

James Black is a trailblazer for black golfers

BY ANTHONY HILL
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A number of people familiar with golf would probably say that Tiger Woods was the first black professional golfer to score a 67 in the first round of his first tournament. Woods did that in the Greater Milwaukee Open in 1997.

James Black, who was a self-taught caddy and child prodigy, accomplished that feat at the age of 21 at the L.A. Open back in 1964. Black is also the only African-American golfer to win the Negro Junior, Amateur and Professional titles in UGA events (United Golf Association).

"That's true," Black said. "Tiger wasn't the first black to shoot a 67 in his first golf tournament. I was. Black history is hidden."

What may be more impressive than the fact that Black was the first African American golfer to do some of the things he did is the time in which he accomplished some of his feats. Black began golfing in the early 50s and turned pro in the early 60s. He had very little support from other golfers in a racially charged time. Plus, he didn't have a lot of golfing equipment. Black obviously didn't have much money either. When he left his hometown of Charlotte for the L.A. Open he only had an incomplete set of clubs, one pair of pants, a quarter and a bus ticket. He slept on his golf clubs in the bus station before and during the California golf tournament.

He actually won the L.A. Open with a Wilson driver, a power built three-wood and first flight irons. Arnold Palmer, a legendary professional golfer and Wake Forest graduate, presented Black with his personal endorsed golf bag and a set of new Palmer clubs after that victory.

"I didn't think a lot of qualifying," said Black, who started playing golf at 14. "I didn't even think about leading the tournament. I was simply following a dream. The most important part of that dream was that fact that I was doing something that God gave me the ability to do. He gave me the talent and knowledge to play golf."

Black was an excellent all-around athlete. He was even drafted in AA baseball straight out of high school, but he wanted to be a golfer. Black was actually a member of the Pittsburgh Pirates organization for a stint.

"I still don't know why I made that decision," Black said of choosing golf over baseball. "I was a good athlete. But I wanted to play golf. I think it was a spiritual vision. Golf was like religion to me. It taught self help and discipline and honesty. That's how I was raised."

"But it was very inconvenient to play too," Black continued. "Not many blacks were allowed to play at that time. The only way you could play was by being a caddy. You know, caddies were the better golfers back then. That was also a good way to make some money. So, I did that while I was coming up."

After Black captured three UGA titles, he turned his attention toward going pro. He actually used his titles as a stepping stone to get him to the PGA. Black became one of 13 black pro golfers, including his friend and noted golfer, Charlie Sifford, to earn their prestigious PGA Tour Card in the early 60s. Black said that the hardships he endured paved the way for his fellow golfers to have the opportunity to play on the professional circuit.

Black also has a little bit of history at the Winston Lake golf course, where he was over the weekend for the Winston Lake Open. He didn't compete. Black was simply in town to support the event.

"I didn't play this year," Black said. "...but I told Neal (Wilson) that I was going to put on a clinic for the kids next year. But I have some history on this course. I once beat the field by 13 strokes and ended up with a 265 a number of years ago. The course wasn't manicured nearly as well as it is today. But I have a bit of history at this course too."

Right now, Black uses his time to teach young golfers the game in his youth golf program in Charlotte, where he's from.

"That's what I like to do," Black concluded. "I enjoy teaching kids the game of golf. I want to help others make a little history."



James Black plays at Winston Lake Golf Course.

File Photo

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