

FRIEND OF JACK

It All Started With a Bowl of Soup

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TOLD THAT SOME OF THE GREAT relationships start with a great story. Well, I will always consider my long relationship with Jack Nicklaus and his family a great one, but our first story is, well, not so great.

Before I started my nearly 30 years of working with the Golden Bear, I was north of the border working for the Canadian Open, which is where our paths in golf first crossed.

It was 1962, his first year as a professional, and Jack and his charming wife, Barbara, were invited to the Canadian Open. I was the PR guy for the tournament and one of my jobs was to act as ambassador to assure the sponsor that people like Jack and Barbara would always want to come back. Golf's first couple graciously accepted my invitation to join my wife, Libby, and me for dinner.

I called the top restaurant in Montreal at the time, and bribed all the busboys to treat us like big shots and roll out the red carpet. When the first course of the meal arrived, I watched nervously as Jack and Barbara stared at the soup I ordered for them. Trying to play the seasoned host as well as create conversation, I asked Jack how he enjoyed his soup. He didn't say anything, chewed, winced, and wrinkled his face. I said, "Well, does it taste good?" In a line I will never forget, Jack simply looked back at me and said, "No, it tastes like spearmint." He then pulled out from the soup a piece of gum that a cook or busboy had misplaced. I was mortified, but Jack, Barbara and the rest of the table just laughed.

So that's our "great" beginning. But we went on to have a wonderful relationship together, and he invited me down to balmy North Palm Beach, Fla., in the early '70s as he was just putting together his own company. For a sports-crazed, former newspaper and TV guy, becoming publicist for Jack Nicklaus was a dream come true. At that point, I had already led a wonderful life, met tremendous people, and had a scrapbook full of memorable stories—whether it was pitching batting practice to a young Dodger farmhand by the name of Jackie Robinson or breaking a story on a major crime ring when I was just a cub reporter. This new chapter in my life with the Golden Bear brought even more lasting friendships, such as those with former President Gerald Ford or with actor Sean Connery. To this day, I will never forget the villa Sir Connery and I shared once at the Memorial Tournament, and a raccoon that made its way inside, as well as the ensuing battle between the animal and Connery, armed with a golf club.

But the most rewarding relationship forged was with Jack. After all, Jack Nicklaus is not a person who needed a PR guy. Also, when it came to PR, do you think he ever needed anyone more than Barbara?

We all know that Jack is simply the greatest player to ever play the game or design a course. But this is not what he is most proud of. If you ever get the chance to see his office, you will know in the first moment that

his unmatched golf accomplishments must not be all that important to him. His office isn't gleaming with the trophies and medals he has collected across all five continents; it has pictures of his wife, his children and his grandchildren. There are photos that reflect his love of the outdoors, and the hunting or fishing trips shared with family. Actually, there is one golf photo—the famous one of he and his oldest son, Jack, walking off Augusta's 18th in 1986, arm-in-arm, after Jack's historic victory that was made even more special by the chance to share it with his son. The center of Jack's universe has never been golf; it has always been his family.

Jack is the greatest, but to me, he is the greatest for far more important reasons than etching his name on trophies around the world.

He is not all that different today than when he was hitting balls back at Scioto or trying to win the love of a co-ed named Barbara. In my mind, he's still that kid from the Midwest and the son of Charlie Nicklaus, his hero and a humble, hard-working pharmacist who taught his children life's true priorities. Just as Barbara is still the sweet, honest daughter of a schoolteacher. She really has been responsible for each of the majors Jack credits her for.

Yes, Jack did go on to rewrite much of the game's history, which is how most people will remember him. Not me. When I retired at the end of 1997, I knew that during all those years of pecking out those stats on Jack each week on my

old manual typewriter, I was fortunate enough to be riding along with one of the truly great men in all of sports. But I will remember more fondly the dad who took far greater pleasure in watching his kids' football or volleyball games. People remember the steely blues and the numbing stare of a champion. But I will remember the smile and the laughs he shared with friends. People remember his tireless work ethic, hitting balls until the sun could stay up no longer. But I will remember coaching little league with him and hitting fly balls to centerfield. People will remember the intensity; I will remember the fun he had making practical jokes and needling people, including me. People will remember the green jackets; I will remember the guy, who on most days, wore a pair of shorts to the office and gave us rides home from the airport after long business trips. People will remember the presidents and celebrities; I will remember his wife and five children.

We shared many other bowls of soup over the years (much of which, Jack will gladly point out, I spilled on my tie or on the seats of his plane!). But we shared a great deal more, and I have never been more grateful to two people than Jack and Barbara for teaching me what really mattered in life: our families.

Larry O'Brien
Larry O'Brien

Jack Nicklaus, left, and former right-hand man Larry O'Brien



COURTESY LARRY O'BRIEN



Larry O'Brien once pitched batting practice to the legendary Jackie Robinson.