

Tiger's Honorary Grandfather

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

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Watching the pros warm up on the practice range at Torrey Pines during the U.S. Open, I noticed Chi-Chi Rodriguez standing next to his pal Charlie Sifford. You wouldn't recognize Charlie or know his significance if you aren't a long-time follower of professional golf. But Sifford, who just turned 86, holds a special place in the history and politics of the PGA Tour. He was the first black to break the color barrier and he did it with strength and dignity, despite being subjected to ugly acts of prejudice and humiliation all along the way.

Sifford has said, "There's not a man on this tour who could have gone through what I went through to be a golfer. I still can't believe I went so long without breaking down or quitting the game... I don't smile much, and I never laugh. It's just something that's in me. If you'd been through what I've been through, you wouldn't be smiling, either."

But despite having to take the arrows in his back for being the chief scout for blacks in pro golf, he also made it clear he'd do it all over again: "I was made for a tough life, because I'm a tough man. And in the end I won; I got a lot of black people playing golf. That's good enough. If I had to do it over again, I'd do it exactly the same way."

Sifford paved the way for Tiger Woods, who considers him his "honorary grandfather." Woods was born in 1975, the same year Sifford won the PGA Seniors Championship.

A California lawsuit caused the PGA to strike the "Caucasian members only" clause in 1960, and Sifford got an official PGA Approved Players card for a one-year trial. Renewal depended upon his ability to win among the ranks of whites. He was almost 40 at the time and was older than the average PGA golfer. Nevertheless, he managed to remain among the top 60 money winners for a whole decade, from 1960 until 1969. He won twice, in 1967 becoming the first Black player to win on the tour. His second victory came in the 1969 Los Angeles Open, where I remember seeing him perpetually chomping on a cigar—even while he swung his club. He began smoking cigars at age 12 and stopped only recently on doctor's orders. Sifford didn't have a graceful swing like Tiger Woods but he kept the ball in play and could shoot some low scores.

Before his days on the tour, Sifford worked for ten years as a valet and personal golf instructor for the singer and bandleader Billy Eckstine. During this time, he won the Negro National Open five times in a row beginning in 1952. He also became friends with the boxing champion Joe Louis and baseball great Jackie Robinson. He had run into Jackie Robinson in California in 1947 and told him what he wanted to do. Robinson told him to go ahead and take the challenge "if you're not a quitter." That's when Sifford decided to turn pro.

Sifford knew he'd never be invited into the deep South to play in the Masters in Augusta, Georgia. And he was right. While he seems not to have made a big deal of it, the irony that Tiger Woods' brilliance ended up smashing through the tournament organizers' barriers must not have escaped him.

In 2004 Sifford was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame and his induction speech was given by Gary Player. It was about time that a man who just wanted to play the game but stumbled into being a civil rights warrior finally got his due.

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