

Arthur Clay and Ben Finley

National Brotherhood of Skiers (NBS) founders organized first Black Summit in 1973, encouraged the formation of ski clubs, brought thousands to the sport, and nurtured athletes' Olympic dreams.

Ben Finley is the diligent, fiscally focused organizer with a sparkling corporate résumé who served as the president of the Four Seasons West Ski Club in Los Angeles. Arthur Clay is the street-savvy Chicago probation officer with the bowler hat and bow tie who knew how to throw a party, and served as the networking trip director for the Sno-Gophers Ski Club in his spare time. Together they made history, conceiving and organizing the first gathering of a 13 black ski clubs with 350 attendees in Aspen in 1973, the foundation for what would become the biennial Black Summit and the National Brotherhood of Skiers.

"We were like tweedledee and tweedledum," Finley laughs, but they shared a vision for creating a comfortable community for the small number of black skiers in the country and a commitment to increasing minority participation that went far beyond securing lodging and lift ticket deals for their group.

It was a different time back then, in the wake of civil unrest and the Black Power Movement, with overt racism not uncommon on the all-white slopes. Uncertain of the reception their big gathering would receive in Aspen, Finley and Clay had the ski clubs book their reservations independently at lodges around town to stay under the radar. It wasn't until 10 days prior to the event that the group sent a press release to the local newspaper.

A half-dozen years later, the NBS learned that Colorado authorities had put the National Guard on alert. It wasn't necessary, of course. "We came, we saw, we had fun," Finley says. Only ski club members could attend, and the event had the desired effect of driving the formation of ski clubs in places like Denver, Seattle and the Bay Area. From the start, NBS was more than just a ski gathering: The group brainstormed ways to increase the black skiing population, and agreed on the idea of a larger, central goal—to put black athletes on Olympic podiums.

Both Finley and Clay would play critical roles with NBS in the near five decades to follow, as it grew to more than 50 clubs and 3,000 members. In 1993, the Black Summit in Vail attracted more than 3,000 attendees. "That was, by far, the most memorable event for me," Finley says. "It seemed like the entire community joined us."

Born and raised in Harlem, Ben graduated from Notre Dame, where he founded an undercover black fraternity and stayed active well after graduation, volunteering his time in various high-profile alumni leadership roles. He started skiing in 1964 when he was earning his master's at New York University and fell under the spell of Dick Martin, a TV cameraman who ran a Harlem ski shop on the side and was organizing weekend ski trips (he considers Martin the "unsung hero" of African-American skiing). Ben would enjoy a long, distinguished career as an engineer at Raytheon Systems Company, where he guided the development of various electro-optic and radar systems for the Department of Defense. He retired in 1999 as program manager of International Development.

Art grew up and still lives in Chicago, where the cold weather led him to conclude that finding a healthy outdoor outlet in the winter was critical to physical and mental health (plus, he soon realized, skiing attracted the "cute girls"). He attended Clark Atlantic University in Georgia, and after a stint in the Army spent 35-plus years working in the Cook County criminal justice system. His first skiing, in the late 1960s, came at the Lake Geneva Playboy Club (naturally) in Wisconsin. He became the trip director for the Sno-Gophers, organizing drive-to weekend trips from Thanksgiving to Easter, and oversaw the club's first big foray: 10 days in the French Alps, all-inclusive, for \$292 per person. His tireless networking led him to Ben in 1971, and they hit it off immediately, agreeing they needed to build something on a national level. It took two years of planning to put together that first Aspen convention.

Clay says it's the atmosphere that surrounds skiing, the camaraderie, the sense of belonging, the après, that sets it apart. He had a natural instinct for creating what he calls "the feeling" for participants. "I do *all that* better than the skiing," he

says. When the NBS shows up in a ski town, adds Finley, "the whole essence of the mountain changes."

The black skiing population was virtually non-existent in the early 1970s. Through the decades, NBS efforts nurtured tens of thousands of black skiers, spending hundreds of millions of dollars, to the sport. Today, minorities, of which black skiers are a small subset, comprise 14 percent of snowsports participants, according to the National Ski Areas Association. Minorities represent 38 percent of the total population overall and will continue to grow, so there is a long way to go. Clay remains undaunted, and NBS promotes affordable youth participation with its Youthfest. NBS was the catalyst for the development of unprecedented programs like the National Winter Activity Center in Vernon, N.J., which turned the defunct Hidden Valley ski area into the home base for its acclaimed, season-long, tri-state winter-sports development program. At the forefront of all those efforts, NBS's mission is to "identify, develop and support athletes of color who will win Olympic and international sports competitions," using its scholarship fund and Team NBS.

NBS efforts helped produce Paralympic medalists and others on the U.S. Ski Team development squads, but there has yet to be a Tiger Woods for snowsports. "If we can get more young people skiing, we'll get there. We are going to keep dreaming," Clay promises.

Finley lives in Los Angeles with his wife Andi his two sons (also Notre Dame graduates), two step-daughters and four grandchildren. Ben and his wife Mamie will celebrate their 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary in April.

### Career Accomplishments

Late 1960s: With both becoming hooked on skiing, Finley becomes the president of the Four Seasons West Ski Club in Los Angeles and Clay the trip director for the Chicago Sno-Gophers.

1973: Joined forces to conceive the first Black Summit, drawing 350 skiers to Aspen.

1993: The 20th anniversary of the Black Summit draws 3,000 skiers and riders to Vail; it is billed as the largest ski convention ever.

2015: The two are honored with the Far West Ski Association's Sports Builder Award.

2019: The NBS today includes 50-plus ski clubs representing 43 cities and a membership of 3,000.

Ben Finley

Born: Jan. 3, 1939 (New York, N.Y.)

Arthur Clay

Born: March 18, 1939 (Belzoni, Miss.)