

THE DIG

HOT TOPICS WITH HARVEY SILVERMAN



The African American Golf Expo and Forum

“We play, we pay, we count”

By Harvey Silverman

In an industry overly focused on what’s wrong with the game, the inaugural **African American Golf Expo and Forum** was a powerful reminder of why a game that began small on the craggy coast of the North Sea 500 years ago is today an international game played by millions – a reminder made particularly poignant by the fact that it comes from a golf community that for most of that history was

not welcomed. A flawed history often overseen by flawed leaders perhaps, but a game sufficiently great to overcome all of that if it will just embrace all who love and want to be a part of it.”

This quote from my friend Craig Kessler, Director of Government Affairs for the Southern California Golf Association, portrays the essence of why he and I traveled across the country to Atlanta to observe and participate in this event. We gain nothing by letting events like this stay hidden from view, so allow me a

few words to describe the scene and its importance to golf’s growth and increased commitment to diversity and inclusion.

The most basic truth is that Black folk’s love of the game is no different from any other race or ethnicity that chases little white balls on a green landscape. Their rich history in the game was on full display. The opening conveyed spirituality with a prayer, while speakers and attendees conveyed an unmistakable passion for golf. Spirituality and passion, mixed with some

Black culture, made for an exciting vibe I’ve not experienced at the many golf events I’ve attended over 25 years.

My one complaint was the inability to attend sessions run concurrently. So I had to pick and choose and likely missed some interesting and relevant points of view. Here’s a synopsis of what I saw and heard.

Dave Pillsbury, CEO of ClubCorp, made my day announcing that ClubCorp had changed the names of two clubs formerly with “Plantation” in their names. So we’re slowly whittling down that legacy to a repressive period in U.S. history. Pillsbury described his company’s new initiatives, resulting from Pillsbury’s and his leadership team’s “awakening” spawned by the George Floyd video.

ClubCorps’ D&I initiative has four planks: D&I educational training every year for every employee; recruiting from a broader spectrum of the local populations; identify minority workers who are stuck in their jobs and develop them on new career tracks; incorporate diversity and inclusion education modules from the University of Las Vegas.

Club Corp unveiled its ClubLife Gateway program in February. You can read more about it [here](#), but the short story is how ClubCorp has awarded 80 First Tee kids with junior membership scholarships at 22 clubs to develop their game and explore the possibilities golf can provide for their futures. Included are tee times, use of practice areas, and the opportunity to compete in events. According to Pillsbury, club members enthusiastically have stepped up as mentors to the youth, empowering them to build their strength of character on and off the course. At the same time, the mentors and members expand their worldview beyond the clubs’ gates.

The title of one seminar fooled me: “Black Women Mean Business.” I thought I’d hear about Black women starting and owning golf-related businesses. But instead, it was “Black women *mean* business” when it comes to organizing communities and understanding

the value of golf to one’s job, life and future.

Three accomplished women spoke about their love and commitment to golf, how it shaped their lives, and how they’re now focused on shaping the lives of young Black women and kids using golf as the foundational tool. La-Jean Gould is the founder and president of the **Women in Golf Foundation**. Oneda Castillo is the second Black LPGA teaching pro. And Ashaunta Epps is the founder and CEO of **A Perfect Swing, Inc.**



NeuraPutt inventor Alan Johnson and Bianka Bailey

Their stories are compelling, and their causes righteous. And by the end of the seminar, I had the feeling of being in a revival meeting.

Since I’m a writer, I attended the “Golf Digest Journalism in Golf – A Black Perspective” seminar. Featured was **Pete McDaniel**, author of “Uneven Lies: The Heroic Story of African-Americans in Golf,” a longtime writer for *Golf Digest* and *Golf World* magazines, and collaborator with Tiger Woods on numerous instructional articles as well as two books, “Training a Tiger” and “How I Play Golf.”

I’ve read some of McDaniel’s work and, honestly, did not know that he was Black. Not that it matters – the written word has no color. McDaniel spoke of the barriers he and other Black golf writers faced from clubs where he was sent to cover events (hello, Augusta National) and racism exhibited by his predominantly white golf writer brethren. He expressed a dour view of the loss of Black golf writers coinciding with Tiger’s waning career. But that didn’t stop a young woman in the room, Alaygra Wells, from rising and speaking energetically about her desire to be a golf writer. She recently graduated from an HBCU with a journalism degree, loves and plays golf; I hope someone gives her that chance.

NGCOA CEO Jay Karen led a seminar, “So you want to be a golf course owner.” Steve Eubanks wrote his observation, seen [here](#), so I’ll just add one of mine. I’m not sure if the seminar was meant to be informational, encouraging or a dire warning. It was probably all three.

Black entrepreneurship was on display with brands like the African American Golfer’s Digest, Bucka Fogey Sports, Deuce and **NeuraPutt**. I met NeuraPutt’s inventor, a Ford Motors engineer named Alan Johnson, an accomplished amateur golfer. NeuraPutt is a deceptively ingenious yet simple putt-training aid device.

Johnson is searching for ways to bring his product to market and had this to say about his Expo experience: “The first annual African American golf show was a wonderful opportunity to rub shoulders with some heavy hitters in the golf industry. I’ve experienced success at other golf shows, but this up-close and personal setting was ideal for networking. It was a truly awesome sight to see golf industry executives pile into my booth to demo my invention, the NeuraPutt Aim and Pace Trainer. The brand exposure and positive feedback were absolutely priceless, and we look forward to attending next year.”



Organizer Jim Beatty and his daughter Tiffany, and pro golfer Jim Dent



I enjoyed playing golf with my new friend Bernard Truesdale, attending the Expo to explore golf industry opportunities. Bernard told me, “It was a privilege having the opportunity to attend the First Annual African American Golf Expo & Forum. The experience was way more than expected and allowed me to meet some fantastic people and gain insight into the pulse of the industry. What impressed me most was what appears to be a genuine effort to include Black and brown people who were once banned from such opportunities. There were also opportunities to meet key personnel in leadership positions who were willing to offer guidance in prospective areas. The event kicked off with a golf scramble that allowed me to personally connect with key industry leaders and be offered a few golf tips that definitely helped my game. Attending next year is a no-brainer - I’ll definitely be there.”

Event organizer Jim Beatty summed up the Expo with, “The EXPO not only met but exceeded my expectations! I wanted golf industry leaders to meet and create relationships with community organizations, and that was accomplished. I wanted the attendees to learn more about the job, career, and supplier diversity opportunities in the golf industry, and that was accomplished. I wanted exhibitors to promote and market their products, and that was accomplished. Finally, I wanted the sponsors to realize the value in their investment, and that was accomplished. Overall, with 450 people attending over the four days of events and activities, the EXPO had a quarter-million-dollar impact, made history, and set expectations for EXPO 2022. The EXPO has helped move the industry in achieving greater diversity and inclusion.”

I saw and met a flourishing national community of Black golfers that most course operators don’t know exist. Maybe some don’t want to and prefer to carry on golf’s sad legacy of exclusion. I can’t think of anything more damning than that, and they’ll deservedly be left behind. However, members – golfers - of this community are not hard to find with just a little work, followed by outreach that extends an invitation. Check out Jamie Taylor’s **Black Golf Directory**, which makes connecting easy. Also, there are alumni chapters from the **Divine Nine** – national college fraternities and sororities regularly holding golf events.

Jim Beatty’s tagline for his Expo is, “We play, we pay, we count.” As golf endeavors to embrace diversity and inclusion, these six words bear remembering and repeating. 🏌️