



For Minority Golf, More Question Marks than Bright Spots

Despite outreach programs, minorities remain on the fence

By Mike Cullity

Over the last 15 years, Tiger Woods has made golf cool. Or at least that's the view of Rodney Green, a PGA professional who in that time has seen his share of Nike-sporting, 100-shooting Tiger wannabes. It's a different image than the one that prevailed in the 1970s, when teenage peers teased Green for playing an old man's game. "I would leave the golf course and go back to the park to play basketball just so I could be accepted with the fellas," he says.

Green became the first African-American director of golf at Florida's Innisbrook Resort in 2008. Now, instead of ribbing him, his high-school buddies pester him for lessons. But despite Woods' unquestioned influence, statistics suggest that minority participation in golf is mostly flagging.

The National Golf Foundation estimated that the African-American participation rate in 2009 was 3.9 percent, down from 7 percent in 2003. Likewise, the Asian-American participation rate dropped to 8.9 percent from 13.7 percent. On the bright side, Hispanic-American

participation increased to 7.7 percent from 5.4 percent — although the NGF called part of this jump the likely result of sampling error.

With minority populations growing more rapidly than the white population, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, appealing to more minority players is imperative to golf's

The 2010 U.S. Census shows minority populations growing faster than Caucasian. That makes golf's appeal to non-whites vital to its future.

future well-being. But significant obstacles to minority participation remain.

That golf participation and income correlate highly is no surprise, but it's noteworthy that participation rates among high-earning minorities are lower than those of their white counterparts. While the participation rate for whites earning \$125,000 or more annually is 19.1 percent, the rates for minorities in the same income bracket are 13.8 percent (Asian-American), 13.2 percent (Hispanic-American) and 11 percent (African-American),

the NGF reports.

This disparity suggests cultural factors at work, which Acushnet Co. Chairman and CEO Wally Uihlein addressed notably in a 2009 interview. "There are so many choices for

what to do with newly acquired disposable income and leisure time—golf is just one of them," said Uihlein. "In the post-World War II period, many North American workers who came from a British cultural heritage entered the middle class and naturally took up golf." As for whether the expanding black and Latino middle classes could represent commensurate golf growth, Uihlein harbors doubts. "Maybe it will happen, but culturally speaking I just don't think it's in the cards," he said.

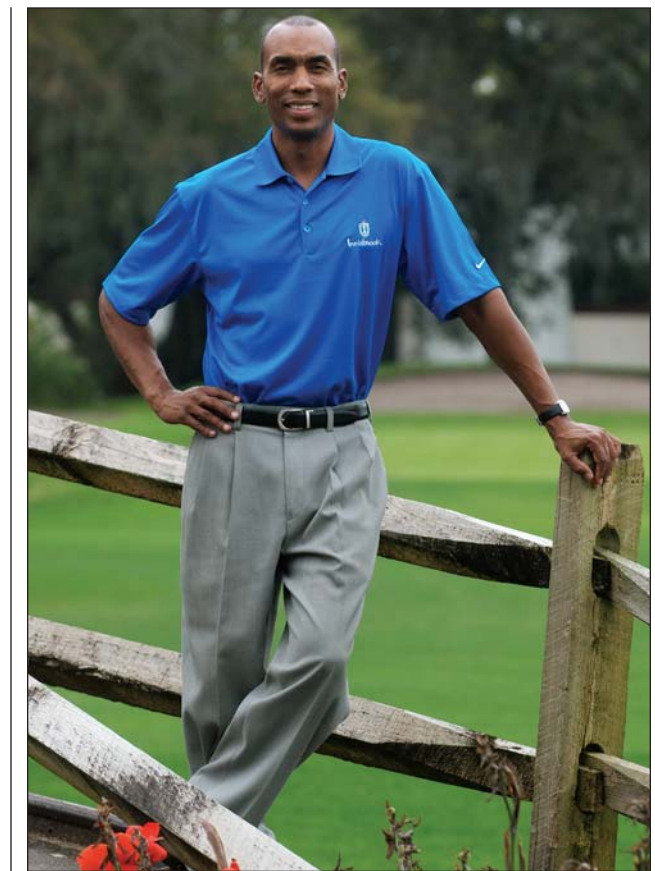
More minorities working in positions of authority at golf facilities could help bridge the cultural divide, suggests Green, who does his part to effect change by employing minority interns at Innisbrook. But despite the buzz that Woods has generated, golf remains less accessible to most kids — especially urban youngsters — than baseball, football or basketball.

Still, there are signs of progress:

- Of the 363,000 kids who participated in The First Tee's chapter programs in 2010, 48 percent were minorities. Moreover, 57 percent of the World Golf Foundation youth development initiative's graduates stick with the game.
- Since 2006, 50,000 kids — 85 percent of them minority — have enrolled at the Tiger Woods Learning Center, which offers a golf program to complement its core mission of providing college access to underserved youth. Sixty percent of the California-based learning center's attendees participate in golf programming.
- Of the more than 17,000 students who in 2010 participated in Get Golf Ready, the industry's adult player development initiative, 25 percent were minorities. The program reports that 84 percent of its participants continue to play and practice after their first year.

In El Paso, Texas, Hispanic players constitute the majority at Butterfield Trail Golf Club, which offers comprehensive player-development programs — including The First Tee and a four-week introductory program for adults called "Golf 101." But Val D'Souza, the facility's PGA general manager and a native Kenyan, acknowledges that it's difficult for golf facilities to foster the game's future when a bleak economy demands attention to the present.

"We have to deliver revenues and rounds, and focus on driving the business forward," he says. "In some of that thinking, we abandon some of the golfer development programs because they don't generate revenue right now." ■



Rodney Green, one of few African-Americans professionals directing a major golf program, mentors minority interns at Innisbrook Resort.

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