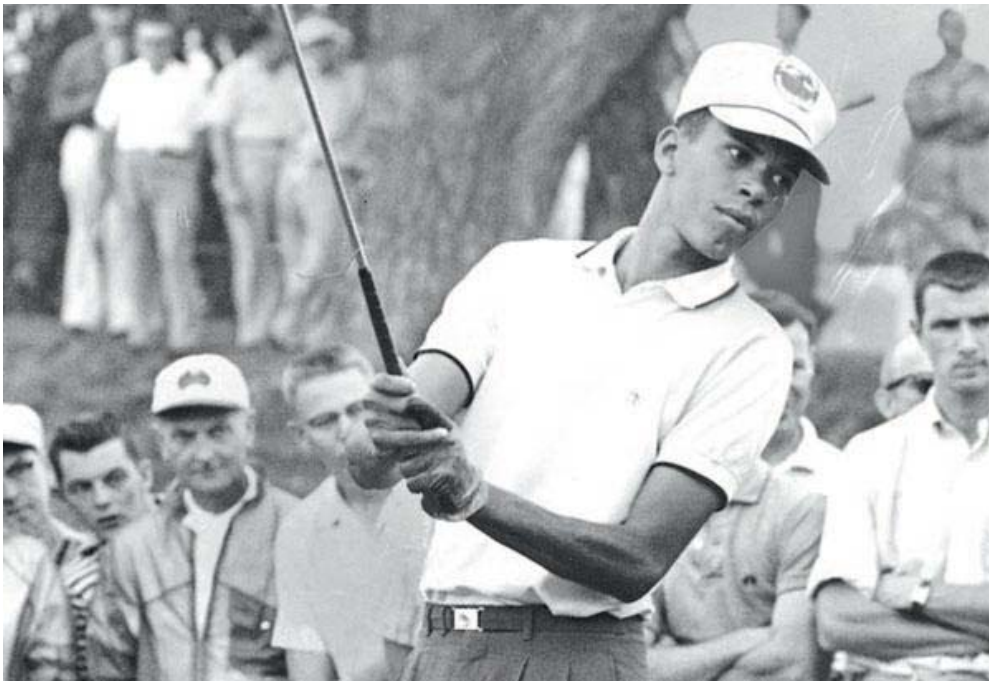


SPORTS > GOLF

Bill Wright broke golf color barrier



Bill Wright watches a putt during his 3-and-2 victory over Frank Campbell to win the U.S. Amateur Public Links title at Wellshire Golf Club in 1959.

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Totally unexpected, at age 73, Bill Wright finds himself feeling frisky in the midst of something of a renaissance. When some of the contestants at the recent NCAA Division II golf championship in his native Seattle asked if he still played, Wright, a featured speaker at the event, challenged them to join him on the first hole and see for themselves. Similarly, he says coworkers at the course where he still teaches four days a week, hard against Los Angeles International Airport, are looking upon him with a newfound sense of respect.

All this because of something that happened 50 years ago this week at Wellshire Golf Course in Denver. Wright entered the United States Golf Association's Amateur Public Links Championship just hoping to make the cut into the match-play round of 64. He did that and a great deal more, beating out 2,434 other competitors to make history. Or, as the USGA put it, "The new Amateur Public Links Champion of the United States Golf Association is William A. Wright, of Seattle, Wash., a Negro and the first of his race to win a national championship in golf."

"I feel guilty about talking about this," Wright said this week in a telephone conversation from his home. "I'm surprised (at the attention), and I keep getting surprised. I mean, it was 50 years ago.

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"But it seems like people have found a new Bill Wright. I mean, I'm not an overly modest man, I'm not real quiet, but you don't go around saying that you're all this or all that. So people around me know that I played golf, but they probably didn't know the story."

This tale began in Seattle, when Bob Wright, an accomplished golfer who would actually qualify for the Public Links three years after his son's big victory, tried to get Bill to take up the game at age 14. His effort was met with great resistance.

"He knew he couldn't get me to play golf because of how it was looked at in the black community," Wright said. "I also played the violin at the time. And I would have to go through the parks in Seattle carrying my golf clubs and my violin, and it was real hard not to get hurt doing that."

An all-city basketball player, the 6-foot-2 Wright became serious about golf when his dad introduced him to a local junior champion and suggested he'd never become good enough to compete with him. Within a year, Wright beat him.

But even after gaining a respectable level of proficiency, there were hurdles to clear to get to the Public Links.

In order to enter the tournament, players had to be members of a public course and carry an official USGA handicap. At that time in Seattle, Wright said, there were courses where Chinese, Japanese and black players were welcome and even played with handicaps, but they weren't recognized by the USGA.

"My parents fought for it, and eventually there was a law passed that said we had to be allowed to join the public courses," Wright said. "After that happened, there weren't a lot of happy faces. There was this undercurrent of tension."

When he arrived in Denver, Wright said his only goal was to justify the struggle it took to get there, "so I wouldn't look like a fool."

On the second day of stroke play, Wright three-putted the 18th hole for par and a 36-hole score of 149.

"I was thinking that I'd missed the cut," he said. "Then a guy came up and was all excited about making it. I asked him what he shot and he said 150. I said, 'I don't think that'll do it.'"

"He said, 'No, I'm already in.' I went to the leaderboard and there I was."

Having accomplished his primary goal, Wright said he began to realize he had a pretty good chance to do more. Indeed, he began blitzing the field. Playing with just 12 clubs, two under the legal limit, Wright began routing his opponents.

"My stroke-play score was the second-to-last in the field, so in the first round of match play I had to face the second-best player," he said. "I birdied the first hole and parred the second and third holes. I birdied the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth holes, and I did that every single day."

He breezed through the first three rounds of match play to reach the 36-hole semifinals against Don Essig III, the 1957 PubLinks champion. On the sixth hole of that match, Essig faced a tough chip shot from the back of the green. Trying to play through some noise from spectators, Essig flubbed the shot and lost the hole.

Afterward, Wright approached the noisemakers.

"Some of you folks bothered him on that shot," he said. "It was very unfair. Please give him a better break so he can play his regular game."

Speaking years later, during the tournament's 75th anniversary, Essig recalled that story, saying of Wright, "Bill's always been a perfect gentleman."

After closing out Essig, Wright took on Frank Campbell of Jacksonville, Fla., in the 36-hole final, winning 3 and 2.

After claiming the championship, the USGA wrote that at times, Wright seemed "ill at ease because of his lack of familiarity with championship procedures. Nevertheless, his innate fairness always showed through."

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Bill Wright

Age: 73

Residence: Los Angeles

Occupation: Teaching pro

Claim to fame: Became first African-American to win a USGA-sponsored event, the U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship held at Wellshire Golf Course in 1959.

Background: Wright joined the PGA Tour in his 20s but found it hard to get sponsors and eventually quit and became a teaching pro. He has been an instructor at The Lakes at El Segundo golf course near the Los Angeles airport for the past 25 years. ... Played in four U.S. Senior Opens. ... Attended University of Washington out of high school but transferred to Western Washington when he was not allowed to play golf at UW. Won medalist honors at the 1960 NAIA National Tournament while representing Western Washington.

Being in the swing of things, circa 1959

A look some of golf's other highlights 50 years ago when Bill Wright won the Public Links:

Jack Nicklaus, 19, wins the U.S. Amateur at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs.

Gary Player takes the British Open at Muirfield, the first of his nine major titles.

Karsten Solheim designs the first heel-toe weighted putter, the 1-A. He later founds Ping.

Masters champion Art Wall leads men's yearly money leaders (\$53,167.60).

LPGA champion Betsy Rawls leads the women's money list (\$26,774).



Anthony Cotton

Anthony Cotton is a former reporter for The Denver Post.



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