



Legacy Award

# THE GOLDEN RULE OF THE GOLDEN BEAR

*Jack Nicklaus, golf's consummate professional, remains a towering figure*

**By Michael Bamberger**

*Photograph by*  
Darren Carroll for Sports Illustrated



TO THOSE of a certain age, he will always be *Big Jack*. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED used that name in a headline in 1961, after Jack Nicklaus won his second U.S. Amateur. Originally the reference was to the actual man, his thighs most particularly. They were sequoias. Jack *ripped* it, using his tree-trunk legs to plant himself into tee boxes, fairways and greens around the world. So solid. In the disco heyday, when

golfers on TV started wearing snug polyester pants in colors your Sony Trinitron could not replicate, Jack's pants looked painted on.

By that point, *Big Jack* had also become a shorthand reference to the Golden Bear's footprint. If he played your event, your event was big. If Jack said he liked your chipping game, you could take his words to your wife, your next tournament, your bank. For years his scoreboard totals were considered unassailable: his record 18 professional majors, plus the 19 other majors in which he was the runner-up. And maybe they are.

For a half century or more now, players and officials and writers have gone to Nicklaus in search of insight. Dave Anderson, 86-year-old sportswriting legend, said recently,

"Jack was the best. *The* best. Not just the best interview in golf but in all sports." Listening to Nicklaus, Anderson said, you always learned something. You still do. His golf IQ is in the Mensa range. In the history of American golf, only Lee Trevino's is higher.

Early on, Jack found the Merry Mex and his constant chatter annoying. Over time, he came to love the man. "Look where he started, playing golf with soda bottles," Nicklaus said recently, "and where he finished."

Nicklaus favors candor over charm. You might not find him lovable, but nobody ever doubted his decency. His parents raised him on this oldie-but-goodie: Treat others as you would want to be treated yourself. Good manners and common courtesy have always come naturally to him. When the Tiger Woods sex scandal was a raging wildfire and Nicklaus was asked to comment, he said, "It's none of my business." He treated golf's courses, customs, rule book and elders with obvious care. (Equipment, at times, less so.) At tournaments you'd see him go out of his way to say hello to a club pro, or to a faded star. He is relentlessly consistent, and in the nearly two decades since he last won an event, his stature has done nothing but grow. His massive charitable efforts for children's health care in central Ohio (where he grew up) and South Florida (where he lives) have added immeasurably to that growth. *Big Jack*.

He's having a good year in a long run of them. Nicklaus turned 75 last Jan. 21. On March 24 he became the seventh athlete to receive the Congressional Gold Medal. (His wife, five children and 22 grandchildren gathered in Wash-

## BIG MAN ON COURSE

*Nicklaus's 18 major wins might never be surpassed, but his post-playing-career achievements are just as impressive.*

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ington for the ceremony and to hand him tissues as needed. He's become a sentimental old coot.) On June 16, Barbara Nicklaus, Jack's wife of 55 years, received the USGA's highest honor, the Bob Jones Award. Yes, Jack cried. On Dec. 15, in New York City, Nicklaus received the SPORTS ILLUSTRATED Muhammad Ali Legacy Award, which honors a former athlete or other sports figure who has made the world a better place. It was part of a night that honored the magazine's Sportsperson of the Year. Serena Williams was the headliner but there was no undercard. Nicklaus won Sportsman in 1978.

As the evening approached, the golf legend was looking forward to his evening with the tennis legend. Nicklaus has a long list of favorite sports, and tennis, which he still plays a couple of times a week, is near the top of it. He mostly plays doubles, on one of the three grass courts in his backyard in South Florida. Jack makes the sides, adjudicates the close calls, hands out the barbs, pours the iced tea. If you want an Arnold Palmer, you can get it yourself.

Fifty-three years after Jack won his first major, in a playoff over Arnold at the 1962 U.S. Open, they remain close friends. Rivals too. As he took on Palmer, Nicklaus took on the rest of them. From the '60s through the '80s, Nicklaus sometimes beat and often lost to Palmer, Gary Player, Billy Casper, Lee Trevino, Raymond Floyd, Hale Irwin, Tom Watson, Greg Norman, Seve Ballesteros, Ben Crenshaw, Hubert Green and other Hall of Famers—colorful, tough men with sui generis golf swings. They improved Jack, and Jack improved them. Nicklaus was not only golf's greatest winner but its greatest loser too. His grace in defeat is an elemental part of him. "My father said, 'Make 'em feel like you are happy for them, even if you don't mean it,'" Nicklaus said recently.

Nicklaus is humbled to receive an award named for boxing's most transcendent figure. "Ali was a great champion," Nicklaus said over the course

## NICKLAUS WAS NOT ONLY GOLF'S GREATEST WINNER BUT ITS GREATEST LOSER TOO.

of a lunch interview that stretched to 3½ hours. "I haven't always agreed with everything he did or said. He taunted some of those guys, didn't he? Joe Frazier? But I've always admired him as an athlete, how he stood up for what he believed in, and what he did for his sport. I didn't meet him until 1996. The PGA Championship was in Louisville. Ali and I were clowning around, and somebody got a picture of it. It's hanging in my office at home." That office is crowded with photos, chiefly of family members. Search the walls high and low: The only athlete you will find is Ali, unless you count Nicklaus.

You should count Nicklaus, and not just because he played football, basketball, baseball and golf in his mid-century, mid-country, middle-class (upper division) boyhood in Columbus, Ohio. Nicklaus's strong and limber body held up for a ridiculously long time. Between his years as a leading amateur, dominating touring pro and elite senior player, Nicklaus had a 40-year playing career. He won the 1986 Masters at age 46, his 18th major. (Tiger has been stuck on 14 since 2008.) Memo to the kids, straight from the man: Strong and limber is where it's at. As for the gym, Nicklaus never liked to lift anything heavier than a small bowl of ice cream.

Nicklaus's second career, as a golf-



### NATIONAL TREASURE

*Nicklaus won a record six green jackets at Augusta, the last in 1986, with a birdie on the 17th hole (above).*

course architect, has lasted even longer than his playing career. He has designed or renovated about 300 courses, and what he's learned you cannot teach. "Looking back at it, a lot of the courses I built were too hard," Nicklaus said. "But I was hired by clients who *wanted* me to build them hard courses."

"Jack's legacy as an architect is similar



## Legacy Award

to my father's," the architect Rees Jones said recently. Jones's father was Robert Trent Jones, the prolific American course designer. "Both helped grow the game by building large numbers of courses all over the world. But Jack's ultimate legacy as an architect is Muirfield Village and the Memorial tournament." Muirfield Village is a winding, hilly, lush and demanding course Nicklaus designed on the outskirts of Columbus that has been, since 1976, the venue for an annual PGA Tour event, the Memorial. It has also been the site of a Presidents Cup and a Ryder Cup. Over the years the Memorial has generated \$26 million for various charities in central Ohio, with a particular emphasis on Nationwide Children's Hospital.

Another PGA Tour event, the Honda Classic in South Florida, has raised millions for the Nicklaus Children's Health Care Foundation. Earlier this year the Miami Children's Hospital was renamed the Nicklaus Children's Hospital. Jack's main hobby these days is asking well-heeled friends and acquaintances to donate to the foundation, which has long been a driving force in his wife's life. "I've had a blast, helping Barbara and not being the primary focus," Nicklaus said. "For years Barbara made so many sacrifices so I could focus on golf. It feels great, doing something for others. It's kept me young."

In 2005, Jack and Barbara lost a 17-month-old grandson, Jake, in a drowning accident. The family started a tournament, The Jake, played at Nicklaus's home course in Jupiter, Fla., The Bear's Club, that has raised millions more for the foundation. Family members and longtime friends of Jack's will tell you that the tragedy changed Nicklaus, made him

### HELPING HAND

*Nicklaus and his wife, Barbara, have made children's health charities their focus, especially in Ohio and Florida.*



gentler and sweeter, slowed him down.

But even in his playing prime, Jack's gaze was always homeward. All five children—Jack II, Steve, Nan, Gary and Michael—were Division I athletes in college. When they were at the private Benjamin School in South Florida, Nicklaus was at nearly all of their sporting events. That is meant literally. "There were many volleyball games where you might have six parents in the gym," Benjamin's longtime volleyball coach, Delores Colton, said the other day. "One would be Barbara, keeping score. Another would be Jack. He'd watch the games closely and afterward have all sorts of questions for me. 'Why did you do this? Did you ever think about doing that?' His tone was always calm."

Nicklaus's career and life was made possible by a rare and happy convergence of intelligence, athletic gift, good instincts and dogged determination. Gerry

McIlroy, Rory's father, picked up on all of that, watching Nicklaus on his parents' TV as a scratch-playing working-class teenager in Holywood, outside Belfast, Northern Ireland. In 1977, Nicklaus lost the British Open to Tom Watson at Turnberry in Scotland by a shot in an epic shootout, then draped his arm around the winner as they walked off the 18th green. Gerry remembers Jack's yellow V-neck sweater, and his grace. He also remembers how Nicklaus had one coach, Jack Grout, his entire life. Rory has followed suit.

Rory has gone to Jack for "life chats" on several occasions, to talk about playing Augusta National, managing a career, balancing golf and life. In the end Jack's counsel, on any subject, adds up to this: *Be prepared. Force nothing. Be yourself.*

One morning last year Nicklaus found himself in his office, talking with a reporter about his life while Donald Trump—then Nicklaus's client on a golf course under construction—was waiting to see him in the conference room next door. Nicklaus was remembering his heroes, his loves, his wins and his losses, both professional and personal. Along the way, he said something that every future winner of the Ali Legacy Award will surely appreciate. You can tell that Rory McIlroy gets it, and so does Jordan Spieth. Maybe you do too. In closing, here he is. The passing years have taken some inches from the man, but he will always be Big Jack.

"Your character comes through in golf," he said. "If you're pissed at the world the whole time, you really can't enjoy your wins, and in many ways you can't really—what's the right word?—you can't really understand the meaning of your defeats. To get beat is very healthy. Particularly when you've really given it your best effort.

"If you win every time, you don't learn anything. You don't learn anything about yourself. You don't learn anything about the other person. You don't learn anything about the game. You don't learn anything about *life*." □