

The African American Woman Golfer: Her Legacy

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M. Mikell Johnson has produced a groundbreaking work in sports history, which focuses on the exploits and organisation of black women in golf. JoAnn Gregory-Overstreet notes in the foreword that Johnson's book 'represents the first complete body of work dedicated to the love of the game of golf exhibited by pioneering women of color' (p. ix). These pioneers 'were seemingly far removed from the white, male, privileged world of the country club' (p. ix). Not only is it a history that was far removed from the white, male world of golf, but it is one also removed from the historiography of golf and sport histories, even works on the history of blacks in sport. This work, therefore, is valuable because no monograph exists on this topic, and Johnson adds to our understanding of golf, blacks in golf, and female sport histories.

Since sport historically has for the most part been considered a male domain, the history of sport has generally highlighted male achievements, and many scholars who write about blacks in sport have also focused on black male athletes in an effort to elevate them to recognizable and equal levels in sports history as their white counterparts. Johnson shows that the black woman golfer not only suffered from racism but has also had the burden of sexism to contend with. She writes that '[t]he purpose of this endeavor is to examine the sport and document the existence of any African American women associated with golf on an amateur or professional level' (p. 3). Since only three black women, Althea Gibson, Renee Powell, and LaRee Pearl Sugg, have had notable success on the professional golf tour, it has been assumed that black women have not played golf (just as the absence of blacks from other so-called 'white' sports has been taken for granted). This historical work takes issue with that assumption.

Johnson identifies over 300 black women golfers, although very little is known about the bulk of the women mentioned. Nevertheless, Johnson highlights players like Althea Gibson, who broke the Ladies Professional

Gold Association (LPGA) colour line; Ann Gregory, who broke the United States Golf Association (USGA) colour line, and Helen Webb Harris, who helped create the first club for black women golfers. Black women golfers emerged in a period of racially segregated sport; like black athletes in other sports, they formed segregated organisations to allow an expanded arena of competition between players. This was crucial, for these organisations allowed for women to compete with each other locally and nationally. Meanwhile, some black women worked to break those color barriers as well as find a niche in the golf world for women golfers. Four women transformed the world of black golf: Marie Thompson (Jones) of the Pioneer Club in Chicago, Lucy William (Mitchell) of the Douglas Park Course in Indianapolis, Ella C. Abel of the Douglas Park Course, and Geneva Wilson playing out of Chicago. Johnson was able to acquire more information about these women than about many black women golfers, whom she calls 'rare birds'. For them, she was forced to tease out whatever biographic information she could find in various sources.

Unlike the white female golfers, black male golfers rarely had major country clubs, where their wives could also create women's groups at the clubs. Even so, many black women learned to play golf from their husbands, fathers or some other male acquaintance. However, it is important to note that some of these pioneer women players worked to introduce the sport to black girls. Furthermore, the major efforts to promote the game among black women players were made by black women themselves through their clubs, tournaments, and instruction.

As a part of an extensive literature review, Johnson lists the black women golfers mentioned in sport reference works which specifically focused on blacks in sports, including encyclopedias, almanacs, etc. Many of these works mention few black women athletes in general, let alone black women golfers. Gibson appears more than any other black female golfer, but mainly for her exploits in tennis. In addition, Johnson provides 'content analysis' of any reference to black women golfers in 'ethnic' golf books. These books also mainly focus on black male golfers. Similarly, she analyses two black-owned newspapers, *The Afro-American* and *The Chicago Defender*. They proved to be her most valuable sources in that they include many photos of black women golfers, identifying many women golfers missing from monographs and references, even if little information is given about them. Often, these black women received notice due to the public status of their husbands, and often the captions or articles refer to the husbands, taking space that could have been used to give more information about the women. Other times, the only biographical data presented is references to their hometowns or club affiliations. Nevertheless, this information provides a major starting place for tracking down many black women golfers.

Another important aspect in this discussion is the question of gender in sports, and how Title IX of the Educational Amendment of 1972 opened avenues for more participation in sports by women. Although this amendment was a watershed for women and girls who wanted to participate in sport, many black girls have still lagged in pursuing it. Many black girls who have played sports have typically selected team sports. Johnson argues that black women have been pressured to participate in team sports like track and field or basketball, the traditional 'black' sports. Therefore, few black girls have taken advantage of opportunities in individual sports like tennis, swimming, fencing, and golf, for example. Johnson offers as a reason that there has been a notion that 'minorities can only function in a team component with a designated role' (p. 35–36).

One of the most valuable parts of the work, however, is the chapter on organisations formed by black women. There were black women clubs in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and other cities. Moreover, Johnson shows that, beginning in the 1930s, black women golfers traveled all over the country to participate in tournaments, bringing many of the top golfers together in high level competitions. The discovery of the black women who played and worked to introduce golf to young black girls shows that more black women have participated in the sport than previously believed.

In addition, she shows how some of these women fought to open doors, closed by racism, so that black male golfers could participate on all levels of golf, and that rarely, if ever, have these women received recognition for this work. For example, the women of the Wake Robin Golf Club worked with the men of the Royal Golf Club to desegregate the golf courses in Washington, D. C., Maryland, and Virginia. Similarly, others worked to open doors for their fellow women players. For instance, the Chicago Women's Gold Club

applied to the USGA for membership so that Ann Gregory could play in USGA-sanctioned events. Despite such efforts of these women, the historiography of blacks in golf focuses on those pioneer black male players as the sole reason for breaking down the walls of segregation in the sport.

As already mentioned, Johnson explains that her research endeavor was hampered by the scant information given on most of the women. Therefore, it remains unknown how many of the early women golfers were introduced to golf and what personal struggles they faced in trying to play the game. Unfortunately, this leads to logically assuming that these women faced racial and sexual obstacles, but with very little evidence to show exactly what those obstacles were, how they manifested in black communities, and how or if these women overcame them. The fact that so few black women are on the professional tour today strongly suggests that many of these barriers still exist. The attitude toward the sport in various black communities, which also affects whether young black girls are introduced to the sport, could also help answer this question, but it is one that remains unexplored. For instance, Title IX legally opened doors for girls to participate in sports, but what other environmental barriers have historically kept black girls from a sport like golf? In addition, the cost to play the sport is also a major consideration. Therefore, race, class, and gender have formed triple oppressive possibilities to explore in discussing various issues of black women in sport, and in golf in particular.

Since Gibson wrote two autobiographies, she explained the challenges she faced on the professional tour, but this type of personal information is lacking for most of the golfers. Gibson was unable to sustain herself financially on the tour. Without major sponsorship, and the inability to land major endorsements, she had to leave it. She argued, 'I am not being utilized in the commercial field because I am black.'⁽¹⁾ If money was a major factor for a player of Gibson's calibre, not to mention the fact that her recognised achievements in tennis failed to land her endorsements, how much more difficult was it for other aspiring black women professionals?

Over several chapters, Johnson pulls together whatever information she found on the golfers, and lists each of them in biographical sketches. She includes major figures like Elizabeth W. Brabble, the president of the Wake Robin Club; Thelma Cowans, United Golfers Association (UGA) National Open Champion; Ethel Funches, UGA National Open Champion; and Maggie Hathaway, golf civil rights activist. Moreover, the author includes noteworthy information in appendices. For instance, she lists all the photos she found of black women golfers in the two newspapers she examined. She lists the achievements of the UGA Junior Girls Program, and the UGA National Open Women's Championship records.

The author has been playing golf for over thirty years, and is a member of the Traces Women's Golf Club. She has participated in USGA events. Her own experiences and personal knowledge allows for a particular insight into the topic. For the most part, Johnson does not present a straight narrative, but lists major aspects of the history in brief sections. The author makes it clear that there is much work to be done on black women golfers, but this work is invaluable as the starting point for additional research. In short, she demonstrates that black women remain on the periphery of many sports due to race, class and gender issues, and also remain largely unexplored in the historiography of sports.

Notes

1. 'Where Are They Now', *Newsweek* (July 1961), 24. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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