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GOLF

Black participation in game still lags



Jeffrey Cunningham, 14, is a 2-handicap at Bear Lakes CC in West Palm Beach.

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The numbers are more disconcerting than alarming: According to the latest Census, African-Americans comprise 12.6 percent of the population. Yet, according to the National Golf Foundation, the 1.4 million who play golf make up only 5.5 percent of the nation's 25.7 million people who regularly participate in the sport.

Jeffrey Cunningham is not surprised. One of the top junior golf-

ers in Palm Beach County, Cunningham, 14 and an eighth-grader at St. Mark's Episcopal in Palm Beach Gardens, said he's frequently the only African-American entered when he competes at junior tournaments both in Florida and around the country.

"I know a couple black golfers, but not that many," said Cunningham, who plays to a 2-handicap from the silver tees at Bear Lakes CC in West Palm Beach. "When I go to other states it's rare to see other African-Americans. (And) when

I tell people I play golf they're kind of shocked."

Last Tuesday night's induction ceremony at the PGA Golf Professionals Hall of Fame offered two reminders of the sacrifices African-Americans have made for their race in a sport widely perceived — rightly or wrongly — as a sanctuary for upper- and middle-class whites.

Bill Powell, who returned from serving his country in World War II in 1946 only to find he wasn't per-



Hall of Fame inductee Bill Powell became the first African-American to build and operate his own club. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

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mitted to play the courses in rural Ohio because of segregation, became the only African-American to build, own and operate his own club, Clearview Golf Club in Canton. And Jimmy DeVoe founded the first golf school for blacks in 1932 in Los Angeles and, when the PGA of America finally lifted its "Caucasians-only" clause 30 years later, became its first black member at age 74.

Martha Clark of West Palm Beach is a pioneer in her own right. A longtime member of the Fairview Golf Club, an association of black golfers founded in West Palm Beach in 1956, Clark became its first woman president in January and offered three reasons why blacks haven't taken to the sport.

"First, how many African-Americans have access to a golf course as a child? The answer is very few," she said. "Second, when you're growing up, you like to do what your parents do, and if they're not playing, more than likely you won't either. Third, you tend to play a sport people who look like you play. And the number of black people who play golf has always been very small."

Initiatives ranging from The First Tee to Donna Horton White's Junior Golf Foundation of America are working toward change. White's JGFA, which began in 1979 and is conducted at Okeehetee and Park Ridge golf courses and John Prince Learning Center, conducted 8,000 lessons for junior golfers in 2012 and White, a former LPGA player, said 10-15 percent of her students are African-American.

"The profiles of most African-American kids coming into our program are just like whites: Both parents work, and their economic situation doesn't give them access to a course. We can give them that, at least on a weekly basis, though that isn't enough when you're



Jimmy DeVoe became the first African-American member of the PGA of America at age 74. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



Cunningham said people are "kind of shocked" he plays golf. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

trying to learn and improve."

Carl Mistretta operates the Palm Beach and Treasure Coast First Tee program out of Dyer Park. He reported that partnerships with groups such as Boys and Girls Clubs, summer camps and religious groups have brought in as many as 3,000 kids a year, many of whom have signed up for a nine-lesson program costing \$95.

"Our students are well over 50 percent minority, and our kids have moved on to high school and even college programs," he said.

Joe Louis Barrow Jr., First Tee's executive director and son of the former heavyweight champion boxer, has seen the same thing on a national basis in the program that started in 1997 and — with the support of the PGA of America, PGA Tour and LPGA — has reached more than 6.5 million young people.

"Fifty percent are from diverse backgrounds, so we're very pleased with that," Barrow said. "Many are starting to play high school and college golf, so it's really about

time.

"The question I've asked more than any other is, 'When will more African-Americans be on the Tour?' I was asked that when I came on board 13 years ago and said 'Give us 20 years,' so I've got seven more. But it's not just making it to the pro level. It's how the character is being changed among these young people."

Cunningham said he's seen the impact programs such as the JGFA and First Tee are making, not to mention Tiger Woods, whom he said drew a noticeably large turnout of African-Americans at the recent Honda Classic, where Cunningham served as a standard-bearer.

Cunningham, who started hitting balls at age 4 and playing a year later, said he likes that golf puts the "outcome of the score in my hands. It's not somebody else, where if they drive the lane and make a basket I lose. It's more me hitting a good shot or a bad shot; that affects me directly."

If Cunningham gets his wish, he will someday bring more diversity to the pro game, where Woods is the only African-American player while the LPGA has none. Until then, he'd like to see programs like the First Tee and JGFA continue to expose junior golfers of all races to all facets of the game.

"Not just hitting balls on the range, but going to tournaments, seeing what the top players do, how they play, what it takes to be a champion," he said. "What I've seen is the kids who last in this game are the ones who have heart."

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