

**GOLF:** Sisters man participated in historic event

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once again limited. Being at the 87th Masters for Aspen Lakes Director of Golf Operations, Howie Pruitt, took on vastly more significance than just being on hand. The PGA (Professional Golfers' Association of America) has between 28,000 and 29,000 members. Of that number only a somewhat astonishing 169 are Black, and of those only three from the Pacific Northwest Region, Pruitt being one.

This year's Masters, always full of ceremony and tradition from the storied green jacket to the Champions Dinner, set aside time to honor one of

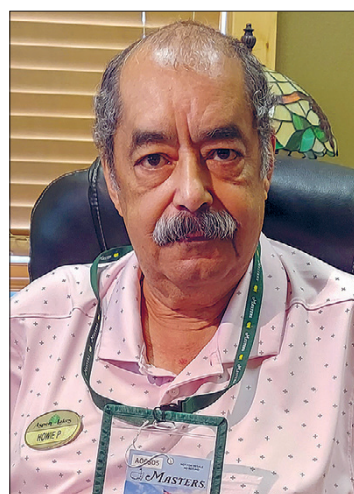


PHOTO BY BILL BARTLETT

Howie Pruitt is director of golf operations at Aspen Lakes.

golf's greats — Lee Elder. In 1975, Elder became the first African-American to play in the invitation-only tournament after winning the Monsanto Open.

In 1971, Elder accepted an invitation from Gary Player to play in the South African PGA Championship in Johannesburg. The event marked the first integrated tournament in that country's history. South Africa had apartheid policies in effect at the time, but Elder agreed to participate after the government promised not to subject him or spectators to the usual segregation requirements. He also played in a number of other tournaments in Africa, where he won the Nigerian Open in 1971.

Elder often endured vile hate mail, threatening phone calls and heckling from the crowd. His contributions to the game, inspirational life story and indomitable spirit led the Masters to recognize him in the ceremonial start to this year's tournament. Along with Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player, Elder who is assisted by a wheelchair, hit the honorary opening tee shots officially starting this year's event. Elder's health prevented him from making an actual shot yet as Pruitt witnessed his mere presence brought the attendees to their feet for an extended ovation.

Pruitt was one of 12 Black PGA members selected to honor Elder and hence his



PHOTO PROVIDED

Howie Pruitt, far left in audience, is applauding Lee Elder, left, with Gary Player, center, and Jack Nicklaus, right.

trek to Augusta. The weather was perfect and despite COVID, the limited crowd was most enthusiastic, Pruitt said upon his return. He was on hand for the Thursday night dinner and lunch Friday at the famed "Patch," officially known as Augusta Municipal Golf Course, another dream course.

Pruitt was present for the first round. He was struck by the sheer size of the club. Walking the back nine, he put 11,000 steps on his pedometer. He said it was the experience of a lifetime, feeling honored to be honoring one of golf's biggest names.

Pruitt speaks calmly about the slow and painful progress professional golf has taken for people of color. There is not a hint of resentment nor bitterness in his voice, though one might wonder how is that possible for somebody who started playing the game, like Elder, at 16 but who then could not play in college as Blacks in the 1960s were routinely denied playing on school teams and prohibited — often by written and openly stated rules — from joining golf clubs.

The PGA itself eliminated its "Caucasian-only clause" from its bylaws in 1961 — the same PGA to which Pruitt

is immensely devoted, serving on several committees. He currently is President of the Pacific Northwest Section comprising Oregon, Central and Western Washington, Idaho, and Western Montana.

Pruitt was born in Columbus, Ohio, as was Jack Nicklaus, his childhood hero. He is in his seventh season at Aspen Lakes having previously worked at Bend Golf & Country Club and Eagle Crest Resort. When *The Nugget* asked what he liked best about his job, without hesitancy he said, "the view," with a gleeful smile and sweeping hand gesture across the window.



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