



JAFARI MOORE'S GOAL IS TO STUDY PHYSICS AT MIT.

COURTESY NATIONAL LINKS TRUST

# POINT OF ENTRY

THE YOUTH CADDIE PROGRAM AT THE HEART OF D.C.'S MUNICIPAL GOLF REVOLUTION

BY BRIAN WACKER

RIVIERA COUNTRY CLUB, IN THE GLITZY Los Angeles suburb of Pacific Palisades, is a long way—literally and figuratively—from Langston Golf Course, the historic beacon of African-American golf set hard against the banks of the Anacostia River in the northeast corner of Washington D.C. There, on Benning Road, you can find the last remaining stretch of D.C.'s streetcar line, reinstalled to help revitalize a blighted commercial corridor that hums with traffic and power lines and the Hip Hop Fish & Chicken, where you can get a three-piece dinner for \$10. For just \$3 more, kids can work up an appetite playing 18 holes at Langston, where Lee Elder was once the teaching pro and manager and legendary Black players like Charlie Sifford and Calvin Peete stopped by regularly. On rare occasions, stars like Ella Fitzgerald, Dionne Warwick, Bill Russell, Muhammad Ali and even Mike Tyson made appearances at the course.

Langston is also where Marcus Byrd first learned to play golf. The 25-year-old tour pro has come

a long way since scratching out birdies on the hardscrabble municipal, teeing it up earlier this year at Riviera in the Genesis Invitational alongside Tiger Woods, Jon Rahm and Scottie Scheffler, among many others, on the tournament's Sifford Exemption—a playing slot intended to promote the goal of improving diversity in golf.

"It was a pretty special moment just to kind of actually shake his hand and like meet him in person," Byrd said of meeting Woods. "Seen him a bunch when he had his tournament at AT&T at Congressional and always was a huge fan, obviously. So to just kind of look at him face-to-face and actually realize he's human, that was pretty cool.

"I remember one day when I was going out [to the AT&T tournament] with my dad, like we always did, I had on the whole Tiger outfit—red shirt, black shorts. I had a picture I wanted him to sign. He was going to the first tee, so he was pretty busy, just kind of walked by. So I used that as a little motivation. Told my dad one day when I make it to the Tour, he'll have to sign my score-

card, anyway. Don't really need the signature right now. That was just kind of a thing to keep pushing me forward to getting to where I am."

These days, Langston GC—named in honor of John Mercer Langston, Howard University's first law school dean and the first Black man from Virginia to be elected to Congress—is looking to push others forward in its own right, partly through offering continued access to golfers of all colors, creeds and economic backgrounds, but

also through a caddie program that provides opportunities for kids and a service to its customers. It represents another means of returning golf to its roots as a walking game.

While Byrd found his way to the highest level of the sport by playing, long after the Tour dropped its Caucasian-only clause, the entry point to golf

for many Black people has been through caddying. But the advent of the golf cart mostly closed off that avenue over the last half-century. Enter Langston, along with a pair of non-profits—the National Links Trust and "Golf. My Future. My Game."

In September 2020, National Links Trust, started by friends Mike McCartin and Will Smith, inked a 50-year lease with the National Park Service to overhaul and operate all three of the District's muni courses: East Potomac, Rock Creek Park, and Langston. It partnered with architects Tom Doak, Gil Hanse and Beau Welling to restore the courses and is paying for the roughly \$65 million project through private donations and revenue generated from the three courses.

Their mission, along with that of Craig Kirby, their fellow National Links Trust board member and CEO/Founder of "Golf. My Future. My Game.", is to protect and promote accessible, affordable public golf courses. Part of that vision also included installing a caddie program at Langston, which is entering its third year this summer.

"It's something we knew we wanted to do from before we took over the courses," Smith said. "This was always on our radar from very early on."

It helped that the Western Golf Association, an organization with which Kirby has built longstanding relationships, was willing to help subsidize the cost of the caddies, who are available from June to September, Wednesday through Sunday, and on fall

weekends once school is back in session. Their tip represents the only cost to golfers.

"The fact is there aren't a ton of junior caddie programs in urban environments and that has led to fewer black golf professionals," Smith said. "Part of NLT's mission is to introduce the game to underserved communities, and caddying was historically a way to do that."

"There's a huge, long history of [Black caddies] developing into successful pro golfers, and you

just don't see that anymore. Plus, the WGA's Evans Scholarship program has a desire to have a diverse pool of scholars. You combine those two things and Langston is the perfect place."

It is especially for teenagers like Butheyne Dahmani, Xander Sehgal and Jafari Moore, says the man who is charged

with its daily operation, Ben Foster.

Dahmani, Foster points out, is an A-plus student. Sehgal started playing the game at age 7 at Langston and now plays on his high school team, with other area clubs having offered him chances to play their facilities because of his ability and his grades in school. And Moore wants to study quantum physics at MIT.

"You have to have a good work ethic to get into a school like that," Moore said, citing MIT's 7 percent acceptance rate.

"This is what makes it so exciting," Foster says. "Seeing these kids that want to caddie well, but also play well."

Langston's program has been something of a work in progress, but one that has grown quickly in both ability and interest. The first year, many of the dozen or so kids in the program had limited golf knowledge, much less caddying skills. But they soon developed them under Foster and legendary caddie Richard "Jelly" Hansberry. Last year, in its second season, the number of caddies increased to about 18 and so did the interest among Langston's golfers in taking one for their rounds. It helps that Foster lets golfers know in the pro shop about the caddies, too.

"I tell them about the program; if it's their first time playing with a caddie, we make sure to let them know the experience will be a good one," Foster said. "It's worked out pretty well."

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A DEPRESSION-ERA AERIAL OF LANGSTON AND THE BANKS OF THE ANACOSTIA; CADDIES JAFARI MOORE (LEFT) AND CHASE BROWN ON A LOOP; PROGRAM DIRECTOR BEN FOSTER; CHASE TENDS A FLAGSTICK.

TOP: COURTESY NPS; BOTTOM LEFT, RIGHT: COURTESY NLT



CLARENCE POLLARD (LEFT) AND CLYDE MARTIN AT LANGSTON. MARTIN WAS LANGSTON'S FIRST HEAD GOLF PROFESSIONAL; TODAY, THE 6TH HOLE IS NAMED IN HIS HONOR.



“And if you have a caddie, you’re going to perpetuate people playing at a faster pace, not spending a whole lot of time looking for their ball. That’s the whole goal, especially on the weekend, because it can get busy out here. We never want to turn anyone away.”

Of course, there was a time when Black players were turned away from golf courses in D.C.

The first course for Black golfers in D.C. was actually just a pitching wedge away from the Lincoln Memorial. Its nine holes were quickly rendered almost unplayable as the adjacent Memorial Bridge was constructed in the 1920s and the popularity of tourism in the area increased. Though there were two other courses Blacks could play back then, they were accessible just one afternoon a week, and golfers endured brutal harassment in the process.

So just two months after Marian Anderson sang for a crowd of 75,000 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial—after having reportedly been denied the ability to perform at Constitution Hall because the Daughters of the American Revolution, who owned the hall, allegedly had a white-artist-only clause for the venue—the all-male Royal Golf Club and all-female Wake Robin Golf Club petitioned the Department of the Interior to grant them a new public course they could play in the city.

Though it wasn’t much of an improvement—Langston was built atop an abandoned city

dump—it was still a refuge. At the time, among the roughly 5,200 golf facilities in the United States, only 20 allowed Blacks.

In this context, Langston was a slice of heaven. In 1940, heavyweight champ Joe Louis played in a tournament and the event drew some 2,000 fans. Another time, Ali showed up on the putting green. “His limousine pulls up, and...he said to me, ‘I’ve never picked up a golf club before,’” recalled lifelong golfer David Ross. “He reached out and got my putter.”

The course has more than endured, it has thrived. Langston averages roughly 130,000 rounds a year, a serious number even by muni standards. It’s also something of a living museum of Black golf history. On its walls are photos of prime-time Tiger Woods, crouched down lining up a putt, and a painting of Charlie Sifford, Calvin Peete, Jim Thorpe, Lee Elder, Jim Dent and Woods.

Even on the scorecard, the legacies endure. All the holes are named after Black golfers, starting with John Shippen and ending, of course, with Tiger. In between there’s Joseph Bartholomew (No. 3), Ann Gregory (No. 7), Charlie Sifford (No. 11), Althea Gibson (No. 12), Lee Elder (No. 13) and Renee Powell (No. 17).

The place is a bargain, too.

For adults, it costs just \$32 for 18 holes on a weekday and \$41 on the weekend. Kids between



THIS PAGE: LANGSTON GOLFERS IN A WWII-ERA PATRIOTIC FUNDRAISER. OPPOSITE: THE WAKE ROBIN CLUB, THE OLDEST AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN’S GOLF CLUB IN THE U.S.

the ages of 5 and 18 pay just \$13 for the full day around. This price excludes the optional golf cart, but that’s sort of the point. The idea for Langston and D.C.’s other two public courses is for them to be walkable, to be woven into the fabric of their respective communities. And at Langston that means taking a caddie.

“We felt one resource was to get kids caddying early and that might promote more African-American participation on Tour and promote more college scholarships,” said Jimmy Garvin, who serves as the general manager of Rock Creek and has, like everyone else in the program, been integral to its development.

“For a long time [the courses] didn’t have the wherewithal to make the necessary changes [to bring back a caddie program],” Garvin continued. “A lot of it was the contracts that were written, the courses not generating revenue and not getting the resources from the National Park Service because they were too burdened with their own projects. Now kids will have a home with Langston.”

That includes a learning center to prepare them not just for golf but life. Since the early 2000s, academic programs for kids from kindergarten through 12th grade have been provided, helping aid their efforts toward what is now an Evans Scholarship, in partnership with the Western Golf Association.

“We knew kids in that area were not being adequately served in the summer months,” said Garvin. There have been challenges—golf carts, after all, are a revenue generator for courses, especially at munis, where margins are tight. But Garvin said the program has been a success so far and he expects an even better year this year, as more players inquire about taking caddies.

“We want to give kids an opportunity to learn a trade, so to speak,” Garvin said.

Opportunity and support are big things around Langston, on the course and off it. Just ask Marcus Byrd.

“It’s part of the reason why I work so hard at what I do,” he said. “It’s because it’s not just my dream. A lot of those guys have had the same dream and for me to be able to be the person to carry the torch for them, it’s an incredible feeling. It makes me happy to know that they support me back home, for sure.”

“It’s about the game being inclusive and about giving kids hope. That’s what I’ve always dreamed of, to make it to the PGA Tour, to be able to sit here and see little kids who look up to me. They have a dream, and they want to be able to do the same things I’m doing from where I’m from. It means more to me than just being a professional golfer. It’s changing lives.”

The same can be said about Langston Golf Course. ♣

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