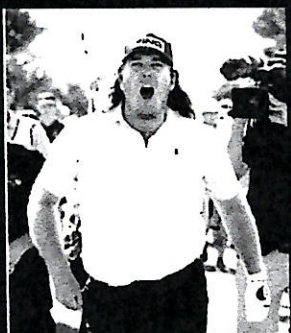
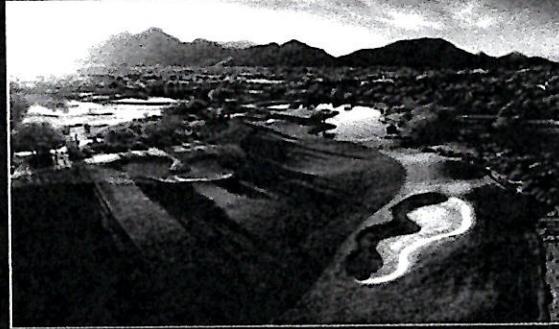
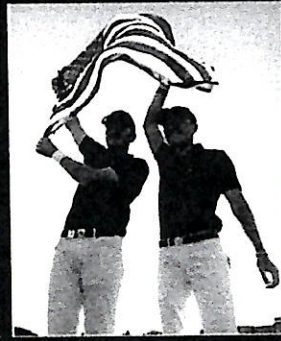
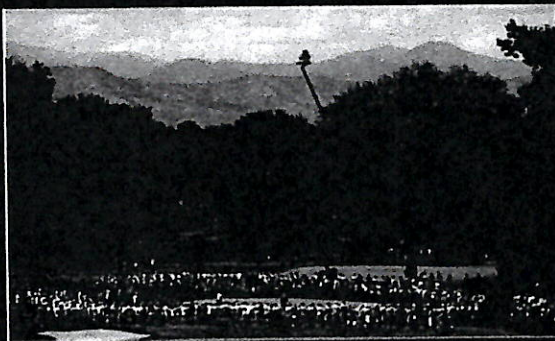


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Western States Golf Association

SHARP PARK
GOLF COURSE



...stick "ret" ... H. Shipman, T. Benn ...
... Johnson, G. ... Gee, N. Charbonnet, ...
... center (L-R): Johnson ...
... Opening Sharp Park

Change Agents

Approaching its 70th year, the Western States Golf Association has helped Black golfers find their rightful place in the game

By LAZ VERSALLES

THIS IS THE STORY of an organization born of the sins of bigotry and racism. This is the story of Black golfers who came together so that they could play, compete and socialize while combatting segregation. This is the story of the Western States Golf Association.

To understand why there is a need for African-American golf clubs, one must understand the history of the African-American experience. Many of the privileges, rights and freedoms Blacks enjoy today were not achieved or granted for roughly the first two-thirds of the 20th century. Leisure activities and sports such as golf were segregated either officially or, later on, unofficially.

The Western States Golf Association was spurred by the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to states in the Northeast, Midwest and West after World War II. Some 3 million African Americans left for cities such as Los Angeles, →

Photo illustration by
DANA SMITH

**“SINCE WE COULDN'T GET *handicaps*
AT THE COURSES THAT KEPT US OUT,
WE HAD TO *make our own.*”**

-BILL WRIGHT

Phoenix, Seattle, Portland and Denver. As they began to pursue leisure activities in their new home regions, they were not always welcomed. In fact, before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was common for golf courses to prohibit African Americans. After 1964, it was still easy for golf shops to turn away Black golfers by simply claiming that no tee times were available.

While African Americans were able to play golf at some facilities, they were frequently barred from becoming members at others that were supposed to be open to the public. This meant they could not maintain a Handicap Index®, which kept them from competing in tournaments. As Bill Wright, the 1959 U.S. Amateur Public Links champion and a former WSGA member, told the USGA in 2012: “You have to understand, we could not play in city tournaments, state tournaments or national tournaments because we couldn't join a club.”

Necessity is the mother of invention, and African-American golfers soon organized clubs of their own. The formation of these golf clubs and associations is a critical part of the history

of the sport in America, as it allowed someone like Wright, a Seattle native, to compete and become the first Black USGA champion. When golfers organized and arrived at courses with dozens of players in tow, tee times booked in advance and green fees in hand, they became much harder to turn away. And the game became much more communal and competitive.

These clubs created their own handicap systems and held tournaments. “We had some really good players, and the competition was intense,” recalled former WSGA president Gus Robinson, who migrated to Los Angeles from the Louisiana town of Mer Rouge.

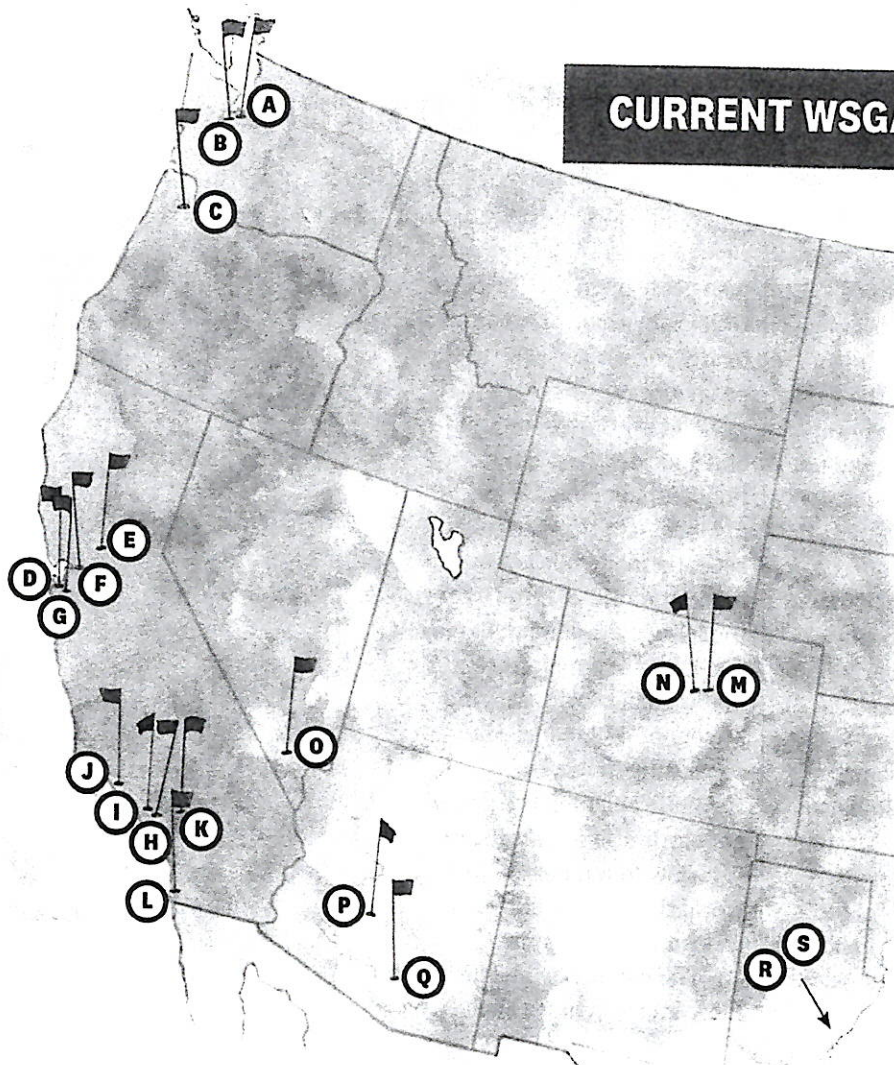
African-American golf clubs and associations started to pop up all over the West Coast in the 1940s. A group known as the Paramount Golf Club played in and around San Diego, along with a half-dozen similar clubs in the Los Angeles area, such as Vernoncrest and Cosmopolitan. San Francisco had the Bay Area Golf Club. The Desert Mashie Golf Club formed in Phoenix. There was the Fir State Club in Seattle, where Wright was a member. The Leisure Hour

Club was founded in Portland, Ore., and from it came the idea of an umbrella organization.

Leisure Hour Club founder Vernon Gaskin had the vision for a larger organization. His concept was supported by Morris Henderson, the captain of San Francisco's Bay Area Golf Club, and J. Cullen Fentress of Los Angeles. Fentress played in African-American golf events from San Diego to Seattle and realized that things could be even better if the clubs formed an association. And so they did. In 1954, Gaskin, Henderson and Fentress led the charge, and the Western States Golf Association was launched. The original eight clubs were based mostly in Southern California, along with Seattle's Fir State, Portland's Leisure Hour and the Bay Area Golf Club. The association's goal was to provide leadership in the Black golf community, support women's golf, create and foster junior golf initiatives, and maintain a handicapping system for fair play.

Soon after the WSGA was born, its first championship took place at Sharp Park Golf Course, south of San Francisco, in 1955. More than 100 players from the charter clubs compet-

CURRENT WSGA MEMBER CLUBS



- WASHINGTON**
A Fir State GC, Seattle
B HyTee GC, Kent
-
- OREGON**
C Leisure Hour GC, Portland
-
- CALIFORNIA**
D Bay Area GC, San Francisco
E Sacramento Area Black GC, Sacramento
F The Maples Club, Richmond
 Sistas on the Links, Richmond
G Spear GC, San Jose
H Continental GC, Inglewood
 Golden Tees GC, Inglewood
I Cosmopolitan GC, Los Angeles
 LA Fairways GC, Los Angeles
 No Nonsense GC, Los Angeles
 Tee Divas & Dudes GC, Los Angeles
 Tee Masters GC, Los Angeles
 Vernoncrest GC, Los Angeles
J Pro Duffers West GC, Oxnard
K Honors GC, Riverside
 Inland Empire GC, Riverside
L Paramount GC, San Diego
-
- COLORADO**
M Greenseekers GC, Aurora
N Mile Hi GC, Denver
-
- NEVADA**
O Divas On Course GC, Las Vegas
 Valley View GC, Las Vegas
-
- ARIZONA**
P Desert Drivers, Phoenix
 Desert Mashie GC, Phoenix
Q Desert Trails GC, Tucson
-
- TEXAS**
R Southeast Texas Eagles, Beaumont
S DFW Fairway Divas, Dallas/Fort Worth

ed for the first time as an association, and Sharp Park, which had been infamous for denying Black players tee times, hosted five glorious days of competition. The championship has been held annually ever since at various locations.

Beyond the camaraderie and strength in numbers, one of the earliest acts was to determine a uniform handicap system. The WSGA essentially became an early “club without real estate” by maintaining handicaps for

members without a host golf course.

Dr. Granville Brown of Las Vegas, current president of the WSGA, noted, “At one point the WSGA had over 30 member clubs and over 1,500 individual members. We’ve awarded hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarships over the last 57 years to our junior golf members. And we’ve had women in the association for almost 63 years now.”

He reflected on the time

a skinny 16-year-old from Orange County, Calif., named Tiger Woods spoke to the membership at the 1992 WSGA annual meeting. Tiger and his father, Earl, were no strangers to WSGA members, and his unrivaled success showed that someone who looked like their kids could scale the game’s highest mountains.

Along with Woods and the aforementioned Wright, other standouts included Alton Duhon and Ashley Smith. Duhon, like

“THEY *cared about me* NOT JUST AS A GOLFER,

Wright a Louisiana native who called Los Angeles home, joined Wright in capturing a USGA championship, the 1982 U.S. Senior Amateur. Smith, of the Bay City Golf Club, did not win a national championship but won numerous city and local titles.

More impressive than the championships is the continued leadership over nearly 70 years. Fentress served as president of the association from 1954-71, and other strong leaders followed. Gus Robinson of the Los Angeles Tee Masters Club served multiple terms as president. Generations of the Colebrook family from Phoenix's Desert Mashie Club served in various leadership roles.

Further, the association benefited from contributions by women such as Mae Crowder, Mary Woodyard, Blanche Whitney, Virginia Flanagan and others who gave tirelessly of their time and talents. Pearl Carey became the association's first female president in 1977.

Another Desert Mashie member, the late Bill Dickey, was known and respected across the country as an advocate for junior golf, having hosted the East West Golf Classic to raise funds that helped send hundreds of students to college. One of those students was Andia Winslow,

who grew up in the Fir State Golf Club junior program. She fondly recalls her time in the program.

“The Fir State Golf Club, and specifically Wilbert Ponder, had a huge impact on my life,” said Winslow, who recently made her acting debut in the role of Ann Gregory, the first Black woman to play in a USGA championship, in the 2022 movie “Playing Through.” “[Ponder] saw something in me.”

While learning the game at Seattle's Jefferson Park, Winslow found herself in a world that felt familiar and welcoming, like home.

“The clubhouse at Jefferson Park was also like a social clubhouse,” she said. “The old-timers would sit outside playing the dozens, just hanging out and having fun. It was a special place to me.”

As Winslow's talent and desire to compete grew, WSGA members ensured that she had proper equipment and instruction, and also offered her a unique platform to compete.

“It was so fun to go to the WSGA junior tournaments and see other players who

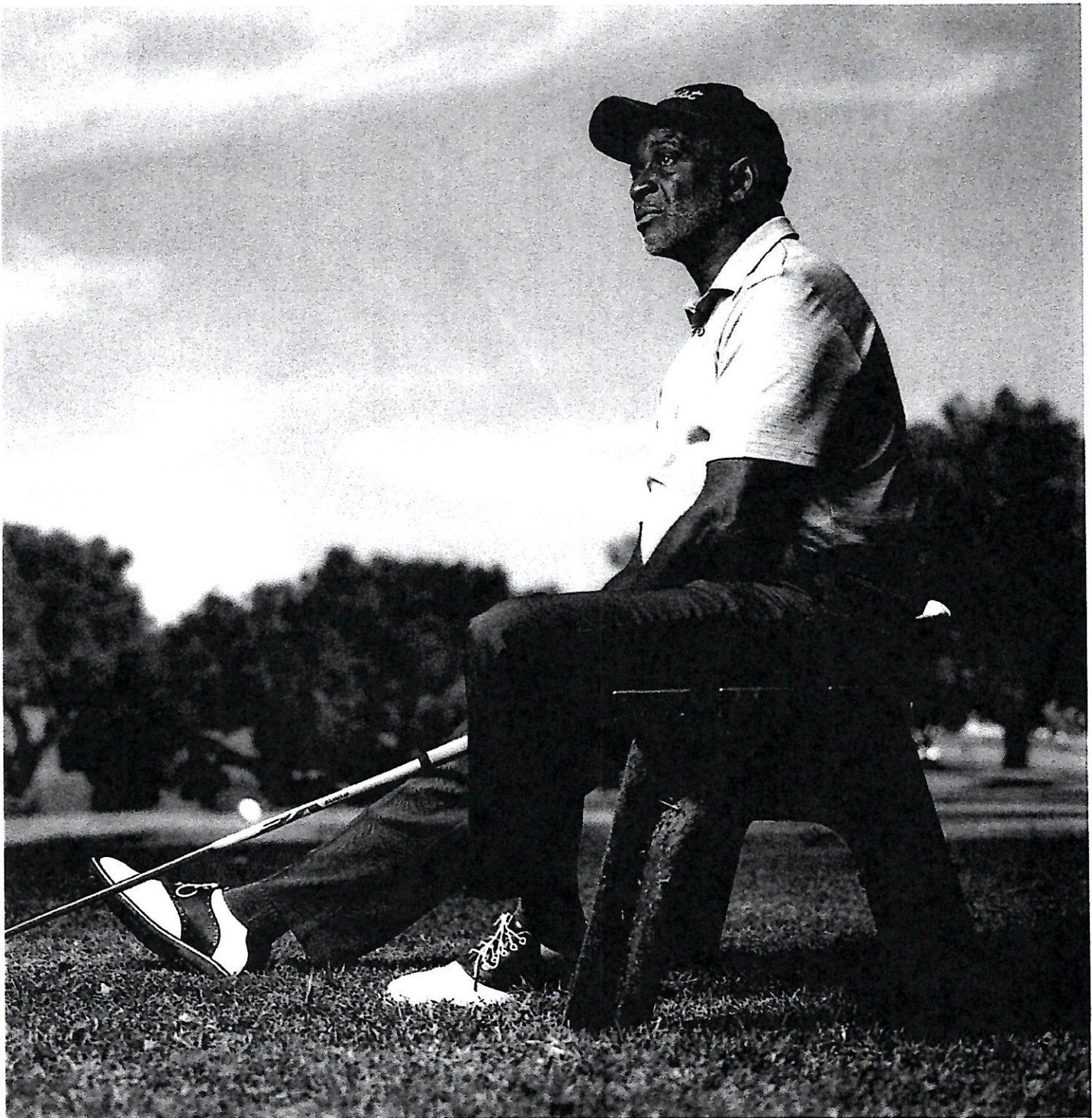
MARK ALSTON
A successful businessman in real estate and a minister at his church, Alston has benefited from the WSGA since his youth.

ROBERT BECK

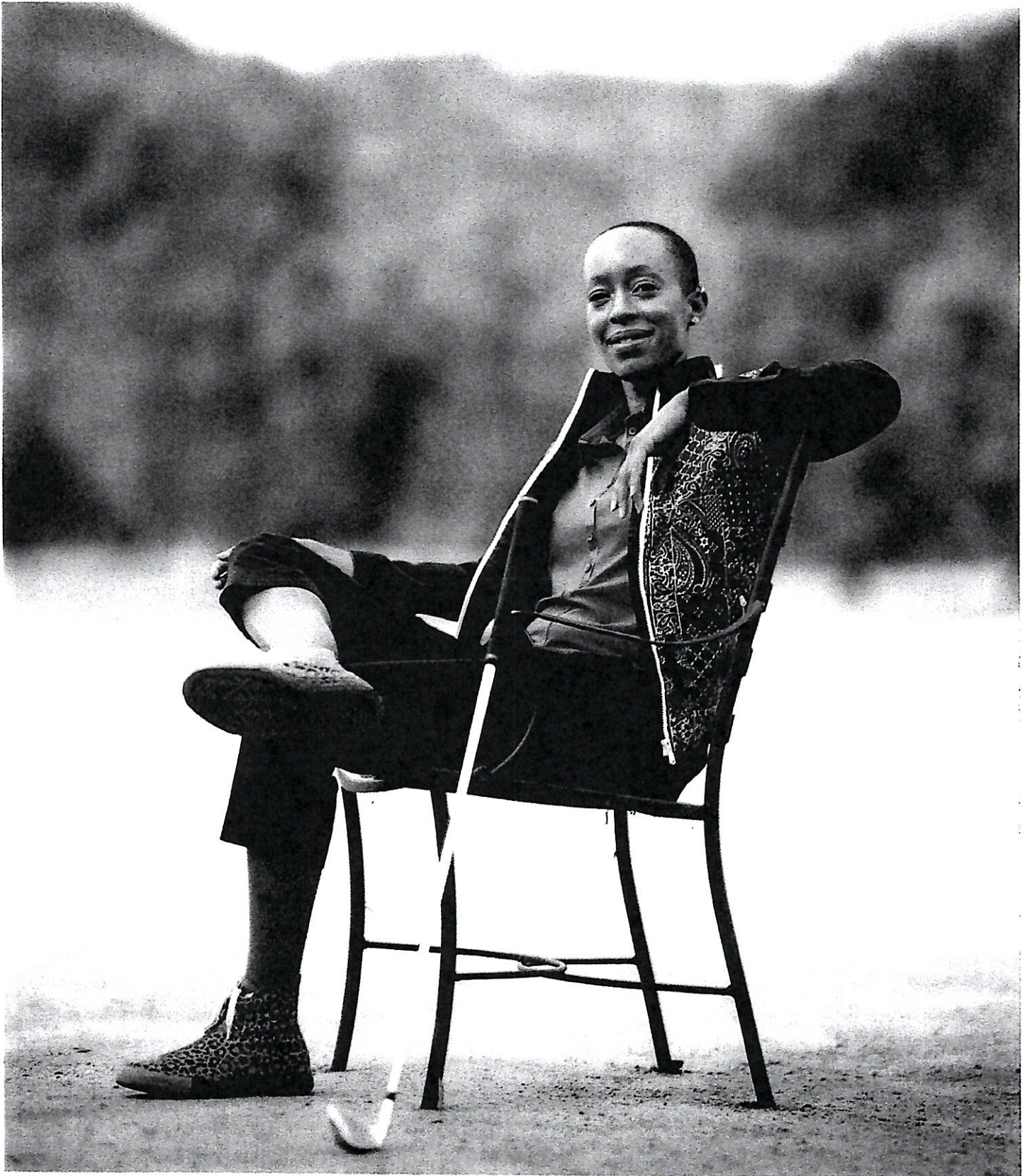


BUT ALSO AS A YOUNG BLACK MAN.”

- MARK ALSTON



WSGA





“THE *old-timers* WOULD SIT OUTSIDE PLAYING THE DOZENS, JUST HANGING OUT AND *having fun*. IT WAS A SPECIAL PLACE TO ME.” —ANDIA WINSLOW

looked like me, Black players, competing,” said Winslow. “We always had a barbeque before and after the tournament. They were great fun and helped build community.”

Winslow would go on to become the first Black woman to play in the Ivy League, as a student at Yale University. She credits Dickey as being the driving force behind much of the scholarship money that helped get her through college. Later, Winslow worked for Dickey before moving to Los Angeles to pursue a career as an actor and voiceover artist.

“The Western States Golf Association helped shape my life,” she said. Winslow’s is one of countless lives touched by the WSGA. Mark Alston is another person who believes his life would be different were it not for the WSGA.

“I grew up without a father in the house,” said Alston, of

Los Angeles. “When I was young, I made decisions I wouldn’t make today, mostly based on economic reasons.”

Alston frequented many of Seattle’s pool halls and nightclubs in his youth. Then golf stepped in. “A friend of mine took me to the driving range one day,” Alston reflected, “and that piqued my interest. While I was there, some men from the WSGA took me under their wings and showed me the game. They cared about me not just as a golfer, but also as a young Black man.”

Golf proved pivotal in shaping the trajectory of Alston’s life. He started to dial back the nightlife in favor of getting sleep for his early-morning game at Jefferson Park. “I learned from these guys the kind of golfer and man I wanted to be,” Alston said.

Beyond providing a compass for him at a critical time, the WSGA has also provided Alston with networking opportunities off the golf course.

“Just like every major city has a Black pool hall, every major city has a Black golf

ROBERT BECK

ANDIA WINSLOW
The Fir State Golf Club junior program played a starring role for Winslow as both a sporting and social outlet during her childhood.

WSGA

course, and that's where you'll find the WSGA," he said. Alston remembered putting that network to use when he moved to Los Angeles in 1985.

"The first place I got directions to was Western Avenue Golf Club (now called Chester Washington), which is the home for Black golf in Los Angeles, so I knew there would be Western States members there," he said. "Most of the people I met at the club were members of the Cosmopolitan Club, so I joined the Cosmos. Later on, I returned to Seattle for the Fir State Annual golf tournament as a member of Cosmos and won the Fir State Annual – it doesn't get much

The commitment to juniors goes back to the early days not only of the WSGA, but also of many of the member clubs. The original preamble of Phoenix's Desert Mashie Golf Club from 1946 notes a duty "to provide for the participation and development of junior golfers," and WSGA clubs are still proudly carrying that torch today.

"We are creating our next generation of WSGA members and leaders," said Jenny Bethune, a retired law enforcement officer and member of the Tee Divas and Tee Dudes Club in Los Angeles. Bethune sees golf's potential as a springboard for many of the children in her community.

"It's not just about golf, but also about trying to help these talented kids understand that they have options, and golf is one of them," she said. Aside from tireless fundraising and promotional work for the children in her program, Bethune also serves at times as a chauffeur, coach, counselor and cheerleader.

For the kids in Bethune's program to be able to see and identify with Fred Perpall, the first Black man to serve as president of the USGA, is powerful. The next generation of WSGA leaders sees the president of the USGA, and they



Maggie Hathaway (center, bottom row) is flanked by members of the Jackson Family (Jackie, Tito, Michael, Jermaine and Marlon) and others to dedicate the Junior Golfer's Green in Los Angeles on March 5, 1972.

better than that!"

Today, Alston is the founder and president of a successful real estate firm in Los Angeles and serves as a minister to his church – another life changed by golf and the people of the WSGA.

As for the current state of the WSGA, "We are down to just over 600 members from our peak of over 1,500," said Dr. Brown, the current president. "There are various reasons for that change, but our commitment to our juniors remains strong." In fact, the PGA of America grants exemptions into the PGA Junior Championship to the boy and girl champions of the WSGA Junior Tournament.

see themselves.

"Some of these kids don't have a ride half the time; sometimes they're babysitting while Mom is at work," Bethune said. "So when I hear about the USGA's National Development Program, I get excited. We've got kids who have real talent, but they don't have the means to develop to that next level. It's going to take a lot of work, and we're going to need a lot of help."

The early days of the WSGA must have been filled with wonder and hope for its founders and members. Now, almost 70 years later, different kinds of wonder and hope prevail. What will become of an organization that was created to provide access for those who had been denied it for so long? Will the price paid by those who came before continue to be recognized, honored and appreciated?

If the past is prologue, it will, because golf is a better game for the WSGA's presence. ♦

COURTESY: CHESTER WASHINGTON GOLF CLUB