

## Stephen Hamblin Interview

July 22, 2020

Participants were James Beatty, Michael Cooper, and Stephen Hamblin.

**COOPER:** Welcome to our ZOOM telecast...Today's topic is diversity and inclusion in golf. I am Dr. Michael Cooper, Chairman of the WE ARE GOLF Diversity Task Force.

Joining me today is James Beatty...Executive Editor for the African American Golfer's Digest. Jim is also a member of our Diversity Task Force. He serves as chairman of the Recreational Play sub-committee.

Our special guest is Stephen Hamblin, Executive Director for the American Junior Golf Association. Stephen serves on our Competitive Play sub-committee. He is one of the most respected golf industry leaders that I know, and I am proud to call him a friend.

Welcome gentlemen...let's get started.

Stephen, you and I have known each other for over 20-years, but I didn't realize how impressive your bio was until I did some background research to prepare for this interview.

I learned your father was a West Point graduate, who served our country and flew 30 missions in the VietNam War. Your parents raised you with the basic military principles of manners, discipline, respect, punctuality, and honor. In college, you studied landscape architecture at Michigan State University. After graduating, you served an apprenticeship under Jay Overton, at Innisbrook Resort near Tampa.

It was Jay Overton who recognized your dedication, talent, and attention to details. In fact, he recommended you for the Executive Director of the American Junior Golf Association. That was in 1984...36-years ago. You still hold that position today!

I learned that when you took over the helm of the AJGA, they hosted 13 tournaments a year, had five full-time employees, and a \$200,000 fledging budget. Thirty-six years later, under your leadership, the AJGA hosts more than 100 tournaments per year, has 61 full-time employees, more than 6,000 members and an \$11 million budget. Very impressive!

Many are unaware that you are a member of the PGA of America. You are also a member of the Georgia Golf Hall of Fame. Congratulations! And your staff and legion of supporters love you so much that they raised money to create the Stephen Hamblin ACE Grant, which provides financial assistance and scholarships to young junior golfers; many of them who lack financial resources. That's quite a tribute, and your legacy will continue.

Equally impressive...maybe more, is that through the years you developed an annual internship program that could well be the finest in the golf industry! Each year, your internship program serves as a training ground for over 100 young men and women. It doesn't end there, though,

because by-way of your robust training programs and personal advocacy, many AJGA interns now work in leadership positions throughout the golf industry, including PGA Tour staff members and Tournament Directors.

All this, while mentoring and helping to develop the talents of the premier junior golfers domestically and internationally. From Phil Mickelson, to John Daly, to Tiger Woods. Paula Creamer, to Mariah Stackhouse...the list of AJGA alumni is literally the Who's Who of the best tournament golfers of all-time. Those are remarkable accomplishments, my friend!

But the invitation to join us on this ZOOM recording today was to talk about diversity and inclusion!

Many are unaware that served on the Board of Directors for the National Minority Golf Foundation, which began in the mid-1990's under the leadership of the late John Merchant...who was one of my mentors.

You also had close relationships with the late Earl Woods, Lew Horne, Barbara Douglas, and Bill Dickey. I believe all of them served on your AJGA Board of Directors at one time.

- 1. Please share a few memories from your personal relationships with those Black golf giants/legends. And did they impact your commitment to diversity and inclusion in golf?*

**HAMBLIN:** They all did in different ways! And thank you, again, for the opportunity to speak with you today. All great people with different stories. Bill Dickey. I loved Bill. Very cool and calm. Had a great mission and purpose to his program...combining golf and college academics. Just a beautiful program. He was a great board member. Would not say a lot but when he did you really listened. I supported his program every year...gosh Michael, I think for 25-30 years or so. Great man!

You know, I think Earl Woods was misunderstood and misrepresented. People and a lot of media, you know, hyped him up as someone turning Tiger into a robot and an over demanding parent. He was one of the best parents we ever had. One of the best. He never followed Tiger. If there was a three-hole loop, he might do three holes. That would be enough for him, and then when Tiger got off the course, he would be going to play ping-pong with his buddies for hours. He would never go to the practice range afterwards.

I remember this one quote from Earl, who said "he is just grinded four and a half to five hours, now it is time for him to be a kid." Wow, I thought that was pretty refreshing. And it is not the Earl that the media hyped up.

Lew Horne was just an amazing man. He was our Mr. Everything! He was our legal counsel. He was secretary of our board. Uh, he just loved junior golf. I mean he'd come to tournaments and you couldn't wipe the smile off his face. He loved the kids. He loved the competition. He came to an awful lot of tournaments. He actually brought some kids over when we played in the junior open in England. Uh, he would be the host and bring kids over and supervise them for the week. You know, and on his own dime and things like that!

And then he headed up the National Minority Golf Foundation, which was really our start, you know, in this D&I program. He had a database of young men and women who were playing golf, and he knew where they were. And he knew where our tournaments were, right, and he would say “hey can we get a spot for this person...can we get a spot for this young lady?”

We would work with him and get these young minority players into the AJGA. So, he was very special and helped us in a lot of difficult situations.

Barbara was great! She took over for Lew as the National Minority Golf Foundation executive director. I got to know her very well. Just an amazing woman in golf, to get where she went with her status at the USGA. I believe she was on the Executive Committee. Just a delight! Hard-working, very business-like. Great lady. I enjoyed getting to know her.

So, in different ways they all definitely inspired me and I'm glad that we've had them as part of the AJGA for all these years.

**COOPER:** *Was there a catalyst or defining moment igniting your passion for D&I?*

**HAMBLIN:** I think the story that comes to mind is Kelly Robbins. Kelly Robbins came from very modest means. She was playing in a tournament in Flint Michigan. Kelly was from Mount Pleasant, and she was about to win this tournament in Flint. I was talking to her dad, and I said, “Well Mr. Robbins, Kelly's now going to be a first-team, Rolex Junior All-American. Over Thanksgiving break we have this year-end event. She's going to get an award, you know.”

He says oh no, no, no...she can't play! She's got basketball. She has had a real good year this year. She might get a basketball scholarship, and we've got to have a scholarship for her to go to college. And I said, well, uh, Mr. Robbins, your daughter is going to get a golf scholarship anywhere she wants, with the game she has.

She was playing golf in the summer for fun. She had no desire to be a golfer. So the dad looks at me, and his face turns white, like what are you talking about? And so it worked out.

It's amazing, but I go back to the office. I get a call from Dale McNamara, coach at Tulsa, and Dale says, Stephen, I just had an international player leave the team. I'm looking for someone who hasn't signed blah blah blah.

I said, I'm going to give you Kelly Robbin's phone number. I'm giving you Mr. Robbin's name. Just give this girl a scholarship, sight unseen. He said, “are you kidding me?” I go, trust me! This girl is unbelievable.

So, he gives her a scholarship and they win a NCAA Championship together. She ends up making the LPGA Tour and wins nine times! She wins the McDonald's, which was a major in women's golf at the time. Can you believe that?

What might she have done without that scholarship? Stayed in Mount Pleasant? That, uh, is why I loved working with Barbara and Lew, and giving opportunities to minorities. I root for the underdog, and I always rooted for them. I love giving these opportunities and love the success stories that come out of them.

**BEATTY:** *What opportunities does AJGA offer with regards to diversity and inclusion?*

**HAMBLIN:** I think the number one thing that we created was a strategic initiative and it's something that we've all rallied behind, staff, board, and players. Our ACE Grant program, and that's a financial assistance program, uh, that we put in place 17 years ago to support young men and women. Underserved young men and women who have the talent to play on a national scale, on a national level that don't have the financial wherewithal. So, under USGA rules we can provide reimbursement for their food, travel, lodging, and entry fees. And our ACE Grant goes up to \$5,000 a year. So, you qualify for it through normal and customary ways that you would apply for college aid.

And, last year alone we served over 220 young men and women and reimbursed back to their families over \$400,000. It's amazing when I think about golf, and there's so many stories of a young lady or a young man picking up the game, and their parents have never played. You know, to me, how did they get so good without a parent being involved? How does that happen? Everyone's got their own story, so I think ACE Grant does that for me.

We decided to come up with an audit. So, we worked with KPMG to do a diversity audit of the AJGA. They interviewed people and gave us things that we could improve on and so we created a diversity statement.

Michael, I am glad you brought up the 100 interns. I feel that that is a great way that we can help the industry become more diverse. Because if you want to get into golf, how do you do that? I mean, you can sign up and go to the Professional Golf Management (PGM) program, right, and go to four years of college, get your PGM degree, and then you're an apprentice for another three years.

So, there's seven years, you know, to kind of get going into the golf industry. Our summer internship, where these young men and women are going to events, and going to public municipals, resorts, and private clubs, dealing with superintendents, dealing with general managers, dealing with directors of golf, solving problems every day, providing a service, knowing the rules, and setting up the course. I think it's just a tremendous way for young men and women to get a taste of golf.

It's not for everybody. We all know that. It's a hard industry, but it's a great industry. So, I think through the hundred intern positions, I can make an impact in golf.

We've been doing a good job of recruiting at historically black colleges and universities (HBCU's). I think we can do a better job, and we can get into that a little bit later. Not only the

internship, but I'm looking to hire full-time people, and then I am placing people within the industry.

As you mentioned, Michael, probably the thing I am most proud of, is just seeing these young people come to the AJGA. Some of them with no golf background at all. Now they're in really neat careers...in neat leadership positions.

**BEATTY:** *How can our minority golfing community help?*

**HAMBLIN:** I asked people like Sam Puryear, Tiffany Fitzgerald, and LaJean Gould to help me identify young men and women who have an interest in the game of golf. Or they may not even have an interest in golf, maybe they just want to be in sports. If I can identify a person that has great energy, a great personality, a good work ethic, and good moral character, I can teach them everything you need to know about the golf industry or event management.

I think if the minority communities can help me identify candidates that might have an interest, that would go a long way. Sam Puryear recommended a gentleman from his college a couple years ago. He came to our intern recruiting weekend and we brought him on board. He did a great job for us! I don't think he wanted to be in golf, though, but what he learned that summer was unbelievable.

We all must figure out how to trust each other. If the HBCU chancellors or athletic directors could get to know the AJGA a little bit better, and we could talk to them and tell them about our program, and they could help us identify young men and women because the next person I send to the PGA TOUR will be the 47<sup>th</sup> person the tour has hired from the AJGA. There's life after the AJGA!

**COOPER:** Stephen, you are clearly one of the most influential golf industry leaders. I believe there are more like you who want to help but might not know how. *What advice do you have for them?*

**HAMBLIN:** I think the three things that come to mind, and at one of our diversity meetings you mentioned this, and I took it to heart...you said you've got to be committed to this. Yeah, you have to work at this. You know, I thought, if I build it they will come, you know, if I have these hundred internships, they'll just come knocking on my door. They'll beat my door down. And that's not it.

When I say about being committed, I mean being committed to building trust within the minority community. You have to do that first. People have to say this is a quality organization, or this is a good person, or they do a great job, or they treat people well. You have to build that trust.

You've got to also understand there is going to be an investment in time and resources. It just doesn't happen overnight. That's important to know, and then just you have to work on it. You just have to roll up your sleeves and get to work. I think we do a pretty good job, but we can do a better job.

We try to support Patrina King and her events, and LaJean Gould. It was funny, Tiffany Fitzgerald with Black Girls Golf, chastised us. The first time she saw an AJGA staff picture, she said I don't see many people of color. She kind of Instagrammed us, and instead of hiding from that comment, we said, all right Tiffany, come help us! You're mentoring all these girls here...is there a girl who, one day might be a candidate to be an intern?

You know, that created a relationship. But instead of putting up a blockade, we said all right, you make that comment, come on, help us out.

**BEATTY:** *Stephen, will you help us, by encouraging other golf leaders to participate in the February 2021 African American Golf Expo in Atlanta? You and AJGA were one of the first sponsors to sign up, and I thank you so much. What would be your words to other golf leaders about getting behind this effort?*

**HAMBLIN:** I just think it's an opportunity that shouldn't be missed. I think it presents so many different opportunities for us to get to know the minority golf community. I had no clue that there were so many minority golf organizations and communities within the Atlanta area alone. I had no idea before but once we stepped into that world of diversity and inclusion, I said, oh Patrina King, oh, LaJean Gould, oh, Tiffany Fitzgerald. It's been great! I mean, we've created some really good relationships.

You know, I keep looking at LaJean Gould as my grandmother. (Laughter). I can't help it. Don't ever say that to her, but she's the sweetest lady. She is that, but I'll tell you a funny story. I took a sponsorship position in her Women in Golf Foundation event. It is a great event. It was like at the silver sponsor level, or something like that. So, the next year, I was going to repeat the silver sponsorship, but I realized she jacked that sponsorship up \$1500. And I called her up, and I go "LaJean, is it costing me more to become a silver sponsor this year?" She just softly says yeah...I think I am. I say ok, and she says thank you again for your support. (Laughter)

But yeah, I just think the Expo is a great opportunity, and even if you don't have a diversity statement or diversity program, I think coming to an event like that, just like our diversity task force meetings, have just opened up some doors and created some relationships. It has helped me have a better understanding of things and where people and organizations are. So, I think it's very important.

**COOPER:** *Beyond golf, we seem to be at a crucible moment for race relations in America. Is there a role for golf industry leaders to play during this transformative period? If so, then why would that be important?*

**HAMBILN:** I think it gets back to finding ways to build trust. Finding common ground. Finding ways to work together. Listening to each other a little bit more. I'll give you an example. This year we put on our schedule the Harold Varner III event in Winston-Salem. And now, Harold never played AJGA. Never played at a private course growing up. And he was a

little leery about the AJGA. When we started talking to him about our mission, our purpose, our internships, our diversity program, and our ACE Grant, he kind of lit up a little bit.

Well tell me more about this ACE Grant, he said. And, uh, we told him about it. He said, sounds cool, how does it all work? We kind of went through the details of it, and he says, well you kind of have a bad system. You're asking the player or the family to put up some dollars, and then you'll reimburse those dollars. He said, I'm just here to tell you, there are families out there that can't even put up the initial dollars.

And we said, you know what, we never thought about that. So, we changed it immediately! I mean, just like that, we changed. Harold dug that so much that it created instant trust. He came out to his event. I mean to tell you, he was there from seven o'clock in the morning, until six o'clock at night, hanging with the parents, and hanging with the kids. No clinic, and nothing organized. Just hanging out!

The kids loved him. They loved him and gravitated to him like the pied piper. He was cool. He was casual. He was fun. And you know, the bottom line is the AJGA is a better organization with Harold Varner III involved. We're a better organization. He helped us, and now we've got a trusting relationship. He said, I already got ideas for next year. You know, we're going to improve this thing.

So, you know, if you get involved from a diversity and inclusion standpoint, and if you listen, and if you work together, you know, some good things can happen.

I think we've got to do a lot more of that. Not just on the golf side, but, you know, in life.