

Sewsunker 'Papwa' Sewgolum

Papwa Sewgolum—unknown Indian sporting great—was born on 12 December 1930.

Graham Wulff was the man behind Oil of Olay. A former Unilever Chemist from Durban, he and business partner Jack Lowe had made the product a huge success. And he was a golf fanatic.

At the Beachwood Golf Club, Durban, he was playing with Lowe and business associates Anderson and Andrews

That sultry day the caddie of the volatile Andrews was a local man from the Indian community.

At the fifth hole, Andrews played a poor drive. He turned to his Indian caddie and asked him for advice on selecting a club for the approaching green.

The Indian man sniffed the breeze, saw the 145-metre distance, and selected a six-iron. The following stroke of Andrews was decent but short.

"You call yourself a first-class caddie?" he turned, face flushed, and barked at the Indian.

The man lowered his head and started walking towards the clubhouse.

"Hey man, where do you think you're going?"

"To the clubhouse, Sir, to get you a first-class caddie."

Andrews was shocked, but restrained his frustrations.

"What's your name?"

"Papwa."

"What made you so sure that a six-iron was the club for that shot?"

"I play a bit, Sir."

Andrews picked up a six-iron and thrust it challengingly in his direction.

Papwa took it, looked at the distant flag, and practiced his swing. Andrews and the others burst out laughing. Left hand below the right, and yet a right hander's stance. This man was hilarious.

Papwa swung the six-iron back, and with the smoothest motion of his hips, he arched through. His arms followed, and his wrists flicked like a whip. The ball rose, soared to its zenith some four metres beyond the flag, bit into the ground, and spun back within a foot of the hole.

The four white men gaped, and then their stern features broke into smiles.

Soon, the Indian caddie's hand was being shaken by all four.

As a child Papwa Sewgolum had been gifted a Syringa stick by his father, a municipal grasscutter in Durban. He had imitated golfers in the nearby course ever since, and had become a caddie as it was the closest he could get to proper facilities. He had won non-white tournaments contested between the caddies.

They discussed the various inequalities and laws that prevented him from playing. There was a conviction growing in Wulff that Papwa should be given proper opportunity.

By 1956, Wulff and Lowe had employed Papwa in their company to place caps on the bottles of Oil of Olay for £10 per month. His workload was light. He was given plenty of time off and access to facilities to hone his golfing skills.

In May 1959, Wulff flew Papwa in his own Piper Twin Comanche from Durban to London, missing Gatwick in the fog and somehow landing on Biggin Hill.

At his North Berwick Hotel, Scotland, Papwa received a telegram from the ladies of the Beachwood Golf Club where he caddied. The receptionist read it

out to him: "Good wishes and good golfing." Papwa could not read, he had never been to school.

In the British Open, Papwa could not qualify for the final two rounds by two strokes. White South African great Gary Player emerged champion.

However, at the Hague his final put trickled towards the 18th hole and, after showing slight signs of holding up, disappeared. He had overcome Gerard De Wit in the final.

The man who was not allowed to compete in Open tournaments in his own country had travelled to the land of the forefathers of the Afrikaners and won the Dutch Open.

The Golden City Post mournfully observed: "Back home the winner of the Dutch Open wouldn't be allowed to take part in a White tournament except in a menial capacity."

Sid Brews, former Dutch Open champion and president of the South African Golfer's Association, said it was unlikely that Papwa would be allowed to compete in the South African Golf Open.

In 1960 Papwa won the Dutch Open for the second year running. 1963.

In the sultry heat of South African January, the Durban Country Club found members stretching out in the sun, Indian waiters hurrying across the turf, bringing them their tall drinks.

The golfers showered or sat in the air-conditioned changing rooms after their efforts in the course. The Indian chefs prepared delightful dishes. The magnificent club building, built in Cape Dutch style, overlooked the sprawling courses.

After years of pressure and criticism in international press, Papwa was finally allowed to participate in the Natal Open.

However, there were no tall drinks brought to him by Indian waiters, nor any dishes prepared by Indian chefs, no changing room with air conditioning and showers.

He ate with the other caddies, lunch packed by his wife. His manager Louis Nelson drove him to the course. He changed in the car. From time to time he entered the tent of the caddies to sip his tea from a thermos flask.

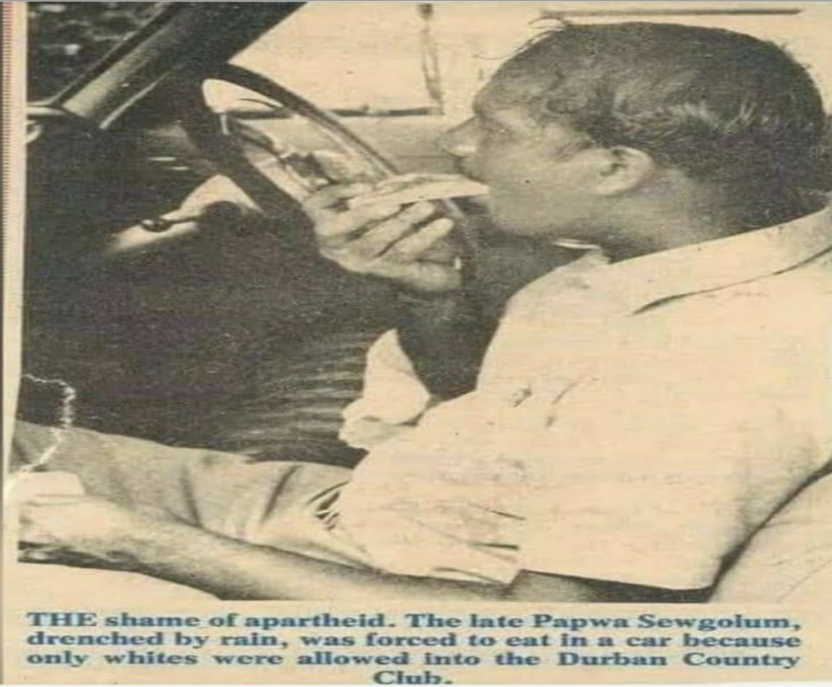
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TIL: Sewsunker "Papwa" Sewgolum was an Indian caddy turned golfer who defeated Gary Player in 1965 in the Natal Open.



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Award

The start was slow but soon the strangeness of playing alongside the 103-strong white field wore off.

Even rains failed to deter him. A smart stroke with a pitching wedge, his ally from the Dutch Open, took him to the brink. And holding his nerve, he putted in, finishing one stroke ahead of his closest rivals, Denis Hutchinson and Gary Player's brother-in-law Bobby Verwey.

Papwa had done the unthinkable. As rain poured down, it sank in. A coloured man, an Indian, had not only competed in the Natal Open, he had won it.

He changed in Nelson's car. The manager asked the spectators and fans who had gathered to congratulate the champion to look away. Then an official hustled towards them, asking him to hurry. The white golfers and their wives were getting wet in the rain.

As the downpour thickened, the golfers huddled into the clubhouse. There was a hitch—Papwa, the Indian man, was not allowed in the whites-only interiors.

Hurriedly, the white officials shoved the trophy into his hand. Some will maintain it was done through the window.

The winner out of the way, the actual celebrations continued indoors. The 1963 Natal Open Champion stayed outside, trophy in hand, getting lashed by rain.

In 1965 Papwa Sewgolum returned to the Netherlands to win his third Dutch Open title.

That same year, at the Durban Country Club, the Natal Open had him pitted against Gary Player. The Indian caddie versus the national icon.

As usual, Papwa changed and ate his wrapped lunch in his manager's car.

It was a classic match

Player later commented, "He chipped like a man from Mars."

Papwa won the tournament by one stroke. There was no rain this time.

The prize-giving took place outdoors. Gary Player, perhaps the greatest golfer of the era, was defeated by the man who could almost never tee off in a proper golf course in his own country.

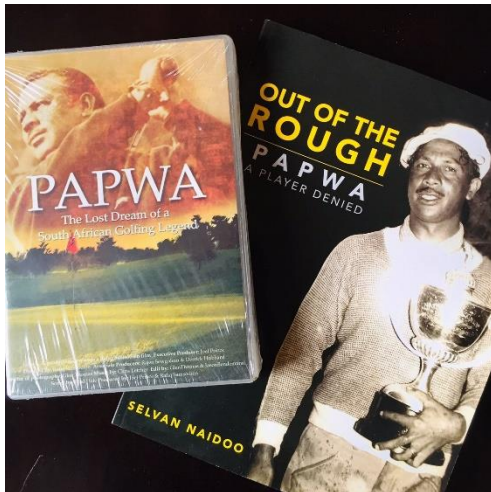
Within two weeks of his win, authorities clamped down on mixed audiences watching sporting events. Papwa's non-White fans had been lucky to watch their hero at the pinnacle of his career graph.

In 1970 Barry Richards enthralled the crowd during his debut series. Eric Lichfield could not hold back his emotions: "Every so often a grandiose diamond is found in South Africa—a jewel that glows with richness. Now there is a new sporting diamond. To the list of such gems, which includes the names of Bobby Locke, Gary Player, Karen Muir and, of course, Graeme Pollock, add Barry Richards."

No place for Basil D'Oiveira or Papwa Sewgolum.

That year April, the National Party romped through the elections once again—winning 118 of the 166 seats. Soon Papwa Sewgolum was banned from the Natal Open. His passport had already been revoked. In the ensuing years he would be denied the right to play golf altogether.

He died a pauper in 1978 at the age of 49. A brilliant sporting career snuffed out by apartheid.



In December 2020 a book titled *OUT OF THE ROUGH, PAPWA, A PLAYER DENIED* by Selvan Naidoo was launched. A DVD "PAPWA " is also available.

"Papwa" Sewsunker Sewgolum was born in 1930, into a family of poor sugarcane labourers in Natal. He started working at an early age, and as a young boy, Sewgolum took to imitating the golfers he had seen on a nearby golf course by hitting a golf ball with a Syringa stick.

Later, Sewgolum was able to practice his childhood passion when as a caddie he was given an old second-hand golf club. At the club where he was a caddie, he was allowed to play on Mondays. Despite his unorthodox golf grip, Sewgolum honed his technique and was soon acknowledged as an exceptional player.

Sewgolum began to dream of playing professionally and finally made a brilliant debut as a professional in 1959 when he won the Dutch Open, which he won again in 1960 and 1963. Despite Sewgolum's success, as a black golfer he was not allowed to play professionally in his own country. The golfing establishment regarded him with amusement and mild embarrassment, while to the apartheid officials he was a black trouble-maker, who should not have aspired to play golf professionally. For years Sewgolum was forced to pursue his game as an amateur in "non-European" tournaments.

Under pressure, the authorities permitted Sewgolum to play in the Natal Open in 1963 at the famous Durban Country Club, after having been satisfied that apartheid laws would not be broken. "Suitable arrangements" were made for Sewgolum to use a mini-van as a change room, and to have his meals with the black caddies. Sewgolum did the seemingly impossible and won the tournament, and to the eternal disgrace and shame of both the white golfing fraternity and government officials, Sewgolum was not allowed to enter the Durban country club to receive his prize.

A picture of a downcast Sewgolum standing in the rain being handed his trophy through an open window - while the rest of the golfers and officials were warmly ensconced in the clubhouse enjoying the post-game fare, outraged the world and gave impetus to the international movement to boycott apartheid sport.

For inadvertently putting the bigoted state policy under the international spotlight, Sewgolum became a target of official harassment and machination. When he again won the Natal Open two years later, apartheid apparatchiks were determined not to make any “concessions” thereafter, and explicitly thwarted his chance of representing his own country in golf.

Within a year of this victory, Sewgolum was banned by the South African government, and was not allowed to play in any tournaments or enter any golf course, not even as a spectator. Out of sheer malice the apartheid government withdrew his passport, thus closing off any possibility of competing internationally.

In 1970, he was specifically banned from the Natal Open. In the ensuing years, denied the right to play the game he loved, Sewgolum was said to be a broken man, struggling to survive and staring forlornly at his golf trophies. He died a pauper in 1978, at the relatively young age of 48.

This unassuming son of farm labourers, who could not read or write, dared to dream and succeed in the face of overwhelming adversity, which included a racist golfing establishment and - in a classic irony of apartheid logic - a government which actively undermined his accomplishments and outrageously humiliated and scorned him.

Sewgolum still remains one of the greatest golfers to come out of South Africa. For his excellent achievements in the field of golf and his perseverance in the face of debilitating apartheid laws, the South African Government bestowed “Papwa” Sewsunker Sewgolum with the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver at the National Orders awards on 19 October 2004