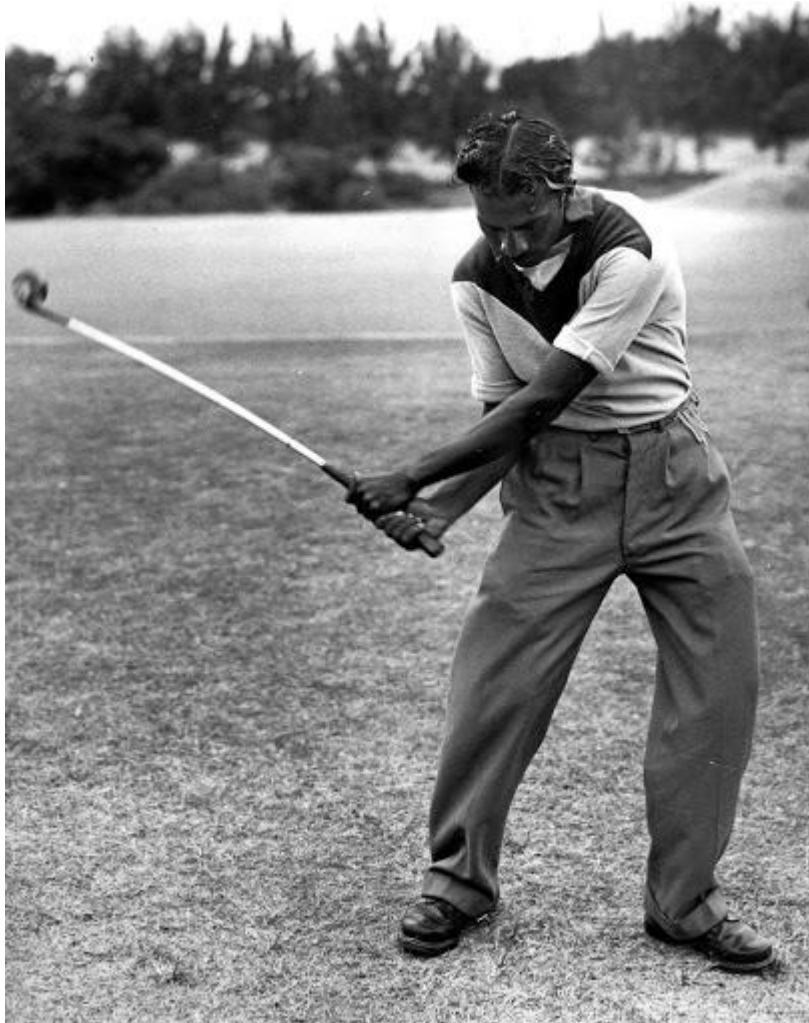


The forgotten stars of SA golf

A new book celebrates the forgotten stars of SA golf – maligned and discriminated against for their colour. Luke Alfred took a look

25 JULY 2019 - 05:00 LUKE ALFRED



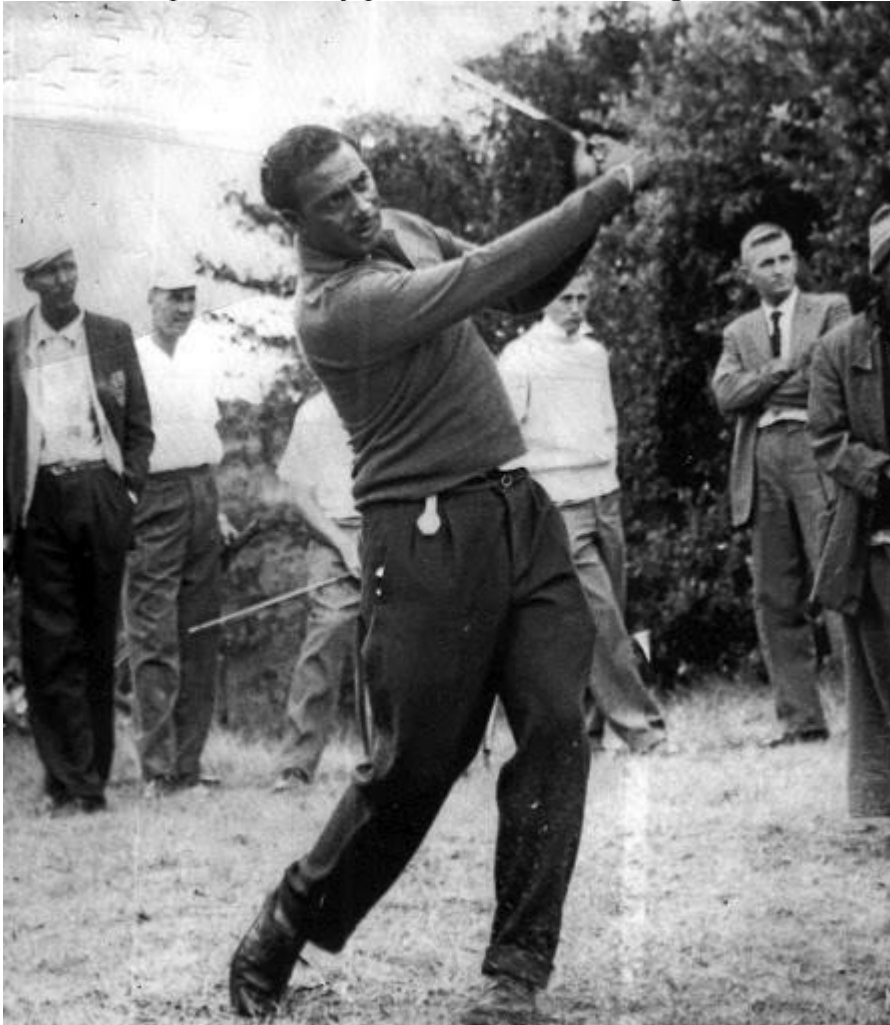
Sewsunker 'Papwa' Sewgolum was known for his unorthodox grip, the left hand lower on the club shaft than the right. Picture: Sunday Times

A chance encounter on a Durban golf course in 1957 launched one of the most remarkable stories in the history of local sport. Playing at the Beachwood GC that workaday afternoon was a local businessman, Graham Wulff, partnered by three others in a fourball.

One of his fellow golfers was David Andrews, who sought a pointer from his caddy when he fell badly short in the approach to the green on the fifth.

Turning to a barefoot Indian man called Sewsunker "Papwa" Sewgolum, carrying his clubs, Andrews asked for advice. Sewgolum suggested a six-iron.

Andrews accepted the advice but turned on Sewgolum in frustration when he fluffed his shot, whereupon the caddy put down Andrews' bag and walked toward the clubhouse.



Suspense on the course as Sewsunker 'Papwa' Sewgolum and spectators watch closely where the ball lands, 1965. Picture: Sunday Times

A fragile peace was secured when Wulff called Sewgolum back, asking: "What made you sure that a six-iron was the way to go?"

"I play a bit in my spare time, sir."

"Well, why don't you show us what you can do?" said Wulff.

There were sniggers of derision from the four when Sewgolum cradled over a newly dropped ball using his unorthodox grip, the left hand lower on the club shaft than the right. But the four's petty cruelties were short-lived. Sewgolum hit the ball crisply onto the green, "momentarily biting 4m beyond the flag and spinning backwards to within a mere foot of the pin".

That story is taken from author Barry Cohen's second book, *Blazing the Trail – Celebrating 90 Years of Black Golf in Southern Africa*.

It's a mere foretaste of Sewgolum's rich, varied and ultimately tragic life.

After the foursome's round, Wulff and Sewgolum became friends. Sewgolum was offered a "job" in Wulff's factory – a sinecure of sorts. Wulff had heard all about Sewgolum's exploits on the "non-European" golf circuit and wanted to help where he could.

It helped that he was rich. Wulff had recently patented "Oil of Olay", the women's cosmetic beauty cream, and was reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in Natal.

He was also among the most open-minded. When it came to encouraging Sewgolum to enter the British Open at Muirfield two years later, Wulff wouldn't take no for an answer. It didn't matter that Sewgolum was illiterate, had no passport and wouldn't be allowed to board an SAA flight to Europe because of his skin colour. Wulff had a cunning plan.



1974. Picture: Sunday Times

He had recently bought a Piper Cherokee and, if needs be, he would fly himself, his wife, Mavis, and Sewgolum to Britain. This he did, stopping en route for fuel throughout the length and breadth of Africa and the Mediterranean, before landing at Gatwick, from where they took a train to Edinburgh.

Despite Sewgolum suffering from culture shock in the rarefied confines of Muirfield, he adapted quickly. He played a practice round or two with Gary Player and, despite not being able to sign his name on the tournament entry form, became a minor celebrity.

He made the cut for the British Open and though he fell away at halfway, it was a creditable performance for a man who had never travelled outside of his province.

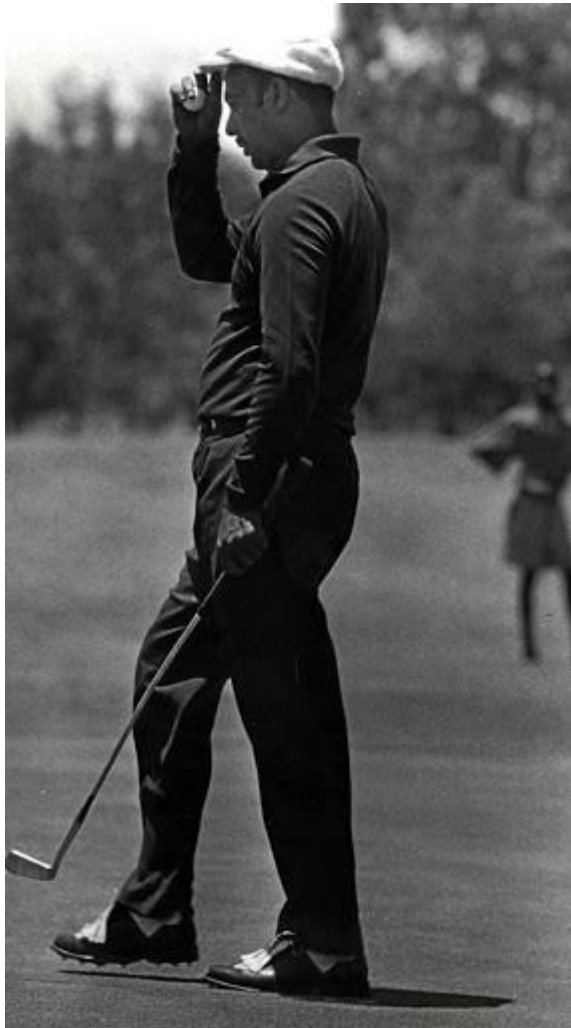
Better followed. Later that European summer (and after being harassed by SA's Special Branch, which caused him to miss the French Open) Sewgolum entered the Dutch Open. On a course outside The Hague, he beat more fancied Dutch and Belgian stars, taking his inaugural European title. "I am so happy to have won here I can hardly think straight," Cohen quotes him saying after that famous win.

Clearly Sewgolum felt relaxed in the Netherlands because he won the Dutch Open for a second time the following year, and won it again — for the last time — in 1964.

But, had it not been for the can-do attitudes of Wulff, he might have remained a caddy at Beachwood GC, unable to showcase his talents in the wider world.

While Sewgolum's first Dutch Open win was celebrated by the community of Natal Indians, it caused the golf authorities and the apartheid government acute embarrassment. The powers-that-be handled this by throwing Sewgolum the occasional sop, bending the rules or creating a dispensation that allowed him to enter white tournaments more regularly.

So it was that Sewgolum entered the Natal Open at the Durban Country Club in 1963. At the end of the third round he was tied in second position, playing the fourth in driving rain. Despite being chased to the title by Bobby Verwey and Denis Hutchinson, Sewgolum held his nerve to win.



Showing signs of pressure in his game; 1966. Picture: Sunday Times

"Every caddy, waiter and labourer in Durban stood a little taller that day," writes Cohen.

Although Sewgolum won R800 for being the champion, this was the high period of Grand Apartheid — and he was forced by law to receive his trophy outside the clubhouse. The scene — with Sewgolum being honoured outside in the rain — was syndicated across the world.

Cohen thinks such photos contributed to Sewgolum becoming famous in India (he was later offered the role of course professional at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club) and sharpened India's distaste for apartheid.

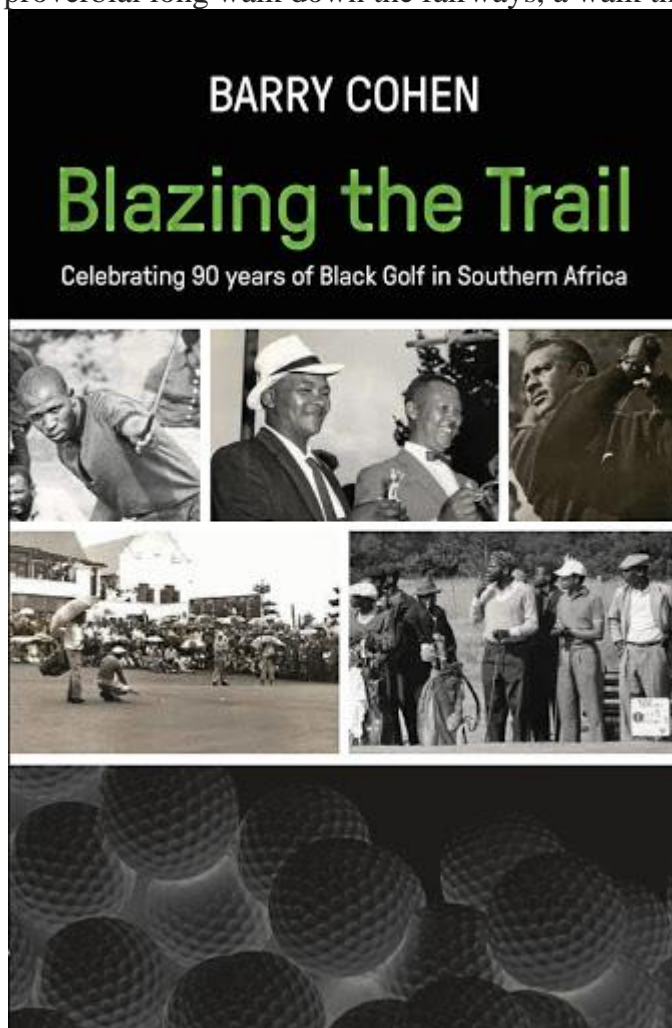
"People don't realise that because of Papwa, India had SA turfed out of the Olympics [in Tokyo in 1964] and later out of the International Olympic Committee," he says.

Cohen brings deep sensitivity to the stories of golf's dispossessed caddies who were often self-taught on improvised "clubs". Growing up as a Jewish South African in Muizenberg in the 1960s, Cohen describes it as a "little shtetl" of about 250 families. The boys played touch rugby on the beach and sometimes caught the Simon's Town train to Kalk Bay's Olympia bioscope, "where coloured boys sitting in the upper tiers used to good-naturedly hurl water bombs down on us".

Opportunity denied

As a teenager Cohen was introduced to Clovelly GC, one of several Cape clubs that once excluded Jews, where he rubbed shoulders with the club caddy-master, Ismail Chowglay. An easy left-hander with a flashing smile and a distinctive straw hat, Chowglay was much loved at Clovelly, but denied opportunity in the wider world of golf because of his colour. So began Cohen's political awakening — a process that saw him spend 14 years abroad and ultimately start the Golf Museum and Hall of Fame at the V&A Waterfront.

History has always been close to his heart and, as he curated the Waterfront exhibition, he came upon material that he couldn't accommodate in the museum. So began his proverbial long walk down the fairways, a walk that culminated in *Blazing the Trail*.



Sewgolum's story (he died of a heart attack aged 48 and was broadly celebrated only after his death) is one of many in Cohen's book. Who could forget, for instance, the story of Vincent Tshabalala, winner of the 1976 French Open, who pulled his caddy cart around the course with him?

Or that of the highly regarded Zimbabwean golfer Lewis Chitengwa, who once beat Tiger Woods, and his death from meningitis at an age when there was so much more left for him to achieve.

Cohen tells them all with great energy and dedication; they make for a fascinating read.

• *Blazing the Trail by Barry Cohen, is available from Blue Weaver Books in Tokai, Cape Town, and all good bookshops.*