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Mr. Vernon Gaskin, founder of the Leisure Hour Golf Club, shows Markel Sales (age 5) the proper way to hold a club. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)

Golfing pioneer aids youthful players

GRASSROOTS NEWS, N.W. — It is only through the foresight and organizational skills of others that Afro-Americans have been able to enter the arena of non-traditional sports.

A Calvin Peete would have never been able to swing high and Zina Garrison wouldn't be on the rise now in tennis. Other people, alive and dead, have paid dues and in Portland Mr. Vernon Gaskin has such an account.

Gaskin is a pioneer in the field of golf and it is through his efforts that young blacks are able to play the game. He is the founder of Leisure Hour Golf Club. He says, "In 1939 there was no organized black golf club in the city of Portland. I thought it was necessary to have some type of organization to gain some type of recognition. In the beginning it was called the Leisure Hour Golf and Bridge Club. In those days the men had their club and the women had theirs. I thought why not put them together. It led to more interest and having a pretty lady present meant a lot."

In 1939 de-facto Jim Crow was alive and well in Portland. Gaskin remembers, "There were some courses who did not care for our patronage. But we found all the municipal courses open."

He calls golf his cardinal sin. "I say it is one of the greatest games that there is. It brings you up to a mental peak and it develops you physically and builds character. The funny thing about golfers is that you can play with the President of the United States and call him by his first name. You are just another golfer."

Gaskin says he believes the reason why golf doesn't have the appeal of basketball or football is that it is not taught to youngsters at the high school level. He learned as a caddy and a locker room boy for a private golf club. "In my day, the only

thing a black man could do was to caddy or shine the rich man's shoes. But since we have progressed, we are able to play the game.

"The men in this club would give me a couple of clubs and when I was off duty I would slip off behind the caddy shack and hit golf balls.

"I've seen and heard people say that golf is such a foolish game — to hit a little white ball and run off down the field and look for it. But I've seen those same people once they are exposed to the game they become so absorbed you couldn't pull them away from it."

For the average man seeing the growth of his local club would have been enough. But Mr. Vernon Gaskin is not the average man and in 1953 Gaskin spearheaded the Western States Golf Association.

"In numbers there is strength. When you have the clout of 28 golf clubs extending from Texas to Washington it gives us power and recognition. We started with 8 clubs and we just grew. We started with 400 members and now we have 2,000."

The WSGA sponsors yearly tournaments which start in March and end in November. "We have a handicap system. We put golfers in certain flights where they are equally pitted against someone of the same skills."

The WSGA also provides scholarships to students along the coast. In Oregon, Lisa Rankins won the scholarship for 1983.

With an afterthought about the growth that he has created, Vernon Gaskin says, "I'm luckier than Martin Luther King. We both had a dream. I have lived to see my dream come true and The Western States is growing, along with The Leisure Hour. We have our youth program and hopefully in Portland our youth will one day own a golf course of their own."



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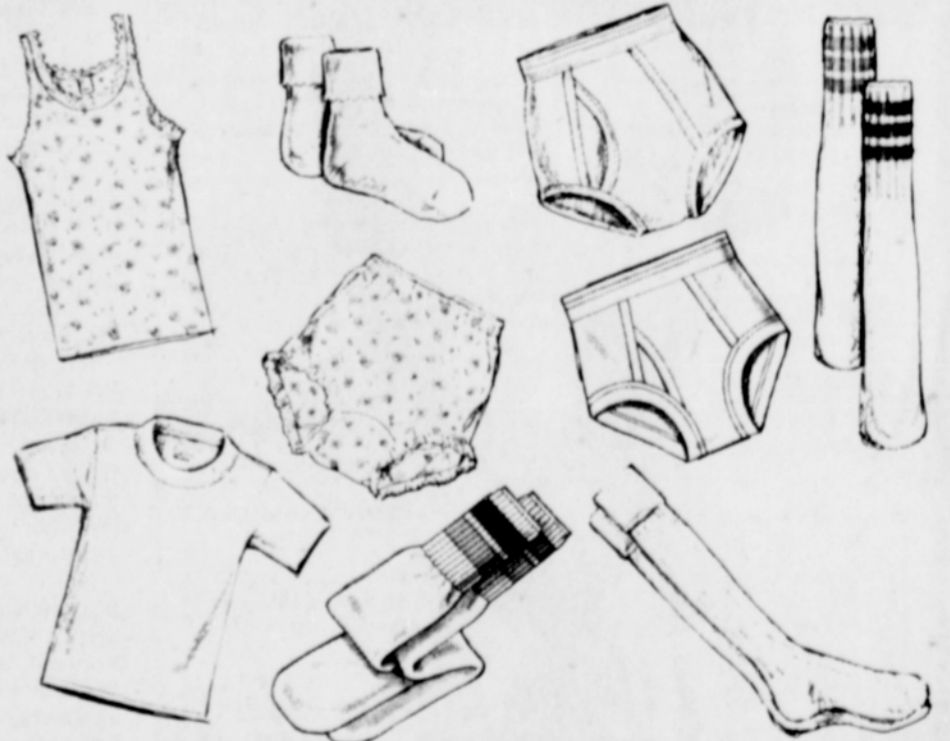
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