



## Golden Bear now the Grizzled Bear

'I don't play anymore. Maybe once a month'

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UCLUELET, B.C. - Bombing along in an all-terrain vehicle over rough and rocky ground, the greatest player to ever hit a golf ball hardly looked like an imposing figure. At 67, Jack Nicklaus no longer resembles the dominant golfer that won 18 majors. Weighted down by a heavy coat to combat the ocean breeze, and smaller in stature than one expects, Nicklaus was in this remote area of western Vancouver Island to build a golf course as part of an ambitious real estate development.

Creating golf courses is what takes most of Nicklaus's time, especially with his game having disappeared with the ravages of age and worn-out body parts. He has dreamed up about 300 all over the world, and his Gulfstream jet logged in more than 500 hours last year alone, taking him to distant shores in places like China and South America.

These days, Nicklaus no longer bothers testing himself out even on the Champions Tour, the home of golf 's senior citizens. For him, golf was about challenge and competition. It was about winning. Once his ability to compete with the best disappeared, he largely stopped playing.

While discussing his golf design work, he admitted he missed the competition, but was not happy with displaying his deteriorating skills to the world, even in front of galleries filled with nostalgic wonderment.

"I don't play anymore," Nicklaus said before reconsidering and qualifying his remark. "Maybe once a month."

Despite that, he did make two appearances in Canada last year -- both at made-for-television events where the interest in Nicklaus was more about his back story than about great golf. It has been more than 20 years since his remarkable charge through the final nine holes at Augusta during the 1986 Masters, and though the will can still be seen in his eyes, the body no longer responds to its demands. This was witnessed by the few dozen bigwigs who showed up in Ucluelet last Friday to get Jack's signature and potentially buy a multi-million property at the Wydansea development. Showing off a dramatic par-three over an ocean inlet, Nicklaus hit two balls at the green. The first came up a dozen yards short, while a hooked second attempt rattled off nearby rocks.

"I think we should consider moving the green over there," he joked as he watched his ball whistle into the Pacific.

But he is not quite prepared to become a ceremonial golfer. While former rival Arnold Palmer agreed to hit a tee shot to kick off the Masters earlier this month, Nicklaus won't follow him to Augusta-- at least not yet.

"I was flattered when I was 67, and I hope they ask me again when I'm 77," he said.

One thing Nicklaus doesn't consider ceremonial is his role as captain of the American squad at this year's Presidents Cup in Montreal. Nicklaus's role prior to the event might be equally important to any advice he provides to his team during the tournament against an increasingly impressive group of Australian, South African, Korean and even Canadian golfers.

There are some concerns the American team might have a difficult time attracting top talent, especially considering the top U.S. golfers are asked to represent their country annually.

They have a tough schedule and he recognizes that it is possible some may have some thoughts about shutting down their year following the conclusion of the much-discussed Fed- Ex Cup two weeks before the Presidents Cup.

Top players, including Canadian Presidential Cup hopefuls Mike Weir and Stephen Ames, could potentially play a grueling schedule of up to nine tournaments following

the British Open and running through to the four concluding Fed-Ex Cup playoff events.

Nicklaus understands the issue.

"I understand they might not want to play," he said. "I know I didn't want to play every year. But what I want is 12 guys to be there that do want to play."

That doesn't mean Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson will necessarily be part of that 12. Mickelson has become notorious for blaming his poor performance at the 2006 Ryder Cup on season-end fatigue. Nicklaus understands the pressures on the game's best players, but quietly, as our interview ended, acknowledged he doesn't expect it will be a problem convincing them to play, especially if he makes a personal request.

"I think they'll come," he said confidently.

They likely will. If Jack calls, who can bring themselves to turn him down?

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