

Black executives beginning to take advantage of golf as a business tool

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SUNSET BEACH, N.C. — When Richard Sutton took up golf 13 years ago, he knew he'd often be the only black guy on the course. He also ignored black friends who razzed him for playing "a white game."

As he kept at the sport he loves, he won over his critics. Here and there, he met other lone black golfers. They shared a common love for golf — and a common isolation.

"We would be basically the only black guy in a group," Sutton, now 43

and a Durham lab technician, said of himself and black golfing friends. "We started a tournament as a way of networking."

The number of black golfers has more than doubled since 1986, to 882,000 from 360,000, according to the National Golf Foundation. But black golfers still represent only about 3 percent of the nation's 26 million golfers. So for black people, as well as other minorities, the links are a lonely place.

That can be a drawback for black people building a business or a career.

"Adults use golf not only for fun and relaxation, but also as a business

tool," said John David, executive director of the Multicultural Golf Association of America. "It's easy for a white corporate executive to take a client to his private, membership-only country club and have his total concentration. If black executives can't do that, they're at a disadvantage with clients and customers."

Last weekend was the ninth gathering of Sutton's tournament group. About 30 players took part, including Sutton's son Michael, 17, who won the three-day event. The group teed off

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James Douglass, a dentist from Fayetteville, N.C., was one of about 40 black executives who played in a golf tournament in Brunswick County, N.C., recently. The event is a means of business networking.

April 28 at The Pearl in Sunset Beach, near the S.C. border. This year, the setting was significant.

The group has always played some of Myrtle Beach's finest courses. But members wanted to honor the NAACP's tourism boycott of South Carolina, where the Confederate flag flies over the State House.

The tournament drew a couple white players, including Billy Hamilton, a college buddy of Billy Williams, a black Raleigh restaurant manager and one of the tournament's original players. As the two checked in at The Colony at Oyster Bay, they reviewed sales brochures, talking about their plans to buy a place along the beach, close to the golf action.



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Gerald Lewis, Anthony Henry, Richard Sutton and Willie Cooper, left to right, wait to tee off at a golf tournament Sutton organized about 10 years ago to give black executives a way to network with each other.

This article appeared in the April issue of the Columbia, SC newspaper, circa 2000

Colony at Oyster Bay, they reviewed sales brochures, talking about their plans to buy a place along the beach, close to the golf action.

Sutton's Hispanic neighbor also played. But the group was predominantly black and all male. Most had stories of the white guy who introduced them to golf, and the black friends who didn't understand why they took up a sport with a history of racism and a dowdy image.

William Neal, for example, found an 8-iron more than 30 years ago and started knocking balls around the yard. When he learned to hit hard enough that he was winging neighbors' houses, he headed for the golf course.

"Everybody told me to put that down and play some ball," recalled Neal, 53, and a budget officer with the Department of Social Services in Raleigh. "I didn't want to play ball. I wanted to golf."

Thanks to Tiger Woods — the handsome Thai-African American who in 1997 became the first person of color to win the Masters — golf is cool to a younger, more diverse population. Still, the stereotypes persist, David said.

"It's a white man's sport. It's a rich man's sport. It's played by white people in funny clothes."

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Not to mention, golf is expensive, intimidating and for decades excluded minorities from its upper echelons.

No wonder industry growth is stagnant, faced with a potential glut of courses. Last year, the National Golf Foundation officially recognized the problem, documenting what golf needs to grow — namely attract more women and minorities.

Amateur tournaments such as the one Sutton leads may be a valuable tool for attracting new and encouraging existing minority golfers.

"Most white people don't have to worry about standing out in the crowd they dominate," said Dr. Calvin Sinnenette, a retired physician and author of "Forbidden Fairways," a history of black golf. "There is no reason why they'd feel the need to (put together a golf group based on race).

"I feel the necessity from time to

time to be with fellow black colleagues playing golf."

Nationwide, there are about 400 golf groups of minority men and women, said Charles Dorton, whose Sports Opportunity and Information Center in Richmond, Calif., is a free, informal networking service that grew from Dorton's golfing interests. Dorton also has identified about 200 amateur and pro-am minority tournaments held annually.

One of the highest-profile events is the Black Enterprise/Pepsi Golf & Tennis Challenge, started in 1994. The event, scheduled for Labor Day weekend at The Doral, draws about 1,300 players, more than one-third of them golfers.

"Black Enterprise wanted to create something for readers, to bring them together from all over the country," said Andrea Delph, golf and tennis manager for the magazine with a predominantly black subscriber base.

The National Minority Junior Golf Scholarship Association also sponsors a large minority tournament. The

a large minority tournament. The group's 18th annual East-West Golf Classic event held at three Arizona courses in January drew 390 players and raised \$232,298 for golf scholarships.

"It's like a fraternity," said Bill Dickey, president of the Phoenix association and the Desert Mashie Golf Club, a black club organized in 1948. "They can have a relationship with other black professional people who went to black colleges together, who come from similar backgrounds, have shared experiences, been treated certain ways because they were black."

Minority golf organizations make the case for golf's career opportunities — and the lack of minority beneficiaries. For example, less than 1 percent of golf's professional and governing positions are held by minorities, according to the National Mi-

nority Golf Foundation in Phoenix.

"Our mission is to increase minority participation in the game and business of golf," said foundation President Barbara Douglas. "We're not focused on developing the next Tiger Woods. We're focused on developing the next executive director of a golf facility, the next vice president of marketing, the next attorney for the PGA."

John Ivey, a first-timer this year in Sutton's tournament, has personally experienced golf's riches. Ivey, 49 and a Durham high school counselor, caddied for 20 years, into his early 30s. He never saw a black player on the high-dollar turf of toney Darien, Conn., where he grew up:

"The thought of playing golf never occurred to me," Ivey said. "I got home and played basketball."

While teaching middle-school gym in Connecticut, Ivey started a school golf team. As he got into the sport, he started taking his son, Jonathan. Ivey's son is finishing his second year at Kentucky State University, where he's on a full golf scholarship.

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"All the things you hear about golf — building relationships, discipline, friends — we've experienced it all," John Ivey said;

Calvin Blanton, 47 and a Raleigh CPA, says he's been golfing for fun so far, but this month he hopes it will pay off for him in business.

"I'm taking a guy out to golf, and I'm going to give him the hard sell," said Blanton, the 1999 winner of Sutton's tournament.

But for most of Sutton's players, business is only one reason to keep at the game.

"It's so close to life," said Gerald Lewis, 37 and a Greensboro business owner, as he practiced on The Pearl's driving range before Sutton's tee time. "One day, it's great, and the next day, you smell like a skunk. That's why it's so addictive — and humbling."