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol5/iss3/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the William Monroe Trotter Institute at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Trotter Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

Sports Notes

Who Invented the Golf Tee?

by
Wornie L. Reed

In the Winter/Spring 1991 issue of the *Trotter Institute Review* I reported that a black dentist from Boston, Dr. George F. Grant, invented and patented the golf tee in 1899. However, in the May 1991 issue of *Golf Digest*, a white man, Dr. William Lowell of New Jersey, another dentist, is credited with having invented the golf tee. Having read in a number of reputable publications that Dr. Grant had invented the golf tee, I was interested in finding out how a second man could have been credited so readily with the development of the tee. So I contacted the United States Golf Association to uncover the real story. A reference librarian at the USGA's Golf House responded to my query and sent several items about the invention of the golf tee.

That Dr. Grant was not given his due in golf's top publication, *Golf Digest*, is illustrative of the many difficulties that persist in maintaining accuracy and visibility in the historical record when it comes to African Americans. The materials I received from Golf House reveal how it happened that Dr. Grant's name has been bypassed: quite simply, Dr. Lowell was able to market his tee, whereas Dr. Grant did not wish to do so and would most likely have been blocked from doing so if he had tried. What this history reflects, then, is the problems that blacks have often had in American society stemming from a lack of equal access to mainstream industry and commerce.

After graduating as a member of Harvard University's second class in dentistry in 1870, George F. Grant became a leading authority on the cleft palate. He fashioned palates for the mouths of some of Boston's most prominent families. Grant's practice was quite successful, and his family spent the winters in their town house on Charles Street in Boston and the summers in their summer home in Arlington Heights.

When not pursuing his dental practice Grant often played golf. He grew tired, however, of scoop-

ing dirt to form mounds for his ball each time he was ready to hit it down the fairway, so in 1899 he invented the modern golf tee and was given patent number 638,920. Although other tees—rubber and metal—had been developed earlier, none caught on. Grant's tee was somewhat similar to the modern day tee and was described as having a "tapering portion [usually wood] to be driven in the ground first, and a flexible tabular head [usually rubber], the lower end of which embraces the upper portion of the base."¹

Twenty-one years later Dr. Lowell, probably feeling just as tired as Grant of fashioning the dirt mounds on which to place his ball for each hole, had developed first a wire tee and then the wooden peg resembling today's tees. Upon his son's advice, he also obtained a patent (#1,497,687) in 1924 for his wooden tee. Dr. Lowell painted his tee red, named it the Reddy Tee, and engaged a manufacturer to begin producing the tee. Business was slow, however, as people laughed at him and his red tees until, in 1922, he paid U.S. Open champion, Walter Hagen, and British Open champion, Joe Kirkwood, \$1,500 to promote the tee by using it on their famous 1922 exhibition tour. While these golfers used the tees only as a novel addition to their game, this novelty soon became a hot item and tees have been used ever since. By 1940 there were more than 150 U.S. patents on golf tees made of various materials.² Dr. Lowell's tee has long been commemorated in a display in the museum of the USGA Golf House in Far Hills, New Jersey. However, Dr. Grant has not yet been recognized by that institution for inventing the tee or for getting the first patent.³

Dr. Grant, an avid golfer who played duplicate whist in the winter,⁴ got a patent for his tee but he gave them away. Even if he had chosen to do more with his invention, though, it is unlikely that in 1899 the U.S. and British Open champions would have used his tee. Although George Grant and his family lived a rather comfortable life, his lack of interest in a commercial venture and the racial structure of society combined to cheat him out of his rightful legacy.

References

1. Jones, G. (No date). Historically Speaking—Dr. George F. Grant. Article archived in the Golf House museum of the USGA, P.O. Box 708, Far Hills, N.J. 07931-0708; Staff. (1991, April). Dr. Lowell's Reddy Tee. *TelNEWS*.
2. Seagle, Janet. (No date). Evolution of the Golf Tee. Document written by curator of USGA Golf House museum, P.O. Box 708, Far Hills, N.J. 07931-0708.
3. On July 3, 1991, museum staff promised me that they would tend to this "oversight."
4. Duplicate whist was a forerunner to modern day bridge. See article on blacks in bridge elsewhere in this issue.

William Monroe Trotter Institute
University of Massachusetts at Boston
Boston, Massachusetts 02125-3393

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
Paid
Boston, MA
Permit No. 52094