

Gannett
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Another barrier is broken

- Arthur Ashe's life has been full of firsts.
- First black man on the U.S. junior Davis Cup team.
- First black man on the UCLA tennis team.
- First black man on the U.S. Davis Cup team.
- First black member of the West Side Tennis Club in Forest Hills.
- First black to win the U.S. Open — in 1968.

Ashe concedes his latest first isn't in that league, but this barrier-buster must rank high on Westchester County's list. Ashe is the first black to be accepted as a full member of Sleepy Hollow Country Club in Scarborough-on-Hudson. Singer-actress Diana Ross has been a family member, as the wife of Arnie Nelson, but Ashe's status as a bonded, voting member is a critical milestone in the history of one of the county's most prestigious private clubs.

Saved the Commemorative

Founded in 1911 by such blue bloods as Cornelius Vanderbilt and William Rockefeller, Sleepy Hollow was once listed by Golf Magazine among the 50 snobbiest clubs in the nation. It boasts a diverse racial and religious membership now but is still considered one of the county's most exclusive and elegant clubs.

Far more important is the fact that Ashe's entry completes the first steps toward integration of the three local clubs that host professional golf tournaments.

Sleepy Hollow hosts the Senior PGA Tour's NYNEX Commemorative Westchester Country Club, host of the PGA Tour's Buick Classic, and Wykagyl Country Club, host of the LPGA's JAL Big Apple Classic, also recently admitted their first black members.

In fact, Ashe saved the Commemorative for Sleepy Hollow. The PGA Tour was satisfied with the club's good faith efforts to integrate, but Ashe's membership came just in time to defuse a NYNEX threat to move the Commemorative unless a black was admitted. Sleepy Hollow president Max Chapman said the club would have let the tournament go rather than admit a black member purely to keep the tournament.

Luckily, for everyone involved, Ashe's membership has been in the works for some time. As a longtime friend of a Sleepy Hollow member (both wanted him to remain anonymous), Ashe has played the course many times in recent years. A former Mount Kisco resident now splitting time between New York City and Miami, Ashe dates talk of his possible membership to 1989.

"Things just drifted along," he said, until last summer's furor over the PGA Championship's presence at all-white Shoal Creek Golf Club in Birmingham, Ala. Shoal Creek admitted its first black, but pressure to integrate spread to private clubs scheduled to host pro tournaments all across the nation.

Ashe isn't sure what would have happened without the Shoal Creek furor, but Chapman admits it played a role in accelerating the process. He said the club became "more sensitive" to the issue after Shoal Creek.

Ashe put it this way: "It may be naive of me to say in hindsight that Shoal Creek had no influence. It would be naive to say that. Shoal Creek probably had some bearing on it."

County should be proud

More certain, to Ashe, is what the future holds.

"It always begins with tokenism, and then you go beyond that," he said. "I won't be the only minority member long. There is a quiet revolution going on in the New York area, no question about it."

Ashe, 47, has been plagued by heart problems that forced two bypass operations and describes his health as "up and down." But he noted that he feels strong enough to handle Sleepy Hollow's hills. Ashe is proud of the fact that he's never ridden a cart over the course.

The county should be proud to have him back.

Bill Varner is a staff writer and columnist.