

Transcript of State of The Bear press conference

January 8, 2010

JACK NICKLAUS: Well basically this is a result of all the requests (for interviews), as Scott [Tolley, vice president, corporate communications at Nicklaus Companies] said, as I'm approaching my 70th birthday. Obviously I'm not much of a golfer any more. I don't play much golf, as you know. Obviously I follow the game. I do a lot of other things. My life revolves mostly around golf course design today, which is basically overseas, most of it right now. And mostly in Asia.

Q.: Congratulations on your 70th birthday coming up. I wanted to ask about your career and your ability to sustain it over many years. After Tiger [Woods] won the Tiger Slam in 2001 - and it seemed inevitable he was going to break your record -you were very good about saying, at this rate he would, but a golf career is a long thing. And I'm just wondering if you could reflect on what it took, whether there were ups and downs in your ability to maintain that high level of focus and concentration to compete at that level and what it takes in general to sustain a career over time.

NICKLAUS: I think it takes a determination, a goal, a focus, a willingness to work, a willingness to dedicate your self. I look at it a little differently than I think the people in the press do today. When I was playing, I wanted to be the best; the reason I turned pro was to be the best I could be at a game.

But I also looked at it as being my second priority. I always looked at my family as being my first priority. And, in my family, it took precedence over golf. And I've kept that priority through the years. Now I look at golf as being my third priority and that business has become my second priority.

But my family has always remained my No. 1 priority. And golf was, it may sound a little silly, never all that important to me. And what I mean by that - somebody will take that right out of context and say golf is not something important to me - is I played the game because I loved it. I played because when I played, the competition, the charge that I got from it excited me to be really good. It excited me to be able to focus on something, something to work at. Something that gave me goals and something that just sort of filled my life with excitement.

Now I never had the goals of winning so many majors and so forth. I mean majors were always my focus because, when I was young, [Bobby] Jones had always said that those are the lasting things in a golfer's life. You always have those four majors every year and a lot of things will change, but those won't change. And they never have.

So I sort of geared my year to that. I geared my game to that. But it wasn't until 1970 and I

was at St. Andrews and I walked in the press room and Bob Green from [the Associated Press] said to me. "Jack, that's 10, only three more to tie Bobby Jones."

I, honest to goodness, can promise you that I had never added them up. That's the honest truth. I said "Really?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "Gosh, I never even dreamed of approaching Jones' record."

Once that was said to me, then Jones' record became a focus to me. And in 1973 I passed Jones' record at Canterbury and then I played golf to be just the best I could be and still do, still play my majors.

But I never had a focus on a number. The number was not an important thing to me. It was just to be able to play my best, be the best at what I did. So that's basically the way I've handled my career. I think the press handles it a lot different today than they did then.

Press today is basically a statistic press. You deal on numbers. You deal on how many drives you hit in the fairway, how far you hit it. We didn't have any of that stuff. I mean it wasn't until my last few years of golf that we even had major driving distances. Nobody ever measured greens in regulation.

The game is different today, the focus is different today, and my focus is different from that standpoint because my focus was basically on my family, and my golf was part of my life.

Q.: That's very interesting. I appreciate your answer. Was there a period when, for whatever reason, you just felt that super high edge required to compete at the very, very best of your ability? Did you ever feel that kind of lapse a little bit and then recover?

NICKLAUS: Sure. Of course I did; several times within my career. I remember I won in 1967 at Baltusrol and I didn't win another major until I got to St. Andrews in 1970. And I won a lot of tournaments in [that period].

I was playing well. I won, I don't know, five, six tournaments a year, or whatever it was. And yet I didn't feel - I was never really pushed and motivated to move beyond that. Then my father passed away and I looked at it and I said, "You know, my dad had really been the sort of person that I had played my game for." I think he had lived through my golf game. And I didn't really treat him right. Because I had never really during that period of time, worked as hard as I should have. I didn't focus as hard as I could have. We all go through those periods.

I had a couple other ones, like 1979. It was a terrible year for me. I mean that was the worst year, first year I hadn't won a golf tournament. I think I finished 60something on the money list. At the end of that year I said, "You know, this is ridiculous. I'm not that old a guy, I'm only going to be 40 next year, 40 should be a good year for me."

So I went back and treated myself as a beginner, I went back to Jack Grout. We totally changed my whole golf swing. We revamped it. I changed my thought process. I ran into Phil Rogers out in California and I asked Phil for some help with my short game. My short game was revamped, my long game was revamped, my whole attitude toward the game was revamped and I won two majors that year.

I would have to say after that I really I sort of dropped off the seen. I played 11 to 14 tournaments probably the next few years. When '86 rolled around and I won the Masters in '86 I would say that was kind of a freak happening.

Did I enjoy it? Absolutely. It was probably the most fun golf tournament I ever played. I hadn't really prepared for it to do that. I mean I prepared, but I didn't prepare like I did when I was in my 30 or 20s. And I wasn't sure why I was even playing golf at that point in my life. I pretty much had accomplished most of the things I wanted to do. I didn't have anybody pushing me.

I certainly don't think my abilities left me, I think my focus and desire to really compete left me. And you're saying how do you compete for a long time?

Q.: You obviously have announced that you're going to come to Augusta and join Arnie [Palmer] on the first tee as an honorary starter. Can you just talk about finally coming to that decision and what do you think it will be like to step out there with him again?

NICKLAUS: That decision first started happening before I was even finished playing golf. I obviously was not ready to be in that position. Billy Payne had said to me that one day he would hope that I would do that. And I said, "Billy, I said I've got to be ready." First of all, Arnold, I think, deserved his chance of doing that. And doing that by himself. The Masters has meant so much to him and he's meant so much to the Masters. And so [Payne] came back to me a year ago and said, "Jack, Arnold has been doing this a few years, we would like to have you join him. But my attitude in 2003 and 2004 is a lot different than it is in 2009 and 2010. I still had enough fire in my belly to think that I could go play and I know better than that now.

I throw my 95-mile an hour club head speed at it, the golf course doesn't exactly wilt. So anyway, I'm delighted to join Arnold. I'm delighted that Arnold has welcomed me to join him. I'm sure we'll have a lot of fun. We'll have a driving contest, but only if Arnold warms up.

Q.: Do you expect that at some point and do you think it would be the right thing if Gary [Player] joined you guys eventually in that role?

NICKLAUS: I think you'll probably find that happen shortly after.

Q.: You've talked so much over the years about whether or not Tiger would be able to catch you in the 18 majors department. And a lot of people kind of assumed that he would and this year would be a big step for him considering where the majors are being played. Do you think that there might be more doubt now in people's minds that he can catch that number considering everything that's happened [since the events of Thanksgiving weekend] and whether or not he's going to play in some of them this year?

NICKLAUS: I don't know the answer to what he's going to do and what he's going to play. I certainly can't answer that. I think he's the only one that can answer that. Certainly this year with where the majors are, as you said ... obviously he loves Augusta, he's had Pebble Beach, you're at St. Andrews. He basically owns all three of those places. And the PGA is in Whistling Straits. I have no idea there, but if Tiger is going to pass my record, I think this is a big year for him in that regard. If he doesn't play this year, then obviously the chore will be a little tougher.

Q.: You talked about family ... you always had other interests like hunting and fishing. In addition to family do you have to have something else?

NICKLAUS: Well, I always had other interests, sure.

My business has always been a big deal to me. I've enjoyed coming to the office. I've been coming into the office since I was in my 20s. It expands as I had gotten older. I enjoy the diversification of it. I enjoy getting involved in different elements of business. I don't consider myself any kind of a business genius, I just consider myself smart enough to have learned to be able to surround myself with good people. And if I surround myself with good people and I can surround myself with people who are energetic and trying to achieve goals and be the best at what they do, then that's fun for me.

My boys have all been involved here in the business in one way or another. Jackie is president of design, Gary is vice chairman of the board and oversees a lot of the day-to-day operations. I think that it's fun to have them involved. It's fun for them to be here. It's fun for them for me to have been not only a mentor for them on the golf course, but it's actually more have them be a mentor to me in business.

I don't really hunt much anymore. I do some bird shooting, but I really don't get into the animals too much anymore. I got into that because that's what my kids wanted to do.

It's wanting to spend time with your family. It's not about what you shoot and kill, it's about spending time with your family, spending time getting to know them better, getting to teach them and be part of them.

So did you say do I have other things besides my family? And my golf? Sure. But I always, I

think if I had only golf I would have been very bored. I think that golf cannot occupy your whole day. My focus was never a seven or eight hour day. My focus was being able to do what I had to do from a playing standpoint, a couple hours if I needed to practice, but I would burn myself out if I did that every day.

So you have to get away, you have to have a diversion, Most of the time I put my clubs in the closet on Sunday night and picked them up three or four days before the next tournament. That gave me some time to do other things and other things I wanted to do.

Q.: You mentioned you sort of felt your game starting to leave you in your mid-40s and earlier you had said you had kind of lost a little bit of interest as well. Do you think it was more ability or it was more interest? And I'm curious with guys like Vijay [Singh] leading the money list in his mid-40s and Kenny Perry won your tournament year before last, at age 48 ... whether you lifted any weights or you did any of that type of stuff at any point along the line and whether in retrospect maybe you wish that you had, it might have extended your career a little longer?

NICKLAUS: You mentioned Vijay and Kenny, who are pretty good examples. But those are guys who really didn't have great success until maybe their mid-30 or 40s.

Kenny, he won the Memorial tournament in 1991, I think. He was about 30 years old. That's the first tournament he won.

I started winning golf tournaments in my teens. I started winning professional tournaments in my early 20s. You have a certain length of time where you can really focus and keep that focus and maintain it.

I think I maintained it for a pretty long time because even after I lost my ability to play on the regular tour I was able to focus and play for several years on the Champions Tour at a relatively high level.

Nobody lifted weights back in my day, not even the football players. But not until I got to be around age 40, maybe my late 30s, that I started getting into the weight room, I started getting into flexible exercises, started working on things like that.

Today I get up in the morning and I don't do a lot, but I do 15, 20 minutes of exercises every morning. I never, ever miss a morning. Any day that I do anything I always do a cool down. I hit golf balls yesterday. Actually, I hit more golf balls yesterday than I have since 2005.

Q.: Wow.

NICKLAUS: And that was two sacks of balls. And I don't think there were many more than 20 in a sack. But I hit more, and my back killed me so bad, I said, "How in the world can I do

this?" I was bent over looking like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. I couldn't straighten up to save my life. So anyway, I don't practice, I can't practice. But when I get done, like yesterday, to get over that I went back and did oh, 20, 30 minutes of exercises because that's what I have to do to put myself back in a functional position.

Q.: How important is the Tiger factor [in golf], being as right now he's not playing.

NICKLAUS: Well, I think that Tiger has always been a big influence in the game, but the game had Bobby Jones, the game had Walter Hagen, the game had Arnold Palmer, it had Gary Player, Tom Watson, Lee Trevino, Jack Nicklaus, etcetera, and Tiger Woods.

And the game has always survived us and the game will continue to go forward. Tiger is a big influence and probably the largest one we have ever had. And we certainly hope that he comes back and plays.

But last year the tour had a lot of events where were larger than they have ever been; quite a few events where the charity members numbers were up. So it's not all about one person, the game is a big game.

Q.: What about the equipment changes that we're going to experience. At least from the professional level starting this year.

NICKLAUS: Well I have been going through that myself for my one event.

Q.: Well, is it hurting or helping?

NICKLAUS: I had my clubs legally scanned this last week. I found out that they all passed because I've always played with V grooves anyway. I think that the game is going to change for some of the guys. They have been able to spin the ball like they have never been able to, spin the cover right off of it. And they're going to have to change how they play a little bit.

The first time that flier comes out of there and it goes sailing over the gallery's head and saying "Oh, my gosh, where that come from?" And they're going say they don't want that to happen. Then they're going to start getting into the ball and they're going to want a softer ball, they're going to want a ball that doesn't ... the game's going to change because of what's happened. As I've said, it's going to be a domino affect. The grooves are going to change, it's going to domino itself right into a different ball, right into a different driver, it's going to ... it's going to change just like it changed getting there.

So I think for the better. We have had too many golf courses in the United States that have become obsolete because of equipment and the golf ball. The grooves are going to start that back the other direction.

Q.: 70 is only a number, but is it going to make you reflect, and if so, in what ways?

NICKLAUS: No.

I never really looked back. I never have looked back. I've always looked forward. Now I don't look forward to playing golf, but I look forward to business, to the growth of our business in China, what we're doing with other things, growth of the game.

How can I participate and how can I help in that. That's what I'm looking forward to. So I never have been one to look back and say, "Gee, wasn't it great when I hit that whatever club I play or let's say 5-iron into 16 and hit it close at Augusta and watched that ball almost go in."

Yeah, it was nice, but that was 24 years ago. I really don't pay much attention to it.

Q.: Over the years, what has been the hardest thing about being Jack Nicklaus?

NICKLAUS: I don't really find anything's been all that difficult. I have a good relationship with my wife, we'll be married 50 years this July. 50 years? Wow.

Q.: You've never gone anywhere that you can just be a regular guy, I assume.

NICKLAUS: Well, more of our business is in China now so I walk down the streets in Beijing and there isn't a soul that knows who I am there. But I've never had problems going to restaurants. I never worry about any that have. We have always just tried to live a pretty normal life and never thought that being me was that big a deal.

Q.: Even before this stuff with Tiger came along, I think there was probably a faction that was rooting for him not to reach your record because they grew up with you. I would be curious if you recall from, say, St. Andrews in 1970, if you there was a group of fans or people out there that was hoping you wouldn't reach 14, just because they were Jones' people.

NICKLAUS: Well, I think most of those people were probably too old to be able to tell me that. No, I never had that. I never heard that one time.

I think Tiger and I are far closer in age than Jones and I, I think.

I guess more people are aware of what's going on today. Let's leave it at that.

Q.: You mentioned all those years you spent with Arnold Palmer and Gary Player, are there one or two stories that, just being around them through the years, always kind of stick in your

mind?

NICKLAUS: I'll never forget one of my favorite stories was at Carnoustie and, I believe, we played The Open there in '68. We finished just finished up at Hoylake and we played a Big Three match at Carnoustie and Arnold and Gary and I had never played Carnoustie. We went there and it was a very windy day and Arnold shot 79, Gary shot 78 and I shot 76. We walked off there thinking that was the worst golf course we had ever seen anywhere in the world. And how in the world we were ever going to play the British Open there that year.

Well, we got back, we were staying at St. Andrews and we were there with our wives. That night, Gary and I started looking at Arnold's round. Arnold hit four greens in regulation and had 25 putts. And we started giving Arnold the raspberries about it.

As we were doing that, I first started thinking about Gary's round. Well Gary had hit five greens in regulation and had 26 putts. Well they got back to me. I had hit eight greens and had 29 putts. But we had fun kidding each other.

Through the years we walked off the golf course, and we just looked at the scoreboard and one of us shot 74 or 75. We couldn't get to the locker room fast enough to say, "Hey Arnie, where did you get all your birdies today?"

In the early years Arnold and I played a ton of exhibitions together. He used to come to Columbus and pick me up in his Arrow Commander and we would go play a week of exhibitions together. And we had a blast traveling all over the place. I mean you don't do that today. Guys just don't do that.

Q.: What is your thought about pro athletes being viewed as role models by some fans and did you ever feel that you were a role model or a hero to the fans?

NICKLAUS: I think anybody who has some success, even moderate success, is a role model.

Q.: In regards to Muirfield [Village], would you like to see a U.S. Open or PGA Championship there?

NICKLAUS: Well, it makes it very difficult for us. If we're going to have the Memorial, which is set for the first of June, you couldn't, we want to continue the Memorial tournament every year. We've have had a Ryder Cup. We have had the Solheim Cup. We have had the U.S. Amateur. We had the USGA Juniors. We think as long as we have a separation we could do it.

I don't think that the PGA is inclined to play a tournament two months apart at the same golf course. The PGA might not. But other events such as that could well happen there.

Those kind of things.

Q.: You've been in business a long time. Are you surprised at how content you are away from golf at this point in time and how much planning did you do for it?

NICKLAUS: I didn't do any planning for it. I should have let the natural, the natural flow happen. I think I enjoyed what I did. I enjoyed my golf. But, frankly, I was probably ready for a change as my skills eroded. I couldn't compete at the level that I wanted to compete.

Q.: Is there any place in the world that you haven't designed a golf course that you would like to?

NICKLAUS: Yeah, probably. I would probably like to do a seaside golf course in Britain somewhere. Scotland. Or Ireland. We have got several ... we're halfway through one in Ireland, called Saint Patrick's.

Q.: To steal a line from Satchel Paige, how old would you be if you didn't know how old you was? In other words, how old do you feel?

JACK NICKLAUS: How old do I feel? I have too many people tell me I'm one of the youngest 70-year-olds they have ever seen. And I want to believe that.

I play tennis two to three times a week. I play golf if I want to play golf. I do anything I want to do. I go skiing if I want to go skiing.

But outside of my arthritis, which is substantial, and all over the places in my body, I feel great. I feel young. I get really excited about when I go make a trip to China or I go make a trip to Russia or something. I get excited about making the trip because the business opportunities are the fun of it. Working with the land and working with people. It's fun.