



# Bill Wright

## loves this game

... but he had to fight to play it

Fifty years ago, a WWU alum used a putter to demolish one of golf's racial barriers

By Mary Lane Gallagher

Photos by Andy Bronson

**N**o one could beat **Bill Wright** ('60) and his putter the day he won the U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship at Wellshire Golf Course in Denver 50 years ago.

After squeaking into the match-play portion of the tournament as the 63rd out of 64 qualifying players from public courses around the country, Wright began a putting streak that would send him into the history books.

In 1959, no African-American golfer had ever won a United States Golf Association Championship title. But the growing crowd of spectators watching Wright birdie seven out of the first nine holes, round after round, sensed that this 23-year-old education major from Western was about to change that.

At one point, the noise from the crowd bothered Wright. He walked to the gallery after his semi-final opponent, a senior from Louisiana State University, was distracted during a critical shot.

"Some of you folks bothered him on that shot," Wright said, according to a USGA report at the time. "It was very unfair. Please give him a better break so he can play his regular game."

The son of two golf fanatics, Wright had been raised in Seattle to love the game in spite of the stubborn racism that remained in the sport's culture.

But Wright wasn't thinking about breaking down barriers when he sank that last birdie putt on the final 18th hole, defeating a former professional golfer from Florida to win the USGA championship for public golf course players. He was simply amazed at his own accomplishment and celebrated with a Singapore Sling delivered to him right there on the green by a clubhouse waitress who knew his favorite drink.

"I wasn't thinking about anything, but I just got through winning," he remembers.

Which may explain his reaction to a phone call from a reporter back home in Seattle. How did it feel, the reporter wanted to know, to be the first black man to win a USGA title?

"I slammed the phone down."

**I**t was a momentary anger. Wright was the day's best golfer, but the first thing he was asked to talk about was not his skill, but the color of his skin.



“That part of golf really doesn’t exist anymore.”



But he soon composed himself. When the reporter called back, he was ready for the conversation.

“As time went on, I realized it was bigger and bigger,” Wright says of the significance of his victory 50 years ago. “I knew how big it was.”

Growing up in Seattle, Wright had been raised on golf. His parents were good friends with Charlie Sifford, the first African-American PGA golfer, who stayed at the Wrights’ home while traveling. The Wrights played at Jefferson Park near their home and at other public courses around Seattle.

“It doesn’t rain on the golf course,” Bob Wright used to joke with his son. “You have to play in the rain around here.”

Bob Wright, an accomplished golfer in his own right, made it to the Public Links championship four years after his son won it. But he struggled for years to become a member of one of the segregated, private golf clubs associated with Seattle’s public courses; golfers needed to belong to such a club to establish a handicap needed to enter tournaments.

So Bob Wright knew the power of “you can’t” when he took his son to watch a champion junior golfer at Jefferson Park one day.

“My dad said, ‘Don’t worry about it, you can’t beat him anyway,’” Wright remembers. “I said, ‘Just for that, within a year, I’m going to beat him.’”

Less than a year later, the younger Wright entered the city’s junior championship tournament, shooting a 68. The next day, tournament officials sent him home, saying he couldn’t continue because he didn’t have a handicap.

“So I was pushed out of that,” Wright says. “But still told my dad, ‘I beat him.’”

But it was basketball that brought Bill Wright to Western. He had led his Franklin High School team to the state championships and caught the attention of Western basketball coach Bill McDonald, who recruited Wright to come to Bellingham.

The teenage Wright had actually dreamed of playing for the University of Washington, but the basketball coach there, Tippy Dye, wasn’t interested in putting the first black player on his team, Wright remembers. So he came up to Western to play under coach Jack Hubbard and became a standout on the WWU team. He caught the attention of a sports reporter at the Bellingham Herald, who often wrote about Wright’s basketball talent.

“And at the end (of the story) he would put, ‘Wait until spring,’ for golf season,” Wright says.

**B**ill Wright made it to the USGA’s Public Links championship in 1959, during his senior year at Western. Seattle’s golf clubs were still segregated, so the future champion had to join a golf club in Portland,

Legend of the game:

Far left, Bill Wright and his wife, Ceta, watch the NCAA Division II championships at Loomis Trail Golf Club in spring 2009. Below, Wright chats with Brett Eaton, director of golf at Semiahmoo. Right, Wright with WWU golfer Jake Koppenberg, who tied for 12th at the tournament.



**Historic moment:**  
Below, WWU Golf Coach Steve Card, left, and Bill Wright at the NCAA Division II Championship. Bottom, Wright accepts the trophy for winning the U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship in 1959.



Ore., to establish a handicap to get into the tournament.

It’s hard for anyone born less than 40 years ago to understand the level of racism in sports during that era. Many colleges refused to field their athletes if there were any black players on the opposing team. Even Don Essig, the player from Louisiana State on whose behalf Wright asked the crowd to quiet down, had to call his university’s officials for permission to play against Wright. It wasn’t personal, Wright says, just something Essig had to do.

“That part of golf really doesn’t exist that much anymore,” Wright says 50 years later. He’s standing at a podium at Semiahmoo Resort, speaking to a banquet room packed with top collegiate golfers the night before the NCAA Division II national tournament, hosted by WWU in spring 2009. Invited as a special guest, Wright had just received an official proclamation from USGA President Jim Vernon, recognizing his accomplishments.

Wright doesn’t like to dwell on the roadblocks he experienced because of racism in the past. Most people know the history, he says, or they don’t want to. But there’s one story he does make sure to tell the nation’s best Division II men’s golfers on the eve of the national championship.

Winning the PubLinks title in 1959 earned Wright an automatic spot in that year’s U.S. Amateur championships. But his fellow PubLinks qualifiers didn’t want

“Anytime a youngster tries me, I’m ready to play.”

to travel or play with him he says. Wright was practicing on the putting green alone when golfing legend Chick Evans walked up. Evans, the first player to win the U.S. Amateur and the U.S. Open the same year, was known not only for his skill on the fairway, but his sense of sportsmanship.

Evans told Wright he was looking for a player to round out a foursome.

“I understand why you’re not playing,” Evans told Wright. “Don’t say anything more. I want you to go into the clubhouse and sit next to me.”

So Wright joined Evans to play with a young up-and-comer named Jack Nicklaus, who won the U.S. Amateur that year, and Deane Beman, who won it the following year. Afterward, Wright sat next to Evans – at the head table.

“He had to be close to 80 years old,” Wright remembers of Evans. “He understood the problem.”

**A** year after winning the PubLinks championship, Wright brought home WWU’s first national title in any sport when he won the NAIA men’s golf championship, also the first African-American to do so.

After graduation, Wright and his wife, Ceta, moved to Los Angeles, where he taught for nine years before becoming a

successful businessman as the owner of Pasadena Lincoln Mercury. He also went on the PGA tour, appearing in the U.S. Open in 1966 and six Senior U.S. Opens in the ‘80s and ‘90s. He returned to WWU several times over the years, often to play in an alumni tournament named in his honor. And in 2000, he was named one of WWU’s “Alumni of the Century.”

Now 73 and a golf instructor at The Lakes at El Segundo near the Los Angeles International Airport, he still gets up at 5 o’clock each morning and hits 300 balls three times a day, he says.

“Anytime a youngster tries me, I’m ready to play,” he says.

Today, many of Wright’s golf students are kids, hoping to get on the golf team. He’ll often teach them for free. Though Tiger Woods has certainly smashed through most of the remaining racial barriers in golf, it’s still difficult for anyone but the very wealthy to become accomplished in a sport that can cost \$50 in green fees each time you play.

But it’s a game he still loves.

“When you play golf, it makes you concentrate,” he says. “You’re not hitting anybody, you’re not hurting anybody. You’re not talking to anybody, except maybe to God.

“You learn etiquette,” he says. “You learn to be honest.”