

Leaders of Afro-American Nashville



Theodore "Ted" Rhodes (1913-1969)

Theodore "Ted" Rhodes was born to Frank and Della (Anderson) Rhodes on November 9, 1913. A native Nashvillian, he attended the city's public schools. At the age of twelve, Rhodes dreamed of pursuing the game of golf. In as much as the sport did not welcome persons of color from its beginning, this was an ambitious goal for an African-American child during the 1920s.

Soon after the First World War, African Americans were banned from municipal golf courses and legalized segregation locked them out of the few country clubs where they had been permitted to play. If one game manifested the ingrained ethnological bigotry, it was the sport of golf.

During his late teenage years, the aspiring young golfer learned the game and honed his skills by working as a caddie at the Belle Meade and Richland golf courses. When it came to the exclusivity of African Americans on the manicured verdant links, Nashville was no different from the rest of the country. No course in the city allowed them to play. Any time the opportunity presented itself, Rhodes surreptitiously played on the clubs' courses. He practiced the game with other caddies and developed his swing by hitting shag balls at Sunset Park in Nolensville, as well as practicing in East Nashville's Douglas Park and North Nashville's Watkins Park. He became an adroit master of the links, mastering the use of the one iron to the sand wedge, the driver through the four wood, and the putter. According to Rhodes's friend Zlenoch Adams, "He had all the shots. He would tell you what he was going to do on the golf course."

Ted Rhodes joined the United States Navy during the Second World War. After his tour of duty, Rhodes was discharged in Chicago, Illinois. There he met and became friends with entertainer Billy Eckstine and heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis. Rhodes taught both to play the game of golf. Later, the "Brown Bomber" sponsored Rhodes on the golf circuit. By the

late 1940s, Rhodes became unbeatable on the tour sponsored by the United Golfers' Association (UGA), an association founded circa 1926 by a group of African-American physicians in response to the United States Golf Association's (USGA) racially exclusive policies.

In 1948, Rhodes participated in the United States Open at the Riviera Country Club in Los Angeles, California, and became recognized as the first African-American professional golfer. The same year that he participated in the U.S. Open, he and another black golfer brought suit against the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA). They sought adjudication in the courts because of the association's "Caucasian clause," a provision that allowed membership to only "professional golfers of the Caucasian race." Although they won an out-of-court judgment, the golfing association changed its tournaments to "invitationals" with more racially prejudiced regulations. In 1961, the PGA deleted its "Caucasian clause" from its body of laws, making golf the last major sport to desegregate its ranks.

Ted Rhodes, who "dressed in silks and plus fours" when he competed, finished in the top ten in the few white tournaments he was allowed to participate. He played without practice against white golfers like Sam Snead and Ben Hogan. A year after he participated in the U.S. Open, Rhodes played in the Tam O'Shanter All American in Chicago and later in the Canadian Open. Because his race barred him from many PGA-sanctioned tournaments, Rhodes played in tournaments sponsored by the UGA. The first person of African descent to play in a U.S. Open, Rhodes won approximately 150 UGA tournaments. He became the first American Black employed as a member of the advisory staff of Burke Golf in Newark, New Jersey.

In 1950, African Americans in Nashville requested a facility where they could play golf. City councilman, attorney Robert Lillard sponsored legislation that provided for the land and financial resources for the course's development. Built near the

(continued)

This publication is a project of the 1998 Nashville Conference on Afro-American Culture and History. Information was compiled by the Department of History, Tennessee State University. The Metropolitan Historical Commission assisted with editing and design.

Cumberland River in North Nashville, the nine-hole Cumberland Golf Course opened on July 10, 1954. Joe Hampton, an African American, served as the course's first golf pro. Although Cumberland was a "separate but equal" course, it became a desegregated golfing facility soon after its opening.

After touring the country for most of his adult life, Rhodes returned to his native city in the 1960s. Considered the quintessential instructor among black golfers, the famed golfer contributed both "locally and nationally to the game of golf." Perhaps one of the greatest African-American golfers of the immediate post-Second World War era, he took the time to mentor such persons as Lee Elder, the first African-American golfer to play the Masters, Charhe Sifford, and others. Jim Dent, a well-known black professional golfer, said, "I . . . younger guys like me would come by just so they could sit beside him and listen to him talk about golf. He understood the game."

Given the sobriquet "Rags" because of his exquisite and flashy dress style on the golf course, the life of Theodore "Ted" Rhodes suddenly came to an end at the age of 53 on July 4, 1999. The day after his demise, Lee Elder said, "Ted Rhodes was like a father to me . . . He took me under his wing when I was 16 years old and completely rebuilt my golf game and my life." A few days later, Rhodes's remains were interred in National Cemetery on Gallatin Road.

At the request of Councilman Lillard, on August 13, 1999, the Metropolitan board of Parks and Recreation renamed the Cumberland Golf Course in honor of Theodore "Ted" Rhodes. The Joe Hampton Clubhouse at the U-hole Rhodes Golf Course honors the memory of the trailblazer with a painting, photographs, and memorabilia. In 1970, to commemorate Rhodes as the first African-American golfer to be recognized by the PGA, the Ted Rhodes National Memorial Foundation was formed "to promote the game of golf for one and all, regardless of race, gender, creed or color."

When Tiger Woods won the 1997 Masters Golf Tournament, he invoked the memory of Ted Rhodes and other African-American pioneers in the world of golf. A legend in the African-American community, Rhodes's accomplishments in golf escaped the attention of the white masses, most notably in his native state. For his achievements in the golfing community, the "black Jack Nicklaus" was better known outside his home state. However, in November of 1997, officials of the Tennessee Golf Foundation rectified his anonymity in the sports history of the state when they announced his forthcoming 1998 induction into the Tennessee Golf Hall of Fame located in Franklin, Tennessee. An homage long overdue!

-Linda T. Wynn
