

THEN AND NOW

The personal stories of successful entrepreneurs in the Washington area

A TRUE WHOLE IN ONE

How Rose Harper became one of golf's most important contributors

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The first time Rose Harper said she played golf, it was a bold-faced lie to impress a tall looker of a man she met in a bowling alley. Truth is, the 17-year-old had never heard of the sport. But she knew she'd have to try it, just for an excuse to meet that fellow again.

The first time Harper entered a country club, she figured it was the white cigar-smoking, card-playing manager's needlessly fancy home.

The first time she hit a ball across a driving range, she didn't know not to wear her work dress and high heels.

The first time she ever heard of professional golfers, her first reaction was, "You get paid to do this?"

Harper's journey from the fourth child of seven on a Hyattsville farm to global golfing legend – enshrined in the National Black Hall of Fame and dubbed by a golf writer as one of the "Talented Tenth" for black women in the field – is a long one. One that includes winning at least a dozen amateur tournaments. And 26 years touring with or managing some of PGA's biggest names. And, now, a 21-year-old consultancy, The Grass Ceiling Inc., to help women understand that polite putting can go a long way toward vigorous deal-making, no matter the handicap.

She lectures, consults and holds accredited workshops on how the art of the deal starts on the curve of the green. She wrote a book, covering golf etiquette for first-timers – the pace, best tee, suitable small talk, perfect club fit, frowned-upon fashion statements (and if anyone knows fashion statements, it's a woman who effortlessly matches the pink in her logo with her scarf, pants, belt, shoes, earrings, golf gloves and golf bag).

But it's more than decorum. For Harper, golf has been synonymous with progress and prosperity. It's been the vehicle for her business success and a personal saving grace. In the end, golf has given her as much as she's given it.



Rose Harper spends more time in boardrooms than on the green nowadays, but will always love golf. "It's a beautiful game. It's a tranquil game," she says.

"I negotiated contracts in Japan. I negotiated contracts in Australia. I negotiated contracts in Africa," she says. "The only thing I had in my portfolio that most women I spoke to didn't have was golf."

SWINGS AND MISSES

From her arrival at Freedmen's Hospital, today Howard University Hospital, Harper refused to be excluded.

An obstinate tomboy, she spent most time with her two older brothers. She once snuck out in one's jacket and cap to watch a pig get slaughtered just because she wasn't about to be left home. The three regularly infiltrated the policeman neighbor's stable across the street to ride his horse, bareback. Even her first job was with her brothers, at Harris Electric, an electrical engineering

shop three doors down on E Street NE. Alongside them, she'd sort nuts and bolts, cleaned the trucks and, yes, fought back when the boys threw hardware at her.

When she was banished to the front office – where girls belonged, she was told – she found a mentor: Elena Harris, a Howard University magna cum laude who ran the company with her husband. For a dozen



COURTESY ROSE HARPER



COURTESY ROSE HARPER

Above left, Rose Harper had organized golf tournaments for President Gerald Ford. **Above,** No stranger to fame, Harper was close friends with Bob and Dolores Hope and served on the board of the Crosby Invitational.



JOANNE S. LAWTON / STAFF

years, her most formative, Harper quickly became a public face of the company, delivering and negotiating contracts, depositing checks and responding to such customers as the Congressional Country Club – at the time more a dreaded drive around the Beltway for her than the vaunted golf venue it was. From Harris, a brilliant strategist, Harper learned tenets she holds today: Pay attention

to your daily banking. Memorize bid details. And never, ever bring back a contract unsigned. Figure out the compromise and cut the deal.

It was at the Harris staff bowling tournament when that dreamy man told her that winter bowling matches turned into summer golf matches. It's how the teen found herself at East Potomac Park's driving range on Maine Avenue for the first time. She



COURTESY ROSE HARPER

Rose Harper plays in her first major tournament.

was hooked in the first few swings. Her second day, a white man asked if she had tennis shoes to replace those heels. He was a pro golfer and trainer. She had a good swing, he told her, but he could help make it better.

"It was a challenge of just being able to see if I could do this without a lot of effort," Harper says. "It grew on me. It gave me a sense of purpose, and I never gave it up."

Harper used to play nine holes at Langston Golf Course, then whip across the street to Springarn High School by first bell. Sometimes she'd play during a lunch break. All summer, she'd work at Harris Electric and play another nine holes after that. Every day. The trainer worked with her three of those days a week.

It was the '50s and '60s, an era of uneven progress. Black golfer Bill Spiller was denied entry into the Richmond Open, but Ann Gregory and Charlie Sifford became the first African-Americans to enter the U.S.

► EDITOR'S NOTE

Then and Now is a new monthly feature tracing entrepreneurial success stories. Email Vandana Sinha at vsinha@bizjournals.com if you have a great story to tell and want to inspire others.

Women's Amateur and earn a PGA Tour card, respectively. The PGA of America was just beginning to remove its "Caucasian-only clause" for tournaments. The fairways weren't yet fair, but Harper knew it's where she was meant to be.

"When they look at me, they'd think I don't belong," she says of white onlookers back then. "But my people have been in this game."

TEERING OFF

Harper didn't make it a semester at Howard University before determining college wasn't for her.

So, Harris enrolled her in Patricia Stevens College, a finishing school that taught her how to stand properly, talk politely and, most importantly, do public relations effectively – skills that drew her first PR and modeling jobs, but served the petite, deliberate, impeccably put-together entrepreneur well beyond that.

Amid those PR jobs in her 20s, Harper played golf. She competed in tournaments, from D.C. to Miami, for the United Golfers Association, the golf circuit for black players. There, she met names now in history books. Ted Rhodes, Pete Brown, Althea Gibson, And, of course, Lee Elder, the first black man to break the color barrier at the Master's.

About a year after meeting Elder, Harper married him in 1967. She eventually came to manage his endorsement and sponsorship deals as he toured six continents. Through

CONTINUED ON PAGE 40

THEN AND NOW

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

her consulting company then, Rose Elder & Associates, she met with manufacturer Pal Joe to talk golf clubs, negotiated terms of shirt deals with Titleist or shoe deals with Foot-Joy. And she'd work with other players, too. Help Calvin Peete qualify for the Ryder Cup. Sign an affidavit for Sifford for public acknowledgement of his hole-in-one.

She had also entered a realm of the rich and famous, socializing with the (Bing) Crosbys and (Bob) Hopes, sharing a feast with the king of Morocco, developing an eye for African art, meeting in Vail, Colorado, with President Gerald Ford and setting up tournaments for President George H.W. Bush.

That standing didn't come without considerable work. And she didn't let it pass without effecting some change. Harper "transferred what she learned to try to help blacks," says Earnie Ellison, a former PGA of America business development and diversity director who now manages Ellison Consulting Group, his Florida sports management firm.

Harper started the Lee Elder Scholarship Fund, sparking 24 years of celebrity tournaments – think Johnny Mathis and Gen. "Chappie" James – for students at historically black colleges and universities. She helped found the PGA Tour Wives Association. She shepherded college students on a delegation to the Seoul Olympics and was one of five founders, the only woman, of the PGA Minority Collegiate Golf Championship. She organized a massive multiracial sporting event in apartheid-stricken South Africa with a 21-point checklist of demands – black players get to use the same restrooms, stay in the same hotels, walk through the same gates to the links.

"She was not selfish at all when it came down to promoting the game for equality," Ellison says.

These are experiences she shares in the most fleeting of ways, mentioning them as almost afterthoughts in long-winded, unbroken answers, punctuated by loud, throaty laughs, to entirely different questions. Like her casual aside that she entered into a joint venture with Arnold Palmer and Gary Player to conduct a feasibility study for what would become FedEx Field – in a labyrinthine response to a question about tournaments she played. Don't try to ask her about dates – details may elude her, but it's the broader experience that continues to inform her.

"When I went on tour, I had no mentor. There was no 'lean in' back then, in the '70s," she says. "I cut my own path. Each year, I was growing that path a little wider and a little longer. And I've been doing it ever since."

THE ACE TODAY

The one thing she doesn't like to talk about? Her marriage to Elder. It



COURTESY ROSE HARPER

Rose Harper chats with former Boston Celtic Bill Russell at her tournament fundraiser when she helped manage D.C.'s Langston Golf Course.



COURTESY ROSE HARPER

Celebrities at Harper's tournaments have included TV star Greg Morris, August Busch of Anheuser-Busch and, shown here, golf legend Lee Trevino.

came to a grueling end in the early 1990s with a lawsuit and bankruptcy filing. But she slowly and steadily picked herself back up, reinvigorated her contact list and, in 1995, reentered the business world with her own consulting firm, Grass Ceiling, run out of her D.C. home today.

Because she had joined her veritable second home, TPC Potomac at Avenel Farm, under her own name, she remains a member today, knowing its grassy bends by heart and

holding many of her seminars there.

"I don't use my ex-spouse's name, I use my own name. I do that for a reason," she says. "I believe it's very important for women going through a major transition in life to reclaim their own identity. I'm not ashamed of my past. It has played into my future."

She expects that future to include her first international seminar, in South Africa. More revenue from corporate workshops, though she

► ROSE'S JOURNEY

1967: She married Lee Elder

1972: Organized first interracial sporting event in South Africa

1986: Helped found PGA Minority Collegiate Golf Championship for students of color

1988: Served as a delegate with high school and college students to the Seoul Olympics

1995: Started Grass Ceiling

2000: Held her first training seminar, with 14 female ambassadors, on including golf in their business skills portfolio

2011: Inducted in the National Black Hall of Fame

2013: First female to win Greater Washington Urban League's Sam Lacy Award

2014: Published her book, "Art of the Deal"

2015: Appointed to task force to commemorate African-American history in golf

declines to disclose figures. A handicap of 17, down from her current 22 and closer to her peak of 7. And an autobiography penned by a ghost writer she has yet to find. She has too important a story to tell – one of a black woman making a name in a white, male-dominated field.

To this day, she refuses to give her age for fear of prejudice. "It's very serious in this day and time, the bias toward gender and age and race in the sports industry," she says. "People see it but often don't want to speak up about it. I'm in the stage of life where I have earned the right to."

Some of golf's biggest voices agree. The PGA of America and U.S. Golf Association selected her for a 14-person task force to create a repository of African-American golf history and memorabilia.

"Oh, she had to be chosen. Of all the things she's done, there are only a few black women who could have been chosen," says Debert Cook, publisher of the quarterly African American Golfers Digest.

People often lump Harper with black female players who shattered golf's barriers. But Cook says she's different. She's a businesswoman. "Rose has been focused on education, building her business and connecting women to one another," Cook says. Her contributions have "rounded it out so women can have a big picture of the whole sport of golf and how they can fit into it."

That sums up a career that's helped other women behind her avoid the mistakes Harper made in her own first brushes with golf. And it's seen her cross paths with everyone from Michael Jordan to Muhammad Ali, Jack Nicklaus to Joe Louis, Dinah Washington to Sheila Johnson.

Everyone, funnily enough, except for that good-looking man from the bowling alley who started it all. ❧