

A woman with short, curly dark hair, wearing a dark blue long-sleeved dress, stands smiling in front of a large, dark wooden door. The door is set in a stone wall. The door has metal hinges and a handle. The background is a rustic stone wall.

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GOLF BUSINESS

Breaking Up the Boys' Club

From the lesson tee to the board room,
women are reshaping
the game and business of golf

Sheila Johnson
is one of many
women who are
changing the
face of golf.

From Software to Sandtraps

Meet John McConnell, who became a pioneering course owner following a lucrative software career

Cleaning the Clutter

How an unorganized office may be impacting both productivity and the bottom line

OPENING DOORS

The ink was barely dry on the deal that delivered Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club to Sheila Johnson's burgeoning Salamander Hotels empire. But that didn't slow the flood of phone calls and emails the businesswoman and entrepreneur would receive in the weeks that followed.

"I started getting inquiries from many golfers from all over the country...wanting to know if they were welcome," she says. "This is something the golf industry has been very guilty of, the exclusion."

It was an exclusion Johnson, America's first African-American female billionaire, understood all too well. And it was one she was more than happy to squash at first chance.

SHEILA JOHNSON | CEO SALAMANDER HOTELS & RESORTS MIDDLEBURG, VIRGINIA

HAS THE FEMALE'S ROLE IN THE GOLF INDUSTRY CHANGED IN A POSITIVE WAY SINCE YOU FIRST ENTERED THE SPORT?

The diversity that I saw in our [Valspar Championship Pro-Am] lineup was just amazing. We have one of the top models, Beverly Johnson, playing golf. It has been fabulous to see all of this and seeing this transition of people coming into the game of golf because they just love it.

THROUGH YOUR EYES, HAS THE SPORT BECOME MORE FEMALE-FRIENDLY IN THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS?

We're trying to get the word out there that golf is fun again, that golf is inclusive. To be able to bring in a real diverse group of people, whether they're from the modeling world to media or off the basketball court. This is what's going to excite people.

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE ABOUT THE GAME IF GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY?

I think you have to bring new faces in on a different level, that brings it to a level that everybody feels they can participate and it'll be fun. I think that's what the game of golf has been missing, but I think Salamander and the way we're marketing and working with different people is starting to increase our numbers at courses.

"I wanted to make sure our gates were open for everyone to come to not only stay, but also experience our fine golf courses," she explains. "That's what was really important to me."

Johnson, the co-founder of BET and co-owner of three D.C. professional sports franchises, believes her foray into the golf industry has come full-circle. As an African-American female, the sport wasn't a viable outlet to her as a child. But now she's leading the charge, opening the gates for everyone regardless of race, gender or social status.

"I'm very proud of the fact that I have been given the opportunity, by whatever doors that have opened, to be able to offer golf to everyone," Johnson says. "Diversity is a huge issue not just in sports, but across corporate America. I think if we're able to level the playing field for everyone, then I think I've helped to change the game, so to speak."

The philanthropist has her own ambitions for leveling the playing field beyond merely inclusion at Salamander's six locations, which include Reunion, Hammock Beach and Innisbrook, home of the PGA Tour's Valspar Championship. A hotel in Destin, Florida, is scheduled to open later this summer.

The 50 students in her Sheila C. Johnson Leadership Fellowship at Harvard's Kennedy School will all receive a set of golf clubs and lessons upon graduation, so they can close deals on the course. Additionally, her hotels host executive women's retreats where Innisbrook's golf director explains the sport's business benefits.

"Everyone needs to do this. Everyone," she maintains. "This cannot continue to be the best-kept secret of corporate America or of golf clubs."

Count Johnson in that group, too. She has built a drive, chip and putt area at her home and plans to learn right alongside her peers. "I want people to start playing the game of golf again," she says. "And I'll be out there with them."

