

## Joe Louis and the Struggle of African American Golfers for Visibility and Access

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### Abstract

This study examines the role of Joe Louis in stimulating greater interest in golf among African Americans during his reign as world heavyweight boxing champion (1937-1949) and in joining the fight to end discrimination in golf after his retirement from boxing. During his boxing career, Louis promoted golf by participating in golf tournaments as an amateur player, employing black golf professionals as his personal golf tutors, organizing his own national tournament, and creating opportunities for interracial golf competition. Failing to achieve success in creating access for black golfers to play in the prestigious, all-white, PGA golf tournaments, Louis became more aggressive in these efforts and joined the movement to end racial discrimination in the sport. While achieving limited success, Joe Louis is credited with contributing to the initial steps in removing racial barriers in golf, which eventually led to removal of the infamous “Caucasian-only” clause from the PGA constitution, thus, paving the way for Charlie Sifford and other African Americans to attain full PGA membership.

The phenomenal success of Tiger Woods, as the lone golfer of African American descent currently competing on the Professional Golfers Association Tour (PGA Tour), has also stimulated interest in race relations and the sport of golf (Sinnette 1998; McDaniel 2000; Kennedy 2000; Dawkins and Kinloch 2000; Dawkins 2003). Much of this interest has focused on the historical impact and cumulative, long-term effect of overt and institutionalized discrimination to explain why, with the exception of Woods, no African Americans are playing on the regular PGA Tour today. Particular attention has been given to the pioneering role of black golfers who competed at the professional level during the era of Jim Crow segregation in America but were formally excluded from participating in PGA events. For example, Charlie Sifford, the first African American to

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gain full PGA membership, described the racist treatment he experienced as one of a few black professional golfers attempting to play in segregated, all-white golf tournaments during the 1950s and 1960s (Sifford and Gullo 1992). Only after social and legal pressure forced the PGA to remove a long-standing clause in its constitution restricting membership to persons who were “Caucasian only,” did Sifford gain full PGA membership in 1964. Although little coverage of golf’s discriminatory past can be found in the literature on the history of golf in America (Graffis 1975; Barkow 1974), the struggles faced by black golfers during the Jim Crow era received wider treatment after Arthur Ashe (1988) briefly covered their experiences as part of a larger project examining the history of black athletes in America. The exclusionary treatment faced by African Americans who attempted to participate in mainstream golf activities extends back to the earliest appearance of golf in America during the 1890s, through the establishment of the Professional Golfers Association in 1916 and the institutionalization of discrimination in 1943, when the PGA inserted the “Caucasian only” clause into its constitution. In response to discrimination, African Americans developed their own organizations such as the United Golfers Association (UGA). The UGA, which was established in 1926, developed golf activities that paralleled the PGA, including the development of a national championship golf tournament, the “Negro National Open,” held every year from 1926 (except during World War II) until the late 1960s. The UGA and many local black golf organizations were also viewed as launching pads that would propel accomplished black golfers into the world of “mainstream” golf. Some of the black professional golfers of the Jim Crow era held the hope of one day gaining access to PGA sponsored tournaments and participation in other mainstream golf tournaments controlled by whites (Dawkins and Kinloch 2000).

An especially hopeful period for African American golfers who held aspirations of wider participation in the sport at the professional level was the decade of 1940-1950. As they witnessed the racial barrier being broken at the professional level in the major sports of baseball, football and basketball, their hopes were given a boost during this period when boxing hero, Joe Louis, became a major figure in the world of black golf. However, few accounts have documented the efforts of African Americans to break through the racial barrier in golf during the 1940s and early 1950s and the role that world heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis played in this struggle (Dawkins and Kinloch, 2000). In this paper, we focus on the role of Joe Louis in: (1) raising the level of interest in golf among African Americans, (2) promoting interracial contact between black and white professional golfers, and (3) joining forces with others to resist discrimination and push for greater access to white-controlled golf tournaments.

While much has been written about the “hero” status that Joe Louis held for millions of African Americans whose hopes and aspirations for overcoming racial oppression were lifted, at least symbolically, as he achieved success in the boxing ring, little attention has been given to his involvement in golf. Although biographical accounts of Joe Louis’s boxing exploits have received widespread attention, the few treatments of his golf activity tend to suggest that golf was pursued only as a form of leisurely relaxation and escape from boxing (Mead 1985). However, as we shall see, a closer examination will reveal that Joe Louis was a catalytic force in stimulating participation in golf by blacks, generally, and promoting interracial play among golfers at the professional level. During his reign as world heavyweight boxing champion (1937-1949), Joe Louis also devoted serious attention to his development as an amateur golfer.

Shortly after his retirement from boxing, Louis became more forcefully involved in efforts to break through long-standing racial barriers to golf tournament entry. This view of Louis as an activist in pursuit of social justice for black golfers also suggests a need to correct a widely held image of Joe Louis as uninformed, non-radical and accommodating on racial issues.

### **The Hero Status of Joe Louis in Boxing And Golf**

Among the biographical accounts of the life and career of Joe Louis, Mead’s (1985) critically acclaimed biography of Louis provides the enduring image of a hero in the black community during the highly discriminatory period of the Jim Crow era in America. By carrying the hopes and aspirations of the entire African American community with him each time he entered the boxing ring, the success of Joe Louis as a boxing champion accorded him the status of “black hero in white America” (Mead 1985). While his boxing exploits are well documented, few biographical accounts have been given of his role in the advancement of black golf in America. Instead, the few accounts of Joe Louis’s involvement in golf during his boxing career suggest that he pursued golf only as a hobby, encountered criticism because golf distracted him from competing effectively in the boxing ring, and was only marginally successful as a golfer. For example, Ashe (1988) notes that some observers attributed the loss suffered by Joe Louis in the initial fight with German boxer Max Schmeling in 1936 (before winning a return match in 1938) to the distraction of spending too much time engaging in his golf hobby. Throughout his boxing career, golf was a target for criticism whenever his performance in the ring was less than spectacular. For example, after a lackluster performance against “Jersey” Joe Walcott in 1947, where he was knocked down twice by the challenger before winning a disputed verdict, Louis was criticized for using time

needed for fight preparation engaging in his golf “hobby.” Subsequently, Joe Louis was voted “biggest disappointment” of 1947 by the nation’s sports editors in the annual year-end poll conducted by the Associated Press (*New York Times*, January 17, 1948, p. 13).

Despite such criticism, after gaining the world heavyweight boxing championship in 1937, Joe Louis increased his interest and activities in golf and became highly visible in the world of African American golf. However, unlike his success *in* the boxing ring, the success of Joe Louis *off* the golf course earned him the reputation of being an “ambassador” for black golf and should accord him the status of “golf hero.” He launched his own national golf tournament, “The Joe Louis Open,” in 1941, promoted interracial competition between black and white golf professionals, and supported black professional golfers by hiring them as his personal golf tutors, while encouraging other black athletes and celebrities to follow his example. Far from being a hobby, golf was a passion for Joe Louis during his boxing career and after he retired from the ring. His passion extended beyond enthusiasm as a player to a determination to seek visibility and social justice for the many good golfers among the ranks of African American golfers excluded from participation in the mainstream golf activities in white America. Therefore, the golf “heroics” of Joe Louis are related less to his talents as a player and more to his activities in stimulating greater interest in golf among African Americans and seeking interracial playing opportunities for talented black golfers.

### **The Joe Louis Open Golf Tournaments**

Following his victories over Jim Braddock for the heavyweight boxing title in 1937 and Max Schmeling in a return match in 1938, the mass appeal of Joe Louis as an American boxing hero received wide press coverage in the general popular media (cf. *New York New Times*, June 23, 1938, p. 14; *Look*, May 7, 1940, p. 50; *Life*, June 17, 1940, pp. 48-56; *Time*, September 29, 1941, pp. 60-64). However, only in the black press did his rising popularity as a boxing champion *and* novice golfer receive significant coverage. Such national black newspapers as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Defender* and *Baltimore Afro-American* provided detailed accounts of his boxing career and growing recognition as a serious golf enthusiast. By 1940, Louis was playing as an amateur and had begun to enter golf tournaments sponsored by local and regional affiliates of the UGA. He was particularly drawn to the local, public golf course (Rackham) in his hometown, Detroit, Michigan. According to Bernard O’Dell, Louis was persuaded by local black professional golfer, Bob Seymour, to initiate his own tournament, “The Joe Louis Open Golf Tournament,” which would become one of the major annual events in black sports, nationally

[personal interview, 1998]. Between 1941 and 1951, eight “Joe Louis Open” golf tournaments were held in Detroit and attracted the top black golfers from around the country, while providing greater exposure for them and the sport of golf throughout black America. O’Dell served as tournament director for five of these tournaments and indicated that, while the idea for the tournaments was Seymour’s, Louis enthusiastically lent his name to the event [personal interview, 1998]. Since there was only one national tournament for black golfers (the UGA’s Negro National Open), the Joe Louis tournament served as a second, and equally attractive, tournament for the best black golfers in the country, while offering a larger purse than the UGA national tournament. The mass appeal and media coverage of Louis as world heavyweight boxing champion was expected to increase the visibility of African American golf to the public and raise prospects of a black golfer being eventually selected as a “break-through” player in all-white, professional golf tournaments. Ironically, this would become a reality during the 1940s in the popular sport of baseball, when Jackie Robinson broke into the major leagues in 1947, six years after the first Joe Louis golf tournament was held.

### **The Joe Louis Open Tournaments as a Showcase for Talented Black Golfers**

Joe Louis was enthusiastically involved in the initial tournament and saw it as an opportunity to showcase the talents of black golfers as serious competitors. He put up the \$1,000 prize money and stated: “I think this tournament will prove conclusively to our white friends that we have some [Walter] Hagens and [Gene] Sarazens in our group” (*Baltimore Afro-American*, March 15, 1941, p. 21); further noting that “It is my aim in giving this tournament to promote and introduce our leading Negro golfers into the golfing world. We have a number of golf pros playing ‘par’ and ‘below par’ golf who are not known to the general public... [and] have a right to their place in the world of sports” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, July 12, 1941, p. 17).

Throughout the decade between 1941 and 1951, evidence indicates that the Joe Louis Open Golf Tournament did, indeed, provide a showcase for talented black golfers and increased their national visibility through coverage in the black press. The first Joe Louis tournament was held at Detroit’s Rackham golf course in 1941 on August 12, 13 and 14, the weekend before the annual UGA national championship, which was already scheduled for August 19 through the 22<sup>nd</sup> in Boston. The date of the tournament was strategically selected to lure the best black golfers throughout the nation, who would normally attend the UGA championship but could now attend the Joe Louis Open, first, and then go directly to the

UGA championship the following weekend. More than 250 entrants were anticipated as the black press gave extensive coverage, with the *Baltimore Afro-American* calling it “the largest of its kind ever sponsored by colored people” (*Baltimore Afro-American*, March 15, 1941, p. 21) and “the richest tournament among colored golfers” (*Baltimore Afro-American*, July 19, 1941, p. 20). The lure of Joe Louis’ name (*Richmond Afro-American*, August 16, 1941, p. 21 ) produced the greatest amount of attention that had ever been given to black golf as amateurs and professionals throughout the nation made plans to be a part of this history-making, double-dose of black golf extravaganza (Dawkins and Kinloch 2000).

The enticement of \$500 top prize for the winner in the professional division and the greater visibility than in any previous year were factors which generated even greater interest in the Joe Louis tournament than the UGA annual Negro National Open championship, where the tournament winner had become traditionally regarded as the “champion” of black golf. Among the notable black stars expected to compete at the first Joe Louis tournament, the leading contenders included past UGA national champions Robert “Pat” Ball, John Brooks Dendy, Howard Wheeler, Edison Marshall and local (Detroit) professionals, Clyde Martin, Bob Seymour, Ben Davis and Eddie Jackson. Another local golfer, Dr. Remus Robinson, who was the reigning national amateur champion, was among the favorites to capture the first Joe Louis Open amateur crown (*Pittsburgh Courier*, August 2, 1941, p. 17). Chicago pro, Pat Ball, was given the inside track by some observers who expected him to win because he won the UGA National Open championship when it was last held at Detroit’s Rackham course in 1934. Others felt that Clyde Martin, who was Joe Louis’ personal golf instructor at the time, was the favorite (*Pittsburgh Courier*, August 9, 1941, p. 16). In recent practice rounds on the Rackham course, Martin shot a 69, two under par, and was continuing to blister the course (*Pittsburgh Courier*, August 2, 1941, p. 17). However, tournament director, Bernard O’Dell, noted that the large field of challengers included long shots among the outstanding black professional and amateur golfers from the Far West, the Atlantic Seaboard and the Deep South (*Baltimore Afro-American*, August 2, 1941, p. 21). Many of the 68 pros and 118 amateurs scheduled to play were less known, nationally, but considered outstanding golfers in their local communities and welcomed the opportunity for wider exposure which participation in the Joe Louis tournament would bring. Included in this group were Jerry Hood (Chicago, IL), Tup Holmes and Hugh Smith (Atlanta, GA), Landy Taylor and Walter Stewart (Norfolk, VA), Joe Roach (New York, NY), Lonnie Shields (Seattle, WA), Pleasant Goodwin (Washington, D.C.), Sam Shephard (St. Louis, MO), and Mac Dalton (Milwaukee, WI) (*Pittsburgh Courier*, August 16, 1941, p. 17).

The first Joe Louis Open Golf Tournament lived up to its billing as a headliner in black sports and attracted the major black amateur and professional black golfers throughout the country. The excitement generated by the wide publicity given by the black press was matched by the sterling performance of black golfers at this first Joe Louis tournament. As Dawkins and Kinloch (2000) describe, the competitive play in the final round of the tournament was clear evidence of the high level of skillful performance indicative of black professional golfers. The winner in the pro division was not decided until the last few holes as Clyde Martin started the final 18 holes with a one stroke lead over challenger, Calvin Searles. Earlier in the round, Searles claimed the lead for the first time and tried unsuccessfully to maintain it. As approximately 1,000 spectators followed the golf stars around the course, Martin was two down going into the seventh hole. Searles took seven on the par-5 seventh hole, while Martin had a birdie to recapture the lead. Although Martin appeared to be in the driver's seat, up by three going into the last nine holes, Searles had evened it up again by the 12<sup>th</sup> and jumped out in front on the par-3 thirteenth hole when he scored a birdie. However, Martin evened it up again on the fourteenth hole, when he took a five and Searles a six. Martin shot par golf from the fifteenth through the eighteenth hole to close with a two-stroke margin (292 total for the 72 hole event) over Searles (294), who finished one over par on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> holes (*Pittsburgh Courier*, August 23, 1941, p. 17). Although Searles finished second, he was tied by Zeke Hartsfield of Atlanta, who came on with two rounds of 69, the best two rounds in the tournament, on the final day. Four golfers finished at 301, including Theodore Rhodes, who would become the next pro to tutor Louis, Ben Greene of New Orleans, along with local favorites Ben Davis and Bob Seymour of Detroit. Howard Wheeler finished in eighth place at 302, while Solomon Hughes of Gadsden, Alabama and Eddie Jackson of Detroit shared ninth place with 303 totals (*Chicago Defender*, August 23, 1941, p. 25).

The success of the first Joe Louis Open golf tournament in 1941 gave a tremendous lift to the hopes and aspirations of black golfers. However, the boxing feats of Joe Louis in 1941 may have overshadowed interest in the white press of covering his eventful golf tournament of the same year. In 1941, Louis successfully defended his boxing championship five times from January to May in what some called the "bum-a-month" campaign, leading to a historic 6<sup>th</sup> fight in June against Billy Conn and a record 7<sup>th</sup> defense against Lou Nova in September (Capeci and Wilkerson 1983). While the first Joe Louis Open tournament was a rousing success, plans were cut short for the 1942 staging of what were now regarded as the premier "twin" events in black golf, the Joe Louis Open in Detroit and the

UGA National Open scheduled for Washington, D.C. The United States' entered World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Joe Louis, himself, joined the military as both the Joe Louis Open and UGA Negro National Open golf tournaments were canceled until the close of the war in 1945. However, the resumption of the tournament in 1945 and subsequent tournaments between 1946 and 1951 continued to produce exciting play for recognized veterans and emerging "stars" of black golf. A list of champions (professional division) of Joe Louis Open Tournaments held between 1941 and 1951 are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Joe Louis Open Golf Tournament Winners, 1941 – 1951**

Year	Winner (Professional Division)
1941	Clyde Martin
1942-44	(No Competition-World War II)
1945	Solomon Hughes
1946	Theodore Rhodes
1947	Theodore Rhodes
1948	Theodore Rhodes
1949	Theodore Rhodes
1950	Al Besselink
1951	Howard Wheeler

Among the most notable emerging stars showcased at the Joe Louis tournaments were Bill Spiller, Ted Rhodes and Charlie Sifford. William "Bill" Spiller, a member of Los Angeles' Cosmopolitan Golf Club, won the Joe Louis Open amateur championship in 1946 (*Pittsburgh Courier*, August 3, 1946, p. 28) and began playing as a professional in 1947. Later, Spiller would become one of the forceful black golfers in the push for PGA entry. By 1946, Theodore "Ted" Rhodes of Nashville had ascended to the top as the most highly regarded black golfer nationally. Ted Rhodes had become the most consistent winner in tournaments that he entered and became Joe Louis's private teaching pro. Louis, in turn, supported the career of Rhodes, who was one of the best hopes for black pros to break through the PGA race barrier. Rhodes not only won in 1946, but dominated in following years, winning four consecutive Joe Louis Open championship titles from 1946 to 1949. Charles "Charlie" Sifford was another participant in the Joe Louis tournaments whose recognition was continuing to grow. Originally from Charlotte, North Carolina, Sifford came up through the caddy ranks and moved to Philadelphia, where he was influenced by Howard Wheeler and other established golfers. In 1948, Sifford was rated by his peers as the



most improved pro golfer on the tournament circuit and the main reason for the success of Teddy Rhodes, who had to go all out to top him. Sifford's short game was described as being very good with iron shots true to the pin and a putting touch that was equally true, leading tournament director, Bernard O'Dell to predict that "with more experience, [in] about two years, Sifford may become Negro golf's top man" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, July 31, 1948, p.15).

### **The Joe Louis Open Tournaments as a Context for Interracial Golf Competition**

The Joe Louis golf tournaments also became a staging ground to promote interracial golf competition. From the outset, Louis was able to arrange an exhibition match between well known white professionals and noted black pro golfers. The purpose of these matches was to demonstrate how well African American golfers performed against established white golf pros. In these matches, black golfers accorded themselves well against white competitors. For example, in the first Joe Louis tournament in 1941, an exhibition match was arranged between two white pros, brothers Emerick and Chuck Kocsis, and two of the outstanding black pros, Clyde Martin and Howard Wheeler. In fact, it became the highlight of the tournament drawing close attention to how well African Americans performed in direct competition with white pro golfers. Emerick Kocsis was the current state PGA champion, while Chuck was a former American Walker Cup star and leading pro. Martin and Wheeler were logical choices for Louis to select to represent black pros. Louis thought very highly of Martin, who was his personal golf instructor, while Wheeler was a three-time UGA National Open champion. Wheeler was also a gallery favorite, known for his colorful play, such as an unorthodox, cross-handed grip which produced long drives from a tee made of paper match boxes. The exhibition match became even more of an attraction when a friendly side bet of \$400 on the white pros against "Joe's pros" was put up by a group of white golf enthusiasts in attendance. The thrilling match was clinched by Wheeler and Martin (3-2), with the deciding shot made by Wheeler as he exploded from a trap for a birdie on the 380-yard fifteenth hole. Veteran golfers who witnessed the shot called it "one of the best of the season" (*Baltimore Afro-American*, August 23, 1941, p. 22). The Kocsis brothers were gracious in defeat, stating that "it was the first time that they had played against colored golfers, but they had enjoyed the match and would like to play again... [further noting that] the colored golfers should be real proud of Joe Louis who was the finest sport they had ever met" (*Richmond Afro-American*, August 30, 1941, p. 22). The Kocsis brothers also commented on the performance of Clyde Martin, who won the first Joe Louis Open tournament championship in 1941, stating that "Clyde would be among the first twenty [golfers] in the

country if given a chance in big-time company” (*Richmond Afro-American*, August 30, 1941, p. 22).

By the end of the decade, Joe Louis expanded efforts to promote interracial play through invitations extended directly to white golfers to enter the regular field of entrants to the Joe Louis Open tournament. For example, at the 1949 Joe Louis Open, white golfers were invited to enter and a major press conference was held to announce to a national audience that black golfers would play in direct competition with their white counterparts. Also in that year (1949), the UGA championship and Joe Louis Open tournaments were being held in the same city on back-to-back weekends. Therefore, the press conference announcing the coming of the 1949 UGA and Joe Louis tournaments to Detroit generated significant attention. The press gathering was held at Detroit’s Gotham Hotel, with the governor of the state of Michigan, G. Mennen Williams, donating trophies for the two events. Many of the state’s leading dignitaries stood alongside the governor at the press conference. Also on hand to lend his support to the two tournaments was world renown golfer, Walter Hagen, one of professional golf’s pioneers, who held many championship titles including a record 4 PGA championships in a row from 1924 to 1927. Joe Louis increased his sponsorship purse to attract stronger interest than in previous tournaments in hopes of promoting interracial participation. The cash prize of \$4,000 provided by Louis was the largest amount ever offered by a private individual sponsor, even surpassing the \$3,000 that Bing Crosby annually provided for his Hollywood Open tournament. Both tournaments were also scheduled to be aired over the recently instituted medium of television (*Pittsburgh Courier*, August 20, 1949, p. 24).

The 1949 Joe Louis Open Golf tournament was won by Ted Rhodes, as he had done in the three previous years, but he set a record by also winning the UGA title six days earlier (*Pittsburgh Courier*, September 3, 1949, p. 22) to become the only golfer to win both of these titles in the same year (*Pittsburgh Courier*, September 10, 1949a, p. 18). While Rhodes turned in his usual sterling performance, the tournament took on added significance as the runner-up was a white, Michigan PGA pro, Mike Dietz, who tied for second with Robert McCockrell of Newark. Dietz was one of several whites who were invited by Joe Louis to play in the tournament. Another white golfer, Elmer Priskhorn, shared a fifth place tie with Charlie Sifford (*Pittsburgh Courier*, September 10, 1949a, p. 18). At the event’s closing, televised interviews were held with Louis, Rhodes, Dietz, and amateur champion, Emmet Hollins, who were all congratulated by Detroit’s mayor, Eugene Van Antwerp (*Pittsburgh Courier*, September 10, 1949b, p. 18).

The efforts by Joe Louis to promote interracial competition finally appeared to be paying off as expectations were rising that the showcase of black talent displayed in the 1949 twin black golf championship tournaments provided convincing evidence of the competitiveness of black professional golfers. Adding to this atmosphere of rising expectations for African American golfers who held aspirations of entering the PGA were two earlier events. The first event was the racial breakthrough in the sport of baseball, with the signing of Jackie Robinson to the major league's Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. The second event was an out of court settlement reached in 1948 in relationship to a suit filed against the PGA by black golfers Bill Spiller, Ted Rhodes and Madison Gunter. Spiller, Rhodes and Gunter, who were denied entry to the PGA sponsored Richmond Hills Open Golf Tournament in California, were persuaded by their lawyer to drop their law suit in exchange for a promise by the PGA to review its "whites only" provision (McRae, 1991; *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 24, 1948, p. 9). The stellar performance of African American golfers at the 1949 Joe Louis Open Golf Tournament, especially in direct competition with white professionals, was the final signal that the timing was right for a racial breakthrough in golf. Despite high expectations generated by these events and continuing efforts by Joe Louis and others to promote interracial golf competition, the decade of the 1940s ended without any progress in the struggle of African American golfers to gain access to tournaments controlled by whites.

### **Joe Louis and the Push for PGA Entry**

Although the Joe Louis tournaments were successful in stimulating greater interest in golf among African Americans and promoting interracial competition, they failed to open up opportunities for black professional golfers in breaking through continuing racial barriers in the sport. In the early 1950s, Louis became involved in more aggressive efforts to fight the continuing exclusion of blacks from all-white golf tournaments. For example, as law suits were filed against cities that maintained segregated public golf courses, Joe Louis joined in protesting against such discriminatory practices. Louis commented forcefully in 1950 when black golfers were not permitted to enter the Bing Crosby and Long Beach Open golf tournaments in California. He wrote Mayor Burton Chase of Long Beach and blasted the exclusion of blacks from the Long Beach Open, stating that "prejudice and discrimination have no place in sports" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, June 28, 1950, p. 21). The Long Beach mayor's response became a typical answer to such charges during this period. He pointed out that the Long Beach Open was co-sponsored with the Professional Golfers Association which sets all rules and regulations. Therefore, the matter was out of his hands or those of the local sponsor, the Long Beach Lions Club (*Pittsburgh Courier*, June 28, 1950, p. 21). The PGA continued to maintain its exclusionary

“Caucasian only” policy, which was clearly inconsistent with the times as baseball and other sports began to reverse their policies and practices of racial exclusion.

Although black golfers were not permitted to participate in PGA co-sponsored events, a few non-PGA golf tournaments allowed them to enter. For example, black golfers could enter the annual Los Angeles Open tournament and pit their skills against many leading white golfers. African American golfers were also invited to play in the All American and World Championship tournaments at the Tam O’Shanter Golf and Country Club near Chicago. These tournaments were organized by the Club’s flamboyant president, George May, and, while providing an opportunity for black golfers to demonstrate their skills against some of the leading white pros during the 1940s and early 1950s, the Tam O’Shanter tournaments were not regarded as mainstream, since May introduced golf patrons to a carnival-like atmosphere. Nevertheless, by the early 1950s several of the top black golfers, including Ted Rhodes, Bill Spiller, Howard Wheeler and the young Charlie Sifford, were able to demonstrate through participation in these events that they were primed for PGA entry. These black golfers, and others, felt that they could continue to elevate their game if opportunities for expanded play with stiffer competition were available. However, the PGA continued to use race as the basis for excluding them from PGA membership and participation in its events. Nevertheless, Joe Louis was determined, as Chester Washington of the *Pittsburgh Courier* noted, “to keep punching until old jim crow is counted out in golfing circles” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 28, 1950, p. 21).

As Dawkins and Kinloch (2000) note, the opportunity for a “return match” with the PGA came in 1952 in a well publicized confrontation between Joe Louis and the PGA in relationship to a co-sponsored golf tournament in San Diego, California. Joe Louis and black pro golfers, Bill Spiller and Eural Clark, applied for entry to the \$10,000 San Diego Open. The local sponsors of the tournament, San Diego Chevrolet Dealers, at first welcomed their application and invited them to compete, but then told them that the invitation had to be rescinded because of a PGA ruling that did not allow blacks to participate in PGA sponsored events. Joe Louis’ reaction and the ensuing battle became national headline news and received coverage in the country’s leading newspapers. The *New York Times* carried a blow-by-blow account of the golf fight leading up to and during the week of the tournament (January 15-20, 1952). Louis’ initial response to the PGA-invoked ban on their participation was that this battle was the “biggest fight of his life” and, in making an analogy between the PGA and its president, Horton Smith, and the Nazis at the time of his 1938

boxing match with Max Schmeling, He “want[ed] the people to know... we got another Hitler to get by” (*New York Times*, January 15, 1952, p. 31). The *New York Times* article was accompanied by a photo of Louis, who was now retired from boxing, in full golf attire holding a raised golf club in his hand with the caption heading “The Brown Bomber Fights Again.” Realizing that Louis was galvanizing national support for his fight against the discriminatory PGA policy, Smith immediately called a meeting of the seven-member PGA tournament committee and the co-sponsors to seek a face-saving resolution to the ordeal. In the meantime, Bill Spiller and Eural Clark as pros were allowed to play qualifying rounds, where Clark fell short of qualifying by two strokes (79-77 for a 156 total), while Spiller just made it with a 152 total. Since Louis was an amateur, he did not have to play a qualifying round. The PGA tournament committee decided to approve the invitation for Joe Louis to play as an invited amateur under a rule that permitted local sponsors to invite ten amateurs exempting them from qualifying. However, despite his performance in the qualifying rounds, the PGA committee declared that as a professional golfer “the PGA bylaws and other qualification rules could not be waived in the case of Spiller except through changes in the PGA constitution” (*New York Times*, January 16, 1952, p. 30). This action drew criticism from some groups which saw the PGA as attempting to maintain its historic practice of golf bias. For example, the top national officers of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) adopted a resolution which called for the PGA to end its ban on black players entering its professional tournaments. The CIO pointed out that admitting Joe Louis to participate while excluding Bill Spiller served only to emphasize the discriminatory PGA policy (*New York Times*, January 19, 1952a, p. 19). Since Horton Smith predicted that the PGA would take up the non-Caucasian rule at its next annual meeting with an eye toward its removal, Louis reluctantly agreed to play in the tournament. However, Louis made it clear that he would continue the effort “to eliminate racial prejudice from golf, the last sport in which it now exists” (*New York Times*, January 16, 1952, p. 30). Joe Louis, therefore, became the first African American to play in a PGA co-sponsored tournament.

Expressing dissatisfaction with the decision by the PGA tournament committee to continue the ban on black professional golfers, Bill Spiller re-appealed for an explanation of his ineligibility and threatened to sue the PGA, as he had done four years earlier before agreeing to an out of court settlement when the PGA promised to review its “Caucasian-only” policy in 1948. A truce was reached on the issue generated by the 1952 San Diego Open affair whereby PGA president Smith he would seek PGA tournament committee approval of an “approved entry clause,” which would permit the tournament committee to circumvent the PGA constitutional restriction

by devising a supplemental list of black golfers to compete in a PGA tournament provided the names were approved by the local sponsor and the host club of a city (*New York Times*, January 18, 1952, p. 31). Under the plan, a special committee of black golfers would screen their own players with the aim of selecting one professional and one amateur to play in each PGA sponsored tournament. The proposed screening committee would be co-chaired by Joe Louis and Ted Rhodes with Eural Clark, Bill Spiller and Howard Wheeler as other members (*New York Times*, January 19, 1952, p. 19).

As the San Diego Open reached its final day, the fate of the proposed plan rather than the golf action itself received top billing by the *New York Times* which carried an article with the heading "P.G.A. Committee Votes to Ease Tourney Ban on Negro Players" followed by the subheading "Action to Help Admit Them to Co-Sponsored Events Effective at Once, Smith Says" and finally a second subheading "[Ted] Kroll's 206 Leads in San Diego Open" (*New York Times*, January 20, 1952, p. S1). Kroll eventually won the San Diego Open, his first major golf tournament victory, after holding off the pressure applied by veteran Jimmy Demaret (*Miami Herald*, January 21, 1952, p. 1-D). Also, hardly noticed was the elimination of Joe Louis earlier in the week as he finished the first 36 holes with a score of 158, eight strokes over the 150 needed to qualify for the final 36 holes of the tournament (*New York Times*, January 19, 1952b, p. 19).

While the historic plan was characterized as a lifting of the PGA tournament ban on black golfers, the door to participation could still be closed at the discretion of local sponsors or clubs. PGA president Horton Smith expressed the desire that these groups would invite blacks but was careful to note in describing the details of the plan that the "P.G.A. actually is a guest at wherever tournaments are played and must necessarily be governed by rights of local sponsors, and clubs" (*New York Times*, January 20, 1952, p. S1). Co-sponsors of PGA tournaments held in the South or, for that matter, any place that wanted to maintain its traditional practices of racial discrimination could do so without facing pressure from the PGA or sponsors in other cities. Critics of the plan in the African American community argued that "no committee was named to pick Jackie Robinson to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers, nor Marion Motley to play [football] with the Cleveland Browns. Each was judged on his ability" (*Chicago Defender*, January 26, 1952, p. 19). Therefore, while the confrontation of 1952 in San Diego initiated by Joe Louis (and Bill Spiller) drew national attention to the ongoing battle to end the PGA's Jim Crow policy, the result of these efforts represented partial removal rather than complete destruction of the racial barrier to full black participation in PGA events. This "crack" in the racial

barrier, nevertheless, enabled African American golfers to begin playing in PGA tournaments for the first time in 1952 when “invited” by the PGA (provided that local sponsors did not oppose). Only a handful of black golfers were able to take advantage of this “opportunity,” given the lack of resource support needed to sustain “touring” black players and other risks associated with such an undertaking. The immediate effect of the new policy was that black golfers were permitted to participate in 10 PGA tournaments in 1952 and 15 in 1953; however, none of these tournaments were held in the South (McRae 1991). Charlie Sifford was the only African American golfer who played on a sustained basis in PGA co-sponsored tournaments beginning in 1952 as an “invited guest.” Despite not having the sponsorship support of most white touring professional golfers and facing racial threats, Sifford embarked on this long journey, which eventually led him to become the first black golfer to gain full PGA membership in 1964 and, in 2004, the first African American to be inducted into the prestigious World Golf Hall of Fame. Joe Louis can be seen as a major catalyst, who paved the way for the assault on the PGA “Caucasian only” policy and its removal under social and legal pressure in 1961 leading to Sifford’s achievements (Dawkins 2003).

### Conclusion

In this paper we examined the role of world heavyweight champion boxer, Joe Louis, in stimulating greater interest in the sport of golf among African Americans and participating in efforts to end discrimination against black golfers during the period of his national prominence, especially in the 1940’s and early 1950’s. Unlike many of the early black golfers whose initial exposure to golf came through caddying at exclusive white country clubs, Louis was attracted to the sport after excelling in boxing. However, his enthusiasm and passion for golf matched that of those blacks who rose from the caddy ranks to become recognized golfers throughout black communities in America. At the height of his recognition as world heavyweight boxing champion, Joe Louis became a serious golfer, who not only pursued an amateur career but also supported the careers of other black golfers. He also expanded playing opportunities and promoted interracial golf competition by creating his own tournament which became an instant national success. The Joe Louis Open tournament was a showcase for displaying the talents of African American golf stars, increasing interest in golf among blacks generally and providing a staging ground for the promotion of interracial contact and cooperation in golf. Therefore, Louis became an “ambassador” of black golf, a role which was expected to break the long standing racial barrier to greater access to playing opportunities for blacks. Failing to produce these results, however, Louis turned to a more aggressive approach, using his notoriety to draw

national attention and outrage to the PGA's denial of access by blacks to PGA sponsored events. Although the more militant stance produced limited initial results, these efforts coincided with the rise in direct actions attacking racial exclusion growing out of the civil rights movement of the 1950's. Louis, therefore, helped to draw attention to golf discrimination and opened limited opportunities which increased the chances of a few black golfers to play in PGA events as non-touring players. Another consequence of Louis' involvement in golf was the impact of his activities on increasing the coverage of black golf in the media, especially the black press. The overwhelmingly greater coverage of baseball by the black press during the heydays of the Negro leagues of the mid 1940's yielded a bit as Louis attracted attention to golf through his travels and involvement in golf tournaments and informal play. Finally, this paper reveals that Joe Louis played an active and sometimes aggressive leadership role in pursuit of social justice for African American golfers, suggesting a need to correct the image that is often presented of Louis as non-radical and accommodating on racial issues.



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