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Jack

To mark our 25th Anniversary, we sat down with the greatest golfer in history to get his thoughts on how the game, and life, has changed

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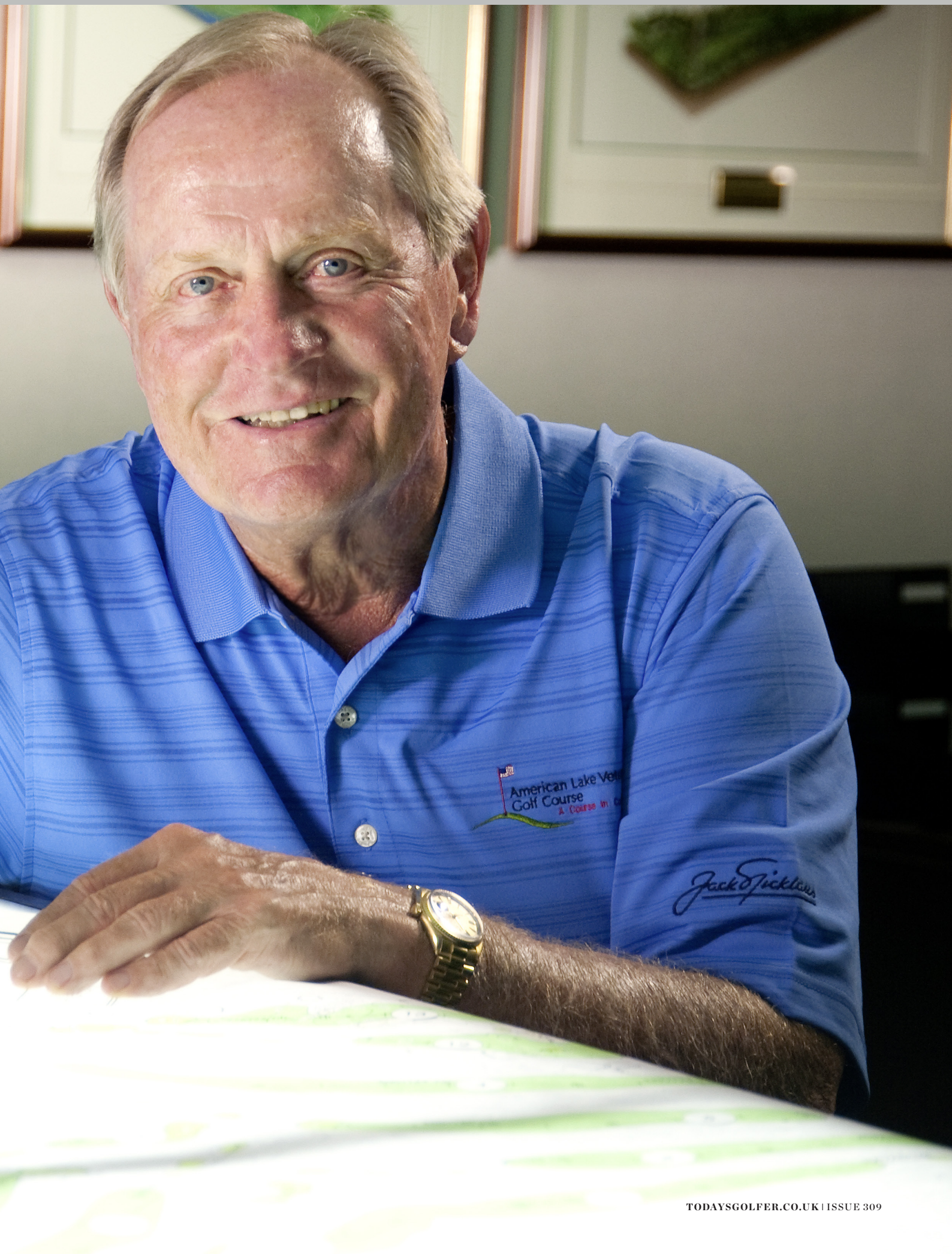
Jack Nicklaus is holding court. And when Jack speaks, everyone listens. It's Tuesday at the Masters and Nicklaus is the last and headline act to appear in a festival of press conferences that has seen Tiger Woods, Rory McIlroy, Bubba Watson, Phil Mickelson, Ian Poulter, Lee Westwood and Luke Donald, among others, quizzed on the tournament and the here and now. But Nicklaus is golf's Bruce Springsteen – the Boss – with an unrivalled back catalogue of material to call upon to compile an

impressive and diverse set-list of opinions. He has his golden oldie greatest hits, of course, but he is also still relevant on the topics of the day, and his thoughts on the future of the game are required listening. There is no one more vocal or determined to help grow the game. He stole the show at the Honda Classic in Florida in March and then chose Augusta in April for an encore.

His opening track? The troubled Rory McIlroy. "The (new Nike) clubs will not make that much difference. He could play with anything," Nicklaus says. "Maybe it's easy for me to say. When I played, here in the

States, I used MacGregors. When I went to England for the Open, I played Slazenger England and when I went to Australia I played Slazenger Australia. I also played the small ball in England, was able to go back and forth and it wasn't that big a deal. Maybe the guys today are so used to having one thing. But his talent is so much greater and a much bigger influence on his golf game than his clubs. He'll be fine."

Track two: Mentoring future stars: "I don't have many 14-year-olds (China's Tianlang Guan) that come to me for golf advice," Nicklaus laughs. "He emailed me, did the ▶





stuff himself. Thought that was pretty sharp. He has a pretty darned good record for a young kid, and he's obviously got a great future. So I will be a little bit like what Bobby Jones was to me; I'll give him whatever he wants. I'm happy to do that with any of the young guys. I'm flattered they're interested. It's kind of neat they want advice from a 73-year-old. With 300 million people in China and the way they go about sports, I wouldn't be surprised in 10 years to see them have five of the top 10 players in the world."

Track three: Technology. "The ball from about 1935 through 1995 probably gained six, seven, eight yards. It's gained 50 yards since then but it's pretty well stopped for the last nine years," Nicklaus says. "The only difference is that the athlete has come. Arnold (Palmer) called me Big Jack. I'm anything but big. These guys now are huge."

Track four: Course design. "I try to design a course to take driver out of their hands a fair amount of time because I feel there are others that are not as strong. I try to balance it out to have some short holes where you're testing the guy who really hits it a long way and force him to use his head, but give him a few holes where he can use his advantage."

Track five: Reigning in equipment. "25

'The game has gone beyond being able to relate back to the people and that's a shame'

years ago, I could play with the club champion and he had a good chance of beating me. Playing a golf ball that didn't go very far, we were playing off tees that were 10 or 15 yards apart and I might out-drive him by 20 yards. It wasn't a big deal; he knew the course and might beat me. Today, can you imagine a club champion going out on a 7,500-yard course and playing Tiger or Phil and beating them? Not a chance. The game has gone beyond being able to relate back to the people and that's a shame. We've lost that and we need to bring that back."

Track six: Saving the game. "Augusta National Golf Club has launched their Drive, Chip and Putt Championship where they are trying to get golf into 10,000 parks. Other sports are grabbing our kids. Parents are being dragged to the park and their kids are playing soccer, lacrosse, football, baseball, basketball, you name it. They don't have the

time to play golf and the kids are not being introduced to it. So we are all working, along with the PGA of America's 2.0 Program, to make golf more fun, faster, easier and less expensive. Just basically putting a flag and a hole in the park. That's where golf started."

Track seven: Golf in the Olympics. "It's a pretty big deal that golf gets it right for 2016 and is voted back in. Think of the effect that's going to have. Not so much on the United States, because we are a pretty mature golf market, but in Brazil, that doesn't even have a public golf facility; and China, which is just starting to get into the game. Take India and Russia, which have barely started to get into the game. For all these countries that have really supported Olympic sports, the Gold Medal has always been the prize. It's not the Masters or US PGA Championship or the Open Championship. Well, if golf is successful in the Olympics, all of these countries will grow the game and bring people into the game. Frankly we are going to have to figure out a way to keep pace."

Track eight and Nicklaus' No.1 best-seller: Tiger Woods and his quest to break Jack's 18 Major titles. "I still think he'll break my record. I don't think for Tiger to win four, five, six or seven more is that big of a stretch,"



Nicklaus says. "He's always been cold-blooded to focus on what he needs to do. No reason why he can't get it done. But let's put it this way, he hasn't won a major for five years. He'd better get with it," he says with a grin.

We could listen to Jack for hours, so we asked him for more of his thoughts on many subjects, from golf to mobile phones...

If you think back, I won the Masters two years earlier (in 1986), playing a persimmon driver, with a metal shaft and a wound ball. Today, those clubs would be in a museum.

It is a different game, particularly at the highest level. The athletes that have entered our game are tremendous. The size; the strength; the athleticism. I was once almost six feet tall, and over the years I've lost almost four inches in height. When I go to Augusta, just as I did last week, and I meet some of the young men on our Tour today, while I am shaking their hand, I have to look up – way up – to them. They are all huge. So when you get golfers who are also good athletes, they are going to hit the golf ball further.

I hit some long drives in my day, and when I go back and look at some of the

'There are more good players today. There were more great players in my day'

driving contests I won, yes, I hit the ball a long way. But that was a one-off shot, when I basically took off, almost left my feet, and hit it as hard as I could. But these players do it every shot. As a golf course designer, it's a challenge to try to design around that.

I don't want to get on my soapbox, but it's been well-documented that I believe the golf ball has created some of the problems we are facing today in the game. The golf ball from about 1935 through 1995 probably gained six, seven, or eight yards – maybe something like that. It's gained probably 50 yards since. While it's stopped or slowed in recent years, the bigger and better athletes we are seeing in today's game have rendered most of the golf courses obsolete. As I have said many times, the golf ball has led to golf courses being designed and developed that are much longer than 25 years ago. Because of that, it takes

more land, and thus it takes more water, chemicals and nutrients to maintain the course, which in turn pushes up the cost of playing the game. Then, the longer the course the longer it takes to play, and for most golfers, the harder it is to play. This combination of time, difficulty and cost has forced many people out of the game.

I have a feeling that the governing bodies, particularly the USGA, are exploring the possibility of bringing back the ball. If you did that, and let's say the number was as much as 20 per cent, you would reduce the necessary length of golf courses not just 20 percent in length, but also in width. So you would be saving on cost and time, and perhaps these courses would become more playable and enjoyable for the average golfer.

Our game at its highest level is very healthy and there is more depth of talent than perhaps any era in history. But it is the game at the grass-roots level that concerns me most and where we need to focus or re-focus our efforts.

I'd rather be two strokes ahead going into the last day than two strokes behind. ▣



‘Tiger hasn’t won a major for five years... He’d better get with it’

Having said that, it’s probably easier to win coming from behind. There is no fear in chasing. There is fear in being chased.

I always liked to visit a major site early. One reason was to prepare, but I also enjoyed taking my boys along and having them play with me. It was a blast watching one of my kids who, say, was an 82-shooter, try to break 90 on a US Open golf course. I enjoyed it more than they did.

When Jock Hutchison and Freddie McLeod were the honorary starters at the Masters, for years they hit more than one shot. They’d play all 18 holes. It was suggested that Arnie and me and Gary, as the next honorary starters, should keep playing for a while. Nine holes maybe, just to give the fans a chance to watch these legends play. It’s an intriguing idea, and if you’re asking if I’d be interested in doing that, the answer is no. The nine par 3s were enough.

When I fly in a helicopter, I insist there be two sets of controls, one for me in case something happens to the pilot. I’m no expert, but I know enough to at least get the thing on the ground. Nothing scares me like the thought of not being in control.

I take that back. MRI tubes confine you so much they scare me, just like they scare a lot of people. A friend of mine had an MRI, and when he was finished, he went right to his lawyer and changed his will. He chose to be cremated instead of buried.

It’s very important to lose graciously. My dad taught me that. The guy who won had to

be pretty good to beat you, right? So give him credit, and mean it.

I go to church only a few times a year. Barbara is giving me a look as I say this, but darn it, I pray every day and worship in my own way. I just never got in the habit of going. Remember, I spent the better part of my life working on Sundays.

I don’t carry a cell phone, never will. Anyone ever call to give you anything?

If a cell phone or camera going off disrupts you, you’ve got issues with concentration or your golf game. If you’re totally absorbed in the shot you’re playing, how can you hear anything?

I don’t believe in luck. Not in golf, anyway. There are good and bad bounces, sure, but the ball is round and so is the hole. If you find yourself in a position where you hope for luck to pull you through, you’re in serious trouble.

You’ve got to eliminate self-doubt. Self-doubt stinks.

As you know, there’s no use trying to get rid of a song that’s stuck in your head. When you get to the first tee, you can only hope it’s a good one. I’ve played very well to Harry Belafonte singing ‘Jamaica Farewell.’ And it’s hard to play badly to ‘Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head.’

My dreams are productive. Many times I’ve been near the lead in a golf tournament despite having trouble with some part of my game. I can’t seem to fix the problem no matter how many balls I hit or how much thought I give it. Then I’ll go to bed and dream I’m working on the problem, and when I wake up I have the answer. Usually it’s something small, like my eye alignment or weight distribution.

Gary Player likes to say: “Jack is not only the best winner of all time, he’s the best loser.” The “best loser” part of that bugs me. It implies I’m adept at losing. I’ve asked Gary to substitute the word “gracious” for “best,” or just say: “Jack is a good sport,” but he won’t do it. He gets too big a kick out of complimenting and teasing me at the same time.

If there is one thing missing from the game, it might be shot-making – the art of it. Today, there is a premium placed on power and not necessarily shot-making.

There are more good players today. There were more great players in my day.

The making of St Mellion

Jack’s first signature course in the UK is also 25 years old this year

A quarter of a century ago, St Mellion’s Nicklaus Course broke ground. It was the Golden Bear’s debut creation on Britain’s shores and on reflection you’d think the layout would at least have been tweaked here and there during that time span. But you’d be wrong.

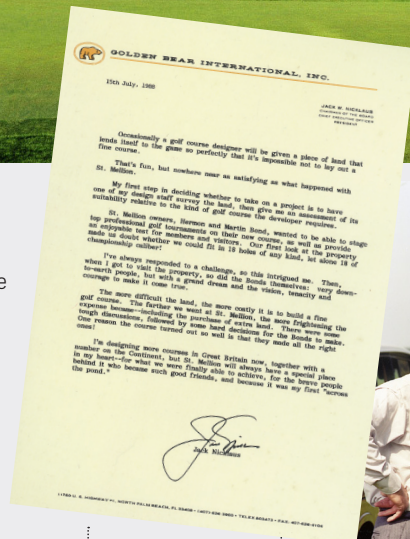
Precious little has been changed from Nicklaus’ original design, which has benefited from 25 years of maturity and growth; whereas once it was raw, open and exposed on former featureless farmland, it’s now majestically overlooked and framed by 30ft high timber.

Admittedly, bunkers have been refurbished, new tees added and costly drainage and irrigation systems installed, but the only actual layout changes were made in 2010 with the creation of two new Championship tees (12th & 14th) which added a combined 40 yards and ensured the Nicklaus broke the 7,000-yards barrier.

Nicklaus told TG: “Originally, I twice – maybe three times – turned down the Bond brothers, Herman and Martin, when they asked me to design the golf course. I did so only because of the challenge of the property. They came back and said, ‘please, Jack, do this golf course. It just makes sense for us. We just can’t do anything else’. I said OK, but understand it’s going to be a unique golf course.

“I was told at the time that it was the largest civil contract in Britain that year, because of the amount of earth we had to move. In the end, it’s a golf course where each individual hole is pretty darn good. They might be in a unique location, but I thought the golf course, as such, turned out to be a really good from a playability standpoint.”

David Moon, the resort’s Golf Operations Manager now in his 20th year at St Mellion, added: “You really will use every club in your bag here. Every hole is different and will ask questions of your game. Nowadays the aim is to make the course playable and enjoyable for average golfers, 16-19 handicappers, so we



ensure the greens aren't too pacey. The challenge is to get to the greens and when golfers get there we want to make sure they've got a chance."

After opening in a blaze of glory with the Big Four of Nicklaus, Nick Faldo, Tom Watson and Sandy Lyle lining up in a special exhibition match, the course went from strength to strength and staged nine European Tour events, including six consecutive B&H International Opens from 1990.

"I have always been very proud of taking the site given to us and turning it into something that has now hosted at least a dozen professional or significant events. I'm sure there were some doubters when we started, especially if someone had said we were one day going to host a number of significant tournaments," added Nicklaus.

Above: The view of the 18th green at St Mellion, in 1987 and today.

Centre: The letter Jack wrote when the course opened in 1988.

Right: Nicklaus discusses his ideas with the owners in an early site visit.



Nicklaus talks course design

Since retiring from competition in 2005, this has been his all-consuming passion

On his creative talents...

"Our figures show that I personally have done 289 courses: 241 solo designs, 33 co-designs and 15 re-designs. We've 365 courses open for play in 34 countries. We've also got 40 under construction and projects in 46 countries, 27 of them I've never worked in before. We've opened 168 courses over the last 12 years. I was involved in 120 of them."

On the recession and its impact...

"We've got work, but nobody's busy right now. The business has shut down to an absolute screeching halt. I really don't know how many we have under construction right now. Normally we have 50 or 60, and we probably still have 40 under active construction."

On jobs, travel and more new projects...

"I keep my vaccination boosters up. I've been doing that for a long time. But we do travel. We've done quite a bit in Southern Africa. We looked at properties in Zimbabwe, Namibia, but I have not done any courses there. Northern Africa, we have courses in Morocco, projects in Tunisia and Egypt. I've never had an issue politically any place I've gone. Sure, there are a couple of places I'm not wild about. There are places you couldn't get me back to with a team of wild horses, but I'd rather not name those."

On the best design advice...

"If I could offer one piece of design advice, I would say, listen as much as you can. Take in



as much as you can because there's probably nothing new in design. It's just how you apply it and how you learn it. Pete Dye started out as an insurance salesman in Indiana and started fiddling around with Indianapolis Country Club. And then people started asking him to do different things. How long did it take him to learn? It took him quite a while, but I'll tell you he just kept learning and learning and learning. And if Tiger wishes to be involved, he'll just learn and learn and learn. But, good gracious, he has a lot of years to go play golf and so my guess is he's not going to do a lot right now. But we welcome him. I welcome him with open arms. Anytime you get the kind of fees he does it raises the bar for everybody else, so that's OK."

On the best property to work on...

"Properties are, in many cases, location. If you have any creativity you ought to be able to create what you want. The ability to be able to create within sand gives you a lot more flexibility. Sebonack was one of those. St Francis Links in South Africa was one of those. Dismal River in Nebraska was one of

those. Dismal River was probably the most minimalist golf course I've ever done. We moved less than 5,000 yards of dirt on the whole golf course. And I'd say that 4,000 of it was on one little knob we took out on a partially blind par 3.

On what he'd change at Augusta...

"The ball... because I liked Augusta the way it used to be, but the game has changed so much that Augusta the way it used to be wouldn't challenge the golfers today. What's been done to Augusta is against my philosophy and probably against Bobby Jones' philosophy. But what they did is correct for the philosophy of the game today. And I think they did a great job. I think Augusta is equally as good a golf course, if not better, than when I was winning, but it's a different golf course with a different philosophy with the same set of greens. It's a wonderful place. I love Augusta."

On a course to play for the rest of his life...

"I don't know. I would want to go to one of my golf courses more than likely. But if I picked one I'd have about 300 unhappy people. So I don't pick! I take the fifth on that. Well, let me tell you this: if I was going to exclude my golf courses, OK, if I have one round of golf to play, I'd go to Pebble Beach (pictured). If I had two places that I want to visit, I'd be hard pressed to choose between Augusta and St. Andrews. If I had one golf course, from a design standpoint, one that I really love, it would probably be Pinehurst."

