LIBERTY CORNER, N.J. (Feb. 23, 2019) – The USGA will honor Lee Elder with its highest honor, the Bob Jones Award, in a ceremony on June 12, 2019, during the week of the 119th U.S. Open Championship at Pebble Beach (Calif.) Golf Links. Elder is the first African American to receive the prestigious award.

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Presented annually since 1955, the Bob Jones Award recognizes an individual who demonstrates the spirit, personal character and respect for the game exhibited by Jones, winner of nine USGA championships.

"Lee's perseverance, positive attitude, and generous spirit personifies the ideals that the Bob Jones Award represents," said Mike Davis, USGA CEO. "His grace and humility demonstrate his extraordinary character, and his work at the community level has paved the way for generations of future golfers. We are thrilled to have the opportunity to honor his incredible sportsmanship in the game."

After bursting onto the PGA Tour in 1968 by tying Jack Nicklaus and extending him to a five-hole playoff at the American Golf Classic, Robert Lee Elder used his new-found fame to introduce disadvantaged youths to the game through various development programs.

Most notably, Elder managed the desegregated Langston Golf Course in Washington, D.C., where he hosted after-school programs aimed at educating youngsters about the game, while also giving them a safe place to spend their afternoons. In 1974, Elder created the Lee Elder Scholarship Fund, which offers financial aid to low-income young men and women to attend college.

A pioneering force in the game, Elder overcame personal tragedy and discrimination to become the first African American to play in the Masters Tournament, as well as the first African American to earn a spot on a Ryder Cup Team, serving as an inspiration to countless players who sought to break the color barrier.

"It's a great honor to receive this award and be recognized in the same vein as Mr. Jones, who did so much for golf, and many others that I've admired who have positively impacted the game," said Elder. "I felt that by setting the right example and serving as a mentor, I would have the ability to leave a lasting impression on people. Even if I could only reach a few of them, I wanted to give all youngsters a chance to learn the game and be a part of it."

Born the youngest of 10 children in Dallas in 1934, Robert Lee Elder was orphaned at age 9 after his father was killed in action during World War II and his mother, overcome with grief, died three months later. Their deaths forced Elder to interrupt his schooling, and he found work at a nearby golf course, sparking his interest in and cultivating his love for the game. He began practicing in his off hours with a borrowed club and developed his skills further after he began to caddie. At age 12, Elder was sent to live with an aunt in Los Angeles, where his affinity for the game grew through jobs in pro shops and locker rooms, in addition to continuing his work as a caddie.

Elder's competitive career began in 1950 at an amateur event conducted by the United Golf Association (UGA), which provided competitive opportunities for African American players. After a stint traveling with famous golf hustler Titanic Thompson and two years in the Army, Elder played professionally, quickly establishing himself as the top player on the UGA circuit with wins in 18 of 22 tournaments in 1966. He easily qualified for the PGA Tour in 1967 and went on to finish his career with four PGA Tour wins and eight PGA Tour Champions wins.

Elder stared down discrimination throughout his career, most notably by accepting Gary Player's invitation to play in the South African PGA Championship in 1971, in the hope that a desegregated event would help end apartheid policies in South Africa. Elder also declined an invitation to the Masters that was based on growing legislative pressure rather than his own merit, and instead earned his spot with his first PGA Tour win at the Monsanto Open in 1974.

Elder joins a list of Bob Jones Award winners that includes national champions such as Francis Ouimet (1955), Babe Didrikson Zaharias (1957), Arnold Palmer (1971), Jack Nicklaus (1975), Ben Hogan (1976), Annika Sorenstam (2012) and Payne Stewart (2014), as well as others who have contributed to the fabric of the game in other meaningful ways, such as Richard S. Tufts (1967), Joe Dey (1977), Bing Crosby and Bob Hope (1978), P.J. Boatwright Jr. (1993), President George H.W. Bush (2008), Barbara Nicklaus (2015) and Judy Bell (2016). A complete list of winners can be found here.

About the USGA

The USGA celebrates, serves and advances the game of golf. Founded in 1894, we conduct many of golf's premier professional and amateur championships, including the U.S. Open and U.S. Women's Open. With The R&A, we govern the sport via a global set of playing, equipment and amateur status rules. Our operating jurisdiction for these governance functions is the United States, its territories and Mexico. The USGA Handicap System is utilized in more than 40 countries and our Course Rating System covers 95 percent of the world's golf courses, enabling all golfers to play on an equitable basis. The USGA campus in Liberty Corner, New Jersey, is home to the Association's Research and Test Center, where science and innovation are fueling a healthy and sustainable game for the future. The campus is also home to the USGA Golf Museum, where we honor the game by curating the world's most comprehensive archive of golf artifacts. To learn more, visit usga.org.

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