

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Robert "Lee" Elder

(July 14, 1934 – November 28, 2021)

"First African-American to Play In The Masters Tournament"

Robert Lee Elder was born on July 14, 1934, in Dallas, Texas to Charles and Almeta Elder. One of ten children, Lee was nine years old when his father was killed in Germany in WWII. His mother died just three months later. The loss of his parents created an uncertain environment with Lee's older sister struggling to manage the household in their absence. To earn money to help the family, Lee frequently cut classes to work as a caddie at the nearby all-white Tenneson Park Golf Club in Dallas.

One of the pro golfers at the club befriended Lee and allowed him to hit the ball after hours, and on the back six holes, which were hidden away from public view. Lee quickly honed his skills as a golfer and

eventually attracted the attention of a local hustler nicknamed "Titanic" Thompson. Using Thompson's financial backing, Lee began playing in small tournaments while developing the ability to win under pressure.

In 1959, Lee was drafted into the Army. Upon his discharge in 1961, he joined the all-black United Golfers Association (UGA), winning four Negro National Open Championships. In 1966 Elder won an astonishing 18 of the 22 tournaments he played in. This success enabled Lee to earn the required \$6,500 he needed to enter the 1967 qualifying school for the PGA Tour.

In November 1967, Lee joined the PGA tour following the footsteps of Charlie Sifford, the first black golfer to earn a PGA Tour card and Pete Brown, the first black golfer to win a PGA Tour event. The following year, Lee's exceptional skill was on display when he tied Frank Beard and Jack Nicklaus for the lead in the American Golf Classic. Frank Beard was out after bogeying the first extra hole, but Lee dueled Jack Nicklaus for the next four holes. Jack Nicklaus won with a birdie on the fifth after Lee missed a long birdie putt. His impressive show at the Classic catapulted Lee into the spotlight; however, the Masters Tournament was still off limits to black players. In 1973, a group of 18 congressional representatives petitioned the Masters Tournament to include at least one black player in the tournament. The Masters responded by establishing a stringent requirement: all Masters participants must have a victory at a PGA Tour event.

In 1974, Lee earned his first PGA victory at the 1974 Monsanto/Pensacola Open Golf Tournament (PGA) — at the same event where, six years earlier, he had been forced to change clothes in the parking lot because black people were not allowed to use the country club locker room. After his qualifying win, Lee was invited to compete at the Master's Open in 1975 - making him the first black golfer ever invited to the Masters Tournament.

On April 10, 1975, Robert Lee Elder stood at the first tee, at the Augusta National Golf Club, on a former indigo plantation in Augusta, Georgia. When Lee smashed his tee shot straight down the fairway, he not only made history at the Masters, he opened the doors for those who would follow. Lee won the Houston Open in 1976 and played in the 1977 Masters. In 1979, he became the first black golfer to play for the Ryder Cup team. On April 17, 1997, Lee returned to Augusta National to watch Tiger Woods win the Masters by a record-setting 12 strokes - becoming the first black golfer to win the Masters Tournament.

Lee Elder played in five more Masters and won four PGA tournaments. Lee Elder had a combined 12 tournament victories on the PGA and Senior Tours, earning more than \$1 million on each tour.

On April 8, 2021, Honorary starter Lee Elder, joined fellow honorary starters Gary Player and Jack Nicklaus during introductions for the ceremonial tee shots to begin the Masters golf tournament at Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, GA.

Robert Lee Elder passed away on November 28th, 2021 in Escondido, California. He was 87.

