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Sports Notes

Blacks and Private Golf Clubs

by
Wornie L. Reed

This past summer racial progress in the United States ran head first into the issue of “freedom of association” in the form of private clubs that prohibit membership to “other” folk, i.e., blacks and women. The specific issue in the case of the Shoal Creek Country Club of Alabama was the appropriateness of holding a Professional Golf Association (PGA) tournament at a club that did not accept blacks as members and was so bold as to say so to the press.

Many individuals defend on principal the right of clubs to offer memberships to whomever they please. On the other hand, these same individuals would not associate themselves with such behavior and would question other fair-minded individuals who may consider joining in such behavior. It was this latter point that was made to the PGA in the case of Shoal Creek: Why would they have a tournament at a place that would publicly admit that they did not accept black members? A similar protest, in fact a demonstration, was made against a private golf club in Georgia that was hosting a Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tournament earlier in the summer. This event did not get the publicity of Shoal Creek because it was a less publicized event and because no one did the “Hall Thompson,” i.e., admit the discriminatory policy to the press.

The furor over Shoal Creek had several immediate results. The PGA Tour announced that it would not hold future events at clubs that had discriminatory policies (nearly half of the 39 tournament sites in 1990 had no black members and many had explicit discriminatory policies), and several prestigious golf clubs announced that they would be or were already searching for black members. Shoal Creek, of course, offered an honorary membership to a local black businessman. Even Augusta National, home of the Masters Tournament and keeper of Old South traditions, accepted a black member. Augusta National had been so segregated that it did not permit white caddies until 1982; in the Masters all the players were white until 1976, and all the caddies were black until 1982.

On the other hand, several clubs announced that they would not change their white-only or male-only membership policies. Old Warson Country Club in Missouri and Cypress Point in California are two prominent clubs that maintain that position. They

withdrew from the PGA Senior Tour and the PGA Tour, respectively, to preserve their discriminatory policies. In addition, the PGA Tour removed the Western Open from Butler National in Illinois when it would not change its prohibition against women members.

Of course, as Sam Lacy, sports editor of the *Afro-American Newspapers*, said, the resolution of the Shoal Creek incident was really just a case of racism meeting its match: money. It was only after six powerful sponsors — I.B.M., American Honda, Toyota, Anheuser-Busch, Lincoln Mercury, and Spalding — pressured the PGA with the withdrawal of their \$2 million in advertising support that any action was taken by the PGA Tour.

As suggested above, many individuals concede the right of private clubs to select their membership and to exclude whomever they please. However, such clubs should not at the same time receive public benefits — benefits such as tax exempt status and tax abatements. Many clubs receive substantial tax abatements under “open-space” laws that provide country clubs with tax breaks if they agree to keep their land — the golf course — “free” of development. In other words, golf clubs get tax breaks for maintaining their golf courses as golf courses — their *raison d’être*! Thus, tax-paying citizens actually subsidi-

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dize the clubs. Consequently, private clubs are everybody’s business. Business people who belong to these clubs are able to credit their club expenses to business expenses under the assumption that business is discussed at the clubs. New legal attacks are being made against private clubs with these issues in mind. The charge is that a club cannot legally discriminate if it receives such support — and most clubs do.

At least three states — California, Minnesota, and Maryland — are attempting to use tax abatements and tax write-offs to attack the discriminatory policies of private golf clubs. It was a similar issue that provoked the furor over Shoal Creek. A black city councilman in Birmingham demanded that \$1,500 in city funds earmarked for an advertisement in the PGA Championship program be withdrawn because Shoal Creek excluded blacks from its membership.

Noteworthy in the Shoal Creek controversy was the reaction of many white male golfing stars. Some of the more sensitive comments were the “No comment” responses of several of the stars. Fuzzy Zoeller said, “I play golf, not politics.”¹ Greg Norman ar-

gued, "When we go to a golf club we are basically their guests for a week. It's not our position to go in there and tell the members what to do."² Payne Stewart suggested that the players were treating the episode as a big joke that would soon blow over. Others expressed the view that the whole thing had been blown out of proportion. However, those who follow golf know the sociopolitical views that prevail among these golfers. After all, many of the star golfers were complaining that Nixon should be left alone when the Congress was considering impeachment.

On the other hand, several black golfing stars, led by the two most accomplished players—Calvin Peete and Lee Elder (now on the PGA Seniors Tour)—were quite vocal about the Shoal Creek issue. Peete and Elder were in support of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which raised the issue by threatening a demonstration, and each thought that the honorary membership solution was insufficient.

The Shoal Creek controversy provoked concern about the "scarcity of blacks in golf." This concern undoubtedly developed because, in comparison to sports such as basketball, football, and baseball, *professional* golf has very few blacks. And while amateur golf has always had a fair number of black participants (and this number is growing), the number of blacks on the professional tours is steadily declining. There are only two regular members on the PGA Tour who are black, Calvin Peete and Jim Thorpe, and no black members on the LPGA Tour. Twenty years ago there were nine or ten black men on the PGA Tour; and Althea Gibson in the 1960s and Renee Powell in the 1970s played on the LPGA Tour.

Blacks have been involved in golf since its introduction in the United States. Black professionals played in some of the early U.S. Opens, and blacks have been inventors of some of the important developments in golf. The history of blacks in golf and the reasons for the decline in the number of blacks

on the PGA Tour will be addressed in the next issue of this journal.

Following up on the "Sports Notes" column published in the last issue of the *Trotter Review* (Summer 1990), here's more on the business of big-time college sports³:

Bowl	Site	Payoff per Team
California Raisin	Fresno, CA	\$ 275,000
Independence	Shreveport, LA	\$ 600,000
Aloha	Honolulu, HI	\$ 600,000
Liberty	Memphis, TN	\$1,000,000
All-American	Birmingham, AL	\$ 600,000
Blockbuster	Miami, FL	\$1,250,000
Freedom	Anaheim, CA	\$ 600,000
Holiday	San Diego, CA	\$1,200,000
Peach	Atlanta, GA	\$ 900,000
Hancock	El Paso, TX	\$ 900,000
Copper	Tucson, AR	\$ 600,000
Gator	Jacksonville, FL	\$1,200,000
Fiesta	Phoenix, AR	\$2,500,000
Hall of Fame	Tampa, FL	\$ 900,000
Citrus	Orlando, FL	TBA
Cotton	Dallas, TX	\$3,200,000
Rose	Pasadena, CA	\$6,500,000
Orange	Miami, FL	\$4,200,000
Sugar	New Orleans, LA	\$3,250,000

References

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- ²Hershey, S. (1990, August 7). Golf World Shaken Down to Its Roots. *USA Today*. P. 7C.
- ³Staff. (1990, November 6). How the Bowls Are Shaping Up. *The Boston Globe*. P. 64.