

Charlie Sifford, who broke the PGA Tour color barrier, honed his skills here.

At Cobbs Creek, a refuge for golf pioneer

By Frank Fitzpatrick
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On the afternoon of June 7, 1950, the story of African American golf was being played out silently but powerfully by two black men at a pair of Philadelphia-area courses.

That story, with its themes of exclusion, prejudice, and resourcefulness, was sadly familiar in mid-20th century Ameri-

can sports.

At the tony Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, where the 1950 U.S. Open would commence the following day, Howard Wheeler began his final practice round alone. None of his competitors, all of them white, would partner with the black entrant.

Meanwhile, at Cobbs Creek Golf Course, separated from Merion by four miles and an enor-

mous cultural chasm, Charlie Sifford was hustling some cash. Unable to compete on the segregated PGA Tour, it was the way he and many early black pros supported themselves.

On Tuesday, Sifford, a PGA Tour pioneer and World Golf Hall of Famer, died at 92. His death prompted reflections on both the progress his tenacity produced and the opportunities

his race denied him.

And through it all, it was Cobbs Creek, the heavily played municipal course on Philadelphia's western edge, that sustained him.

There, while Sifford competed with and learned from more experienced black players such as Wheeler, practicing diligently and hustling golfers of every

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“I always tell people that my home course is Cobbs Creek.

Charlie Sifford, right, the first African American to play on the PGA Tour.

SIFFORD from D1 race, his career and talents blossomed.

“Without Wheeler and Cobbs Creek,” said Philadelphia golf historian Pete Trenham, “we probably never would have heard of Charlie Sifford.”

In an era when virtually all private clubs and the PGA Tour were whites-only, Sifford and Wheeler, always on the lookout for a match, found a home at Cobbs Creek.

When he was a homesick Penn law student in the mid-1950s, Lamar Kilgore lost money to Sifford at Cobbs Creek.

“I was from Ohio, so I wasn't too familiar with hustling,” Kilgore, now 82 and retired in Malvern, recalled this week. “One day I was playing skins with black golfers in a couple of foursomes. We were in the 14th fairway waiting to hit to the green when I recognized the guy chomping on a cigar in the foursome ahead. It was Charlie Sifford. I was pretty good, but I knew I wasn't in his league.

“I said, ‘You dirty so-and-so,’ and he just about fell into a bunker laughing.”

But Sifford learned a lot more than hustling at Cobbs Creek. It was, in those days of overt racism, his classroom and his refuge.

“I always tell people,” Sifford said long after leaving here and becoming a Tour pro, “that my home course is Cobbs Creek.”

Though it and sister course Karakung meander through crowded West Philadelphia rowhouse neighborhoods, Cobbs Creek has a distinguished pedigree.

Opened in 1916, it was designed by Merion East's architect, Hugh Wilson, and built on ground that once housed a Colonial Quaker estate. In fact, its clubhouse and equipment

shed rose from the ruins of the estate's mansion house and barn.

Despite its urban setting, the course features a varied topography, with hills, valleys, and rocky streams. Though just 6,202 yards, Cobbs Creek proved so challenging and popular that in the 1920s and 1930s as many as 80,000 rounds were played there annually, as were several professional tournaments.

Open to all, it attracted Wheeler and other talented black players.

“Cobbs was one of the very few American sports venues that was thoroughly integrated from the beginning,” said Mike Cirba of the Friends of Cobbs Creek Golf Course. “There was never a gender or racial restriction. That wasn't so in many of the other public courses around the country. In some of those places, the restrictions weren't lifted until the 1960s.”

Sifford discovered Cobbs only by chance.

Born in 1922 in North Carolina, he discovered the game as a caddie. But finding places to play in the Jim Crow South was nearly impossible.

In 1939, after a run-in with an abusive drunk, he and another caddie hopped a freight to Philadelphia. Sifford moved in with an uncle in the Northeast and soon found work at the Nabisco plant on Roosevelt Boulevard.

“On a bus, he saw a black man carrying golf clubs,” Trenham said. “He thought that was unusual and he asked the man where he was going. He told him Cobbs Creek.”

Once there, Sifford was surprised to see black and white golfers.

“I'd never seen anything like that in North Carolina,” he told Jim Finegan, the author of a Philadelphia golf history.

Sifford soon met — and lost money to — Wheeler. The latter, 11 years older, was a natural lefty who played crosshanded with righthanded clubs.

Though he had no official affiliation there, Wheeler was, as Sifford quickly learned, Cobbs' unofficial champion. A long and accurate driver and precise ball-striker, he set the course record of 63.

“He owned that course, and everyone knew it,” Sifford said.

Wheeler won six National Negro Open Championships, including the 1947 tourney at Cobbs Creek, and qualified for both the 1950 and 1951 U.S. Opens.

Sifford, meanwhile, served in the Army during World War II. Discharged in 1946, he married, moved into a house near 18th and Norris in North Philadelphia, and became a golf professional.

He worked tirelessly on the Cobbs Creek range, Cirba said, but also found time for some financially rewarding golf.

“On many occasions there,” Kenneth Wood noted in 2006 when the University of St. Andrews awarded Sifford an honorary law doctorate, “Charlie and his friends passed themselves off as hopeless hackers only to turn on their true talents in time to win the match and a fistful of dollars.”

In that '47 Negro Open, Sifford finished second to Wheeler. The first-round leader, by the way, was heavyweight boxing champ Joe Louis, whose instructor was Wheeler.

Many black pros then worked for golf-loving black entertainers, providing lessons and performing other duties. Sifford's work with singer Billy Eckstine left him plenty of golf time.



He returned often to Cobbs Creek and whenever possible played in tournaments of the United Golfers Association, a loosely run, perpetually underfunded black tour.

Like Wheeler, he captured six Negro Open titles. One of those came at Cobbs Creek in 1956. That year, he beat the runner-up, Wheeler, by 15 shots.

By the late '50s, the PGA Tour's whites-only policy was loosening and, though not yet a member, Sifford was invited to several events. He left Cobbs and Philadelphia for Los Angeles in 1957. In 1960, at 39, he became the Tour's first black member.

“You wonder if all that history would have happened if he hadn't come to Philadelphia,” Trenham said. “And if he hadn't found Cobbs Creek.”

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