

Global Golf Post

Champions Cup An Ode To Amateurism

By Richard Dean • April 25, 2019



HOUSTON, TEXAS | At 96 years old, Jack Burke Jr. is the oldest living Masters champion. Witty as ever, and an advocate for amateur golf,

Burke still gives putting tips at Champions Golf Club, which he and the late Jimmy Demaret co-founded in 1957.

A historic golf course in northwest Houston, Champions hosted the 1967 Ryder Cup, 1969 U.S. Open, 1990 Nabisco Championship, four Tour Championships, five other PGA Tour events, as well as the 1993 U.S. Amateur and 2017 Women's Mid-Amateur. In 2020, the club's Cypress Creek Course will be the site of the U.S. Women's Open.

In 1961, Burke, winner of both the Masters and PGA Championship in 1956, and Demaret, a three-time Masters champion, created the Champions Cup Invitational, one of the premier mid-amateur tournaments in the country.

Raised in Houston, Burke conceived of the idea of the Champions Cup from his time as an assistant pro at Winged Foot Golf Club. The New York club had a competition between its members who dressed in the upper locker room against those who dressed in the lower.

"I knew that to grow, you're going to have to grow with the amateur game," Burke said recently from the dining room at Champions. "You're not going to grow with the professional game. These (amateur golfers) want to compete. The competition provides that for them."

Comprising 56 teams from 16 states, as well as players from Japan, Canada and Scotland, the 52nd Champions Cup starts today on the Cypress Creek Course and concludes on Sunday. The 72-hole, two-man, four-ball competition is by invitation only.

"Mr. Burke has always stood for higher-level golf," said Hal Sutton, the 1983 PGA Championship winner and 1981 Champions Cup winner with

Jim Pierson. “And he’s always wanted to have big tournaments at Champions and (have) it be on a national level.”

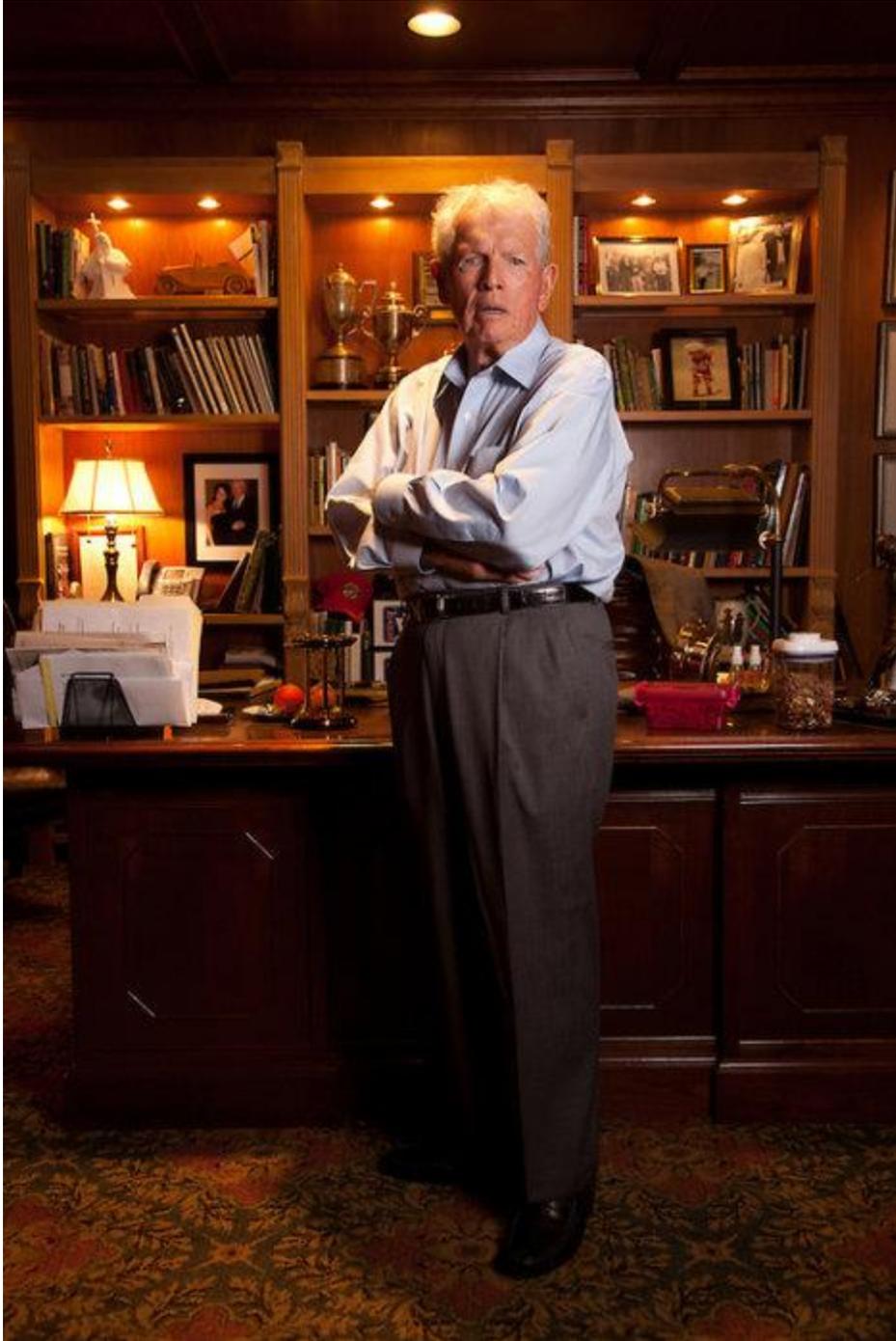
Since last April’s Champions Cup, the Cypress Creek Course, originally designed by Ralph Plummer, has undergone a restoration from architect Chet Williams. The greens and bunkers have been redone. The greens have been restored to their original size and have drainage under them.

“It’s such a great place. People that have the ability to compete in (the Champions Cup) are missing something if they don’t ever get to see Champions. It’s got to be on a bucket list.” – Brady Exber

Known as a great golf teacher after his playing days, which included 16 PGA Tour wins – four straight in 1952 – Burke has always stressed the importance of putting. Among his pupils have been Phil Mickelson and Steve Elkington.

“They still give trophies away on the putting green,” Burke said. “I’ve never seen a trophy given away out in the fairway.”

Former NFL quarterback Billy Joe Tolliver will be playing in the Champions Cup for the first time. He recently had his amateur status restored.



Jack Burke Jr. in his office at Champions Golf Club in 2011. **Photo: Courtesy Champions Golf Club, Copyright Darren Carroll**

“It will be a lot of fun being on a golf course that they re-did for the 2020 U.S. Women’s Open,” Tolliver said. “But it will be fun to be on a golf course where Ben Hogan captained the ’67 Ryder Cup team. And I’m

going to walk a golf course that Sarge (Orville Moody) won the U.S. Open on in '69.

“My partner, Jason Kuperman, we’ll see if he and I can have a good showing and maybe get in more tournaments and play in some of the greatest (mid-amateur events) in the country. And the Champions Cup is certainly high on that list, if it’s not No. 1.”

What sets the Champions Cup apart from most amateur tournaments is that it’s exclusively for mid-amateurs (age 25 and older) and is played over 72 holes, when many amateur tournaments are 54 holes.

“You’re out there, and in 72 holes, he’s (Mr. Burke) going to find out who the champion is,” Tolliver said.

Gary Durbin, a member of Champions and on the competition committee, was part of a Champions Cup winning team in 1999. This week, Durbin, 62, will partner with his son Eric, 31, who played collegiately at Oklahoma. Eric is the reigning club champion at Champions and Gary, who won the Houston city amateur twice, is the reigning senior club champion.

“If you look at the top better-ball events in the country, you look at Champions Cup, Winged Foot has the Anderson Memorial, Oak Hill has the Williams,” Gary Durbin said. “Those to me are the premier better-ball events. But each one’s got their own rules. This is the most open (eligibility-wise) of the events. Which probably has the strongest field.”

Among other players in this year’s Champions Cup is Brady Exber of Las Vegas, a five-time winner of the invitational, and part of the Houston Astros ownership group.

“I’ve always wanted to be somebody that is a supporter of that tournament,” Exber said. “It’s such a great place. People that have the ability to compete in that tournament are missing something if they don’t ever get to see Champions. It’s got to be on a bucket list.”

All around the clubhouse at Champions are historic photos. Many feature Burke. There are also golf photos of Hogan, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. Burke is the godfather of Bing’s son Nathaniel Crosby, winner of the 1981 U.S. Amateur and captain of the 2019 U.S. Walker Cup team.

“I find myself sitting with the other players in the locker room, and we’re talking about all those photos,” Exber said. “Mr. Burke, and his relationship with Hogan, Demaret, and all those guys, and you start reminiscing about golf. A big part of what makes it so wonderful. It’s just different than everywhere else, in a good way.

“When I think of Champions, I think of Winged Foot, I think of Country Club of Charleston, it’s fantastic. And big supporters of amateur golf. Winged Foot is a big supporter of golf in general, but big supporters of amateur golf (are) Country Club of Charleston and Champions. They’re on a different level.”

Champions Golf Club is rich in history. In the 1967 Ryder Cup, the United States team with Hogan as non-playing captain defeated Great Britain 23½-8½, the largest margin of victory in Ryder Cup history. The Cypress Creek Course was also the site of Hogan’s last competitive hole. In the 1971 Houston Champions International, Hogan walked off the course after the 12th hole with severe leg pain.

In 1968, Roberto DeVicenzo won the Houston Champions International. Three weeks earlier at the Masters, DeVicenzo had signed an incorrect scorecard that cost him a playoff opportunity against Bob Goalby. Orville

Moody's 1969 U.S. Open victory at Champions was his only PGA Tour victory.

Champions Golf Club got its name from Jack Valenti, a University of Houston and Harvard Business School alum, who would become president of the Motion Picture Association of America.

Dedicated to amateur golf, Burke, a player on five U.S. Ryder Cup teams, has been instrumental to the sport's growth.

"We need games that abide by rules," Burke said. "Players are their own officials, call their own penalties. Football does not abide by rules. They have to have five referees to keep them from cheating."

Champions Golf Club has hosted prominent national tournaments since the early 1960s, including the 2017 U.S. Women's Mid-Amateur. Photo: Darren Carroll, Copyright USGA