JACKIE BURKE'S FUTURE IS BRIGHT

At age 97, he is our oldest living major champion, the 1956 Masters and PGA winner, and a World Golf Hall of Famer. Good enough for you and me, right? Well, not for this guy.

By Art Stricklin

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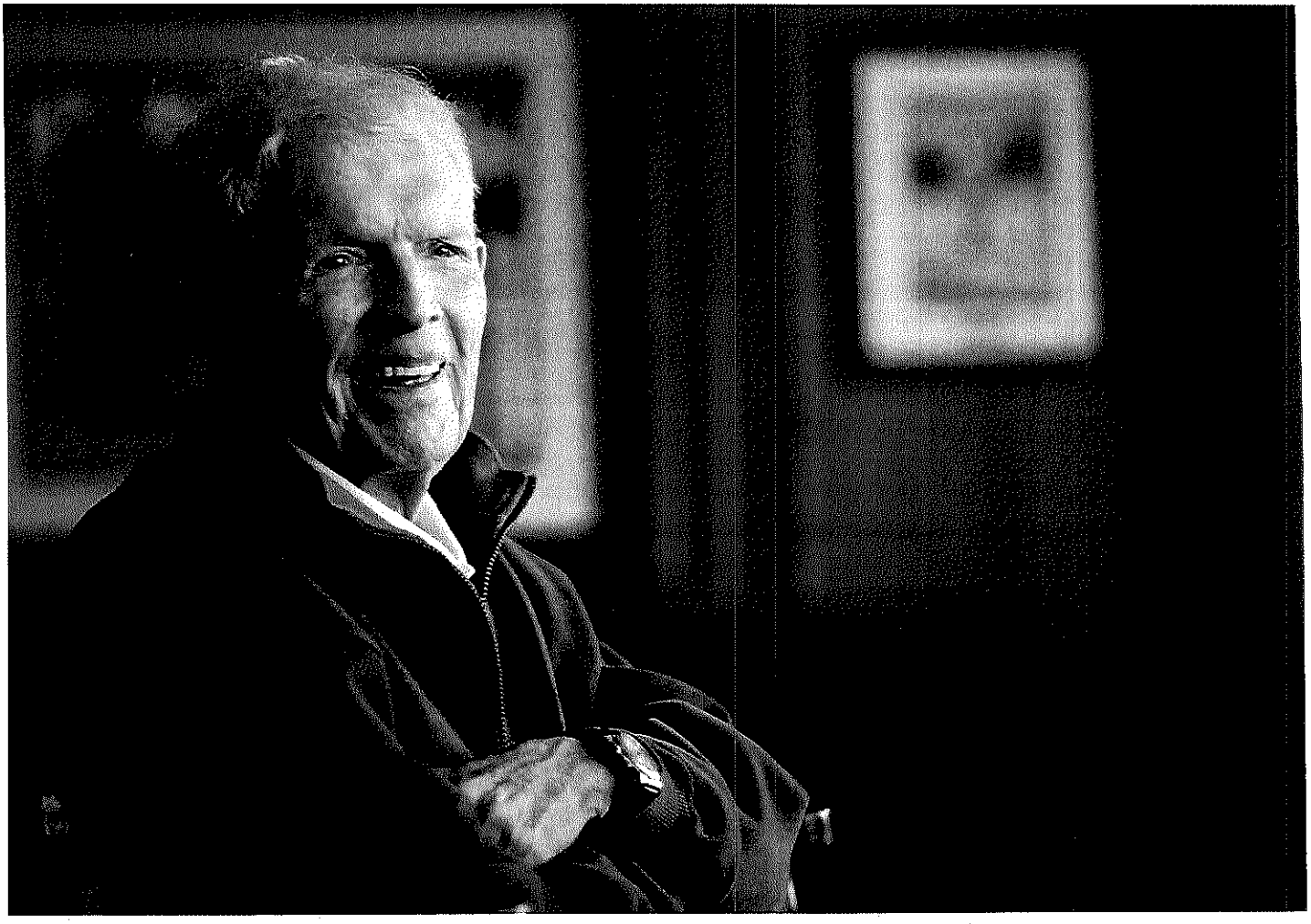


On a sunny, late-April afternoon in Houston, Texas,

Jack Burke Jr. is transcendent in his element. Almost totally alone in the spacious clubhouse of his aptly named Champions Golf Club, the World Golf Hall of Famer eyes a foursome on the first tee. Even at age 97 and in the throes of a pandemic, Burke is a watchful presence here. He makes regular appearances at the practice range and is happy to work on a player's grip or look at their swing. But he's not compelled to offer up last-minute fixes.

"I don't give tips," he says in a gravelly but still firm voice. "That's for horse racing, not golf. You have to have a feeling for the game. You can't sing like Crosby if you've never carried a note." That's Burke in a nutshell: blunt, honest, direct. And as unwavering as a Swiss timepiece. Today he's already made two of the three stops he makes nearly every day of his life: from his nearby home to the bank, where he still keeps a close eye on club finances and has not once, in the 63 years since he cofounded the place, had to assess a Champions member. Then to the club, where he personally approves every new member and still enforces a handicap limit for applicants. Only a stop at his local church—off-limits because of coronavirus concerns—is missing from his deeply grooved daily routine.

As Augusta National chairman Clifford Roberts (near right) looks on, 1955 Masters champ Cary Middlecoff slips Burke into something comfortable.

As he settles into the clubhouse's large dining room, a server greets him as "Mr. Burke" and sets down a boxed lunch (another Covid precaution), which Burke unpacks, plates and consumes from soup to sandwich over the course of an hour-long talk. The veteran golfer, who's become even more famous in the past few years for being the Masters winner who *doesn't* show up for the Champions Dinner, is asked how he likes to be referred to these days: "Golf's last living legend"? "The game's wise old man"? After all, he's mentored dozens of juniors and pros over the decades. He still counts Hal Sutton and Steve Elkington as regular visitors to Champions GC, where they soak up his knowledge. Ben Crenshaw swings by on occasion, too.

Burke thinks for a second, then flicks it all away with a cock of the wrist, the same fluid motion that helped him win his green jacket and the PGA Championship in the same year: 1956. "Son," he says with gentle impatience. "I'm not much into titles. At 97, you're just happy to get up and be able to brush your own damn teeth!"

Burke is similarly dismissive of speculation about his legacy, which includes four consecutive pro wins in 1952, two majors, World Golf Hall of Fame honors and a rich contribution to the Ryder Cup: five successive appearances as a player (1951 to 1959), two captaincies (1957 and 1973) and, in 2004, at age 81, an assistant-captain gig under team leader Hal Sutton.

"Well, there won't be many [left] to say anything about me, because they will all be gone," Burke says. "But you can write that I was an advocate of amateur golf and I was an advocate of the rules. You know, the USGA has 34 of them; God gave us 10. If we followed those 10, the jails would be empty now."

Blunt, honest, direct.

This December, when the rescheduled 75th U.S. Women's Open is played at Champions, it will join Pinehurst as only the second club in America to have hosted a Ryder Cup, a U.S. Amateur, the Tour Championship (four times) and a men's and women's U.S. Open. Pinehurst has had a variety of owners over its 100-plus-year history, but only Burke has been present for every one of his club's indelible moments—from the 1967 Ryder Cup (where Burke literally left the front gate open, begging Texans to attend during college football season) and Ben Hogan's final competitive round at the 1971 Houston Open to the first (in 1999) of Tiger Woods' three Tour Championships and many more. Champions GC got its name from Lyndon Johnson presidential aide Jack Valenti. He reasoned that Burke and cofounder Jimmy Demaret, who have 47 Tour wins and four Masters triumphs between them, merited it.

Without question, the club and the man live up to the name. "You have to be a steward of the game," Burke says. "I'm just trying to do what my dad did."

Jack Burke Jr. got an early introduction to golf—and to talking trash—in the 1930s, when his father, the pro at Houston's River Oaks Country Club, gave lessons to Texas native and future LPGA legend Babe Didrikson. In turn, Babe gave the boy a primer in swagger. "She would say, 'Come over here lil' Jackie and let's play. I'm going to kick your a-- and take your lunch money,'" he remembers. "It was a proud moment when I finally outdrove her."

Burke turned pro in 1941, at age 17, but shortly after began a four-year stint in the Marine Corps, where he served in World War II as a combat instructor with two specialties: teaching recruits how to hurl grenades and how to clamber overboard if their ship took a torpedo hit. Both maneuvers required that you be "careful but aggressive. The same is true for golf," he says. "A certain recklessness [is necessary] to be good, but don't bet your whole wallet on every shot."

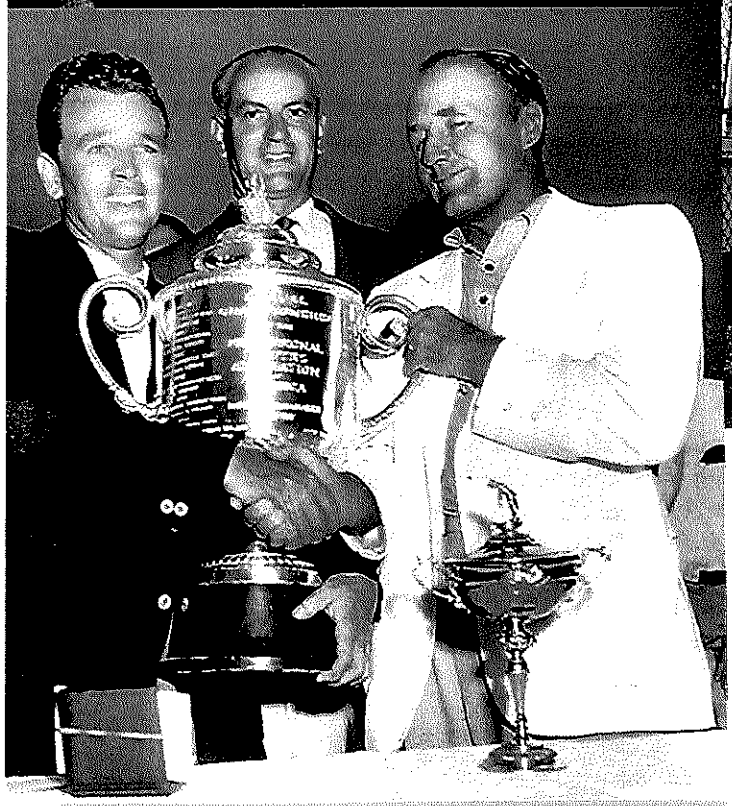
After the war, Burke resumed his pro career with the help of a blank check—which he filled out for $2,500—from a generous local businessman. He also made ends meet as a teaching pro (for a time, under Claude Harmon at Winged Foot), until he won his first tournament, in 1950: the Bing Crosby Pro-Am at Pebble Beach. Burke's game really caught fire in '52, when he won four Tour events in a row—until he ran into Slammin' Sammy.

"The Masters was going to be my fifth straight win," he says, "but Snead beat me by four shots. I'm sure I three-putted some of those greens at Augusta; that's pretty easy to do."

Four years later, Burke found redemption, taking the '56 Masters—the first ever televised—in one of the most dramatic finishes in Augusta history. Playing the final round in 50-mile-per-hour winds, he rallied from a tournament-record eight shots behind to edge amateur Ken Venturi by a stroke. Burke carded a 71. Venturi, who never won a Masters, skied to an 80.

"I'd never seen conditions like that on the golf course,"

Previous page: Augusta National/Getty Images; This page, from left: Darren Carroll; Augusta National/Getty Images



Clockwise from left: In '56 at the PGA, Burke and Ted Kroll wrestled over the Wanamaker Trophy; at the '73 Ryder Cup, Captain Burke shared the hardware with, among others, the Golden Bear and the King; in '54, comedian Buddy Hackett, Jimmy Demaret, Burke, Sam Snead, Ben Hogan and crooner Billy Eckstine cut it up in the Catskills; and in 2004, Burke and Hal Sutton, alas, steered Team USA to a devastating Ryder Cup defeat. Opposite: Robin and Jack, coupled in making things happen for Champions.

"Jackie will give it to you straight," says Hal Sutton. "If you don't want to know what he thinks, it's better not to ask him. He doesn't sugarcoat anything."

recalls Burke, who needed driver-wedge to reach the par-3 4th. "It was just my day—and it wasn't Ken's. It was nice to win, but I was always looking for the next event."

He came upon it soon enough at Blue Hill County Club, in Canton, Mass., where he won the '56 PGA Championship 3 and 2 over Ted Kroll. Remarkably, the suits at the PGA tried to stiff him.

"I earned $6,000 for winning the Masters and $5,000 for winning the PGA, but [the PGA] wrote me a damn hot check," Burke says. "They had to write me another one. Years later, when I was Ryder Cup captain, they gave my wife a $10,000 credit to buy a dress for a banquet. I said, 'Boy, this really *is* a different PGA.'"

For Burke, a lasting memory of those twin majors is the play of the runners-up. Snead, he says, was the most talented pro he ever went up against, and Kroll was the most over-

looked. They both had what Burke thinks of as an essential of the game—and what he tries to impress upon upstart golfers: "You never see a surgeon [nervously] juggling knives before an operation. You're going to trust that? No. You have to take tension out of your swing. The key to my golf was the four Ts: tension, tempo, timing and trust."

He left out the fifth T: tenacity. Although he hasn't seriously competed in more than 50 years—his last Tour win was the '63 Lucky International Open; his last pro win the '67 Texas State Open—Burke hasn't lost his hold on the sport. The lifetime exemption he earned by winning the '56 PGA, paradoxically, allowed him to enter semiretirement after a solid decade of success, and to focus on family and his enduring love: Champions GC, which is almost certainly the only golf club in the world to count among its past and present members four men who've walked on the moon. (Houston. Remember?)

Burke openly admits that he doesn't personally know many of today's young players. It's one of the reasons he cites for bowing out of the annual fete for Masters champs. But he *has* kept his hand in. Because the Augusta National Champions Locker Room isn't big enough to house a locker for every club coat winner, players have had to double up. Burke shares his locker with Tiger Woods, and that's all the opening the not-shy Texan needs. "Every year I leave him a note," Burke says, "asking him to leave a couple hundred dollars behind for his locker mate."

And?

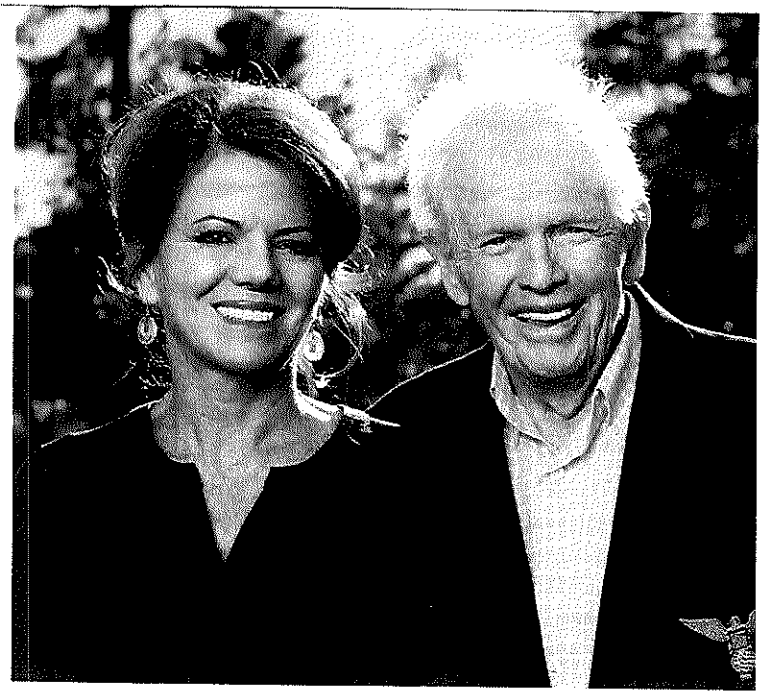
"Never," Burke says. "But he said he likes reading my notes."

About a decade ago, Burke got a call from fellow Texan and former Tour contemporary Miller Barber. Barber told him Phil Mickelson wanted Burke's help with his putting stroke.

"I didn't really know Phil that well," Burke remembers, "and I hadn't seen his game much, but I met him on the putting green here. I put out 10 balls [in a circle] about four feet from the hole and said, 'When you can make 10 of those in a row, 10 times straight, come get me. I will be in my office.' Well, Phil popped off and said, 'I'll do that right now, in about 10 minutes. You just stand here and watch.'"

Burke knew of Lefty's competitive streak, but he wasn't sure if Mickelson knew Burke himself used to throw dice at River Oaks for money he didn't have. "Phil liked to gamble a bit, so I said, 'For how much—if you do this right now?' He replied, 'For the best dinner in Houston.' So I said, 'Go.' I think he missed the fourth putt. I just turned around and walked back to my office."

"Jackie will give it to you straight," Hal Sutton says, with a familiar chuckle. "If you don't want to know what he thinks, it's probably better not to ask him. He doesn't sugarcoat anything."



Clockwise from left: Don Morley/Getty Images; Houston Chronicle; USGA Museum/Darren Carroll; Scott Halleran/Getty Images; no credit

Sutton felt the sting from his mentor when he asked Burke to serve as an assistant during his ill-fated captaincy at the 2004 Ryder Cup at Oakland Hills, which turned out to be the worst U.S. loss on American soil in Ryder Cup history. As Burke recalls it, "I tried to tell Hal not to [pair] Tiger and Phil, but talking to Hal is like talking to General Patton. He won't listen."

If Jack Burke's stride is a little more unhurried these days than it once was, he still moves with purpose. He has meticulously maintained his golf-only club for decades ("We only have one game here") and is determined, even as he nears the century mark, to be not just a figure from golf's past but a custodian of its future—and, as always, a champion of Champions GC. Assuming the Women's Open goes off as planned at year's end, Burke and his 57-year-old wife, Robin—an accomplished golfer in her own right, who captained the 2016 Curtis Cup team and partners with Burke in running the club—will be angling to host more high-profile events. Maybe a Solheim or Walker Cup, maybe a Women's Amateur. Anything and everything to keep Burke going in the game he breathes deeply every day.

With lunch a wrap, Burke leads a guest to the clubhouse's front entryway, where a large formal painting of him and his dear friend Demaret (who died in 1983) adorns a foyer wall. "You see that picture?" Burke asks. "Jimmy is sitting down and I'm standing up. I used to tell him, that's because I did all the work and he would [just] greet people. I never played with Bobby Jones, but I knew him well. I know Clifford Roberts pushed him to be the face of [Augusta National] while he did all the work behind the scenes."

The work nor the role has ever bothered Burke.

"You have to find something that keeps you living when you get off the Tour. I've been in a war, and I've been around golf all my life, always doing what I wanted. That," he says, "is enough for me." ©