

50 YEARS AGO...

# CLASS DISMISSED

*After graduating from what he called  
“finishing school,”  
Jack Nicklaus won his first national title,  
the 1959 U.S. Amateur*

BY DAVID SHEDLOSKI

**S**TEELY BLUE EYES were all the rage in 1959. Yes, it was 50 years ago when the Grammy Awards were introduced, and legendary crooner Frank Sinatra was among those receiving acclaim. Meanwhile, in the Colorado Mountains, the world was introduced to a legend in the making, a superlative young golfer named Jack William Nicklaus.

Nicklaus, already well known in golf circles after being named to represent the U.S. in the Walker Cup matches in Muirfield, Scotland, began his ascent to the pinnacle of the world's sporting stage when he collected the first of his 20 major championships by defeating defending champion Charles R. Coe, 1 up, in the 59th U.S. Amateur at Broadmoor Country Club in Colorado Springs, Colo.

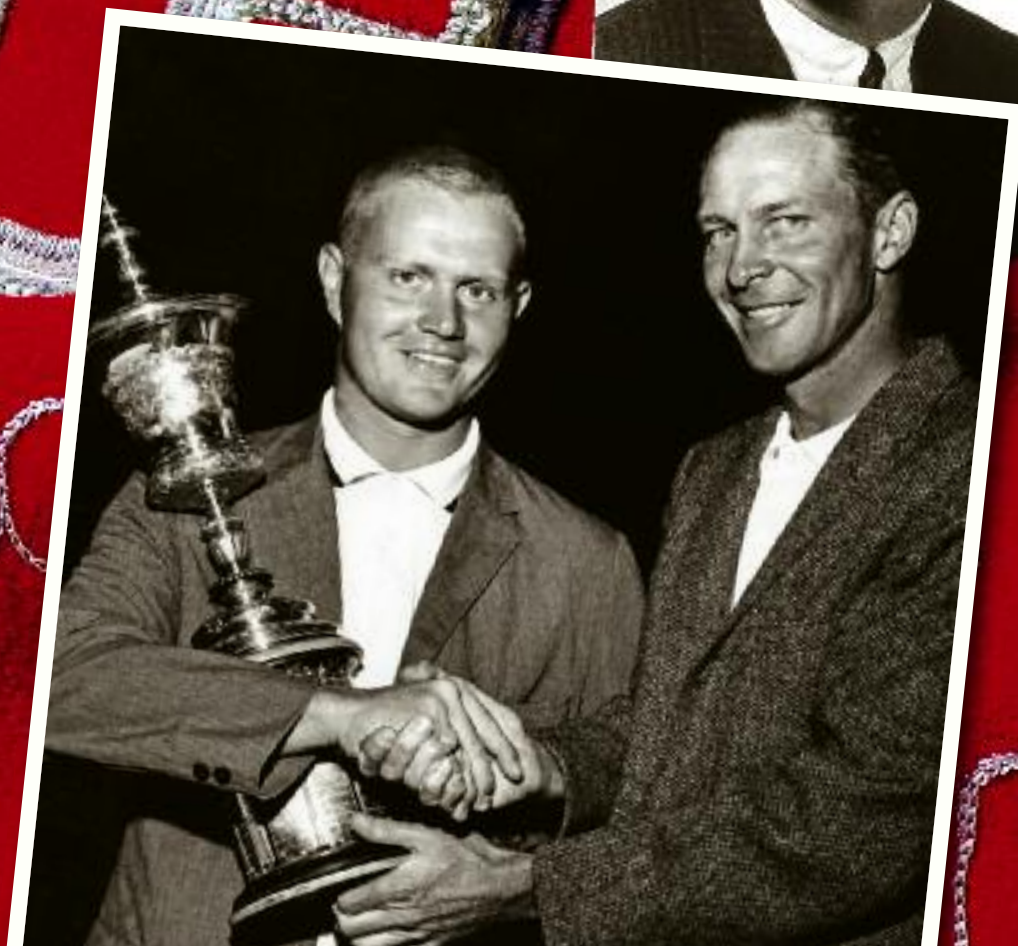
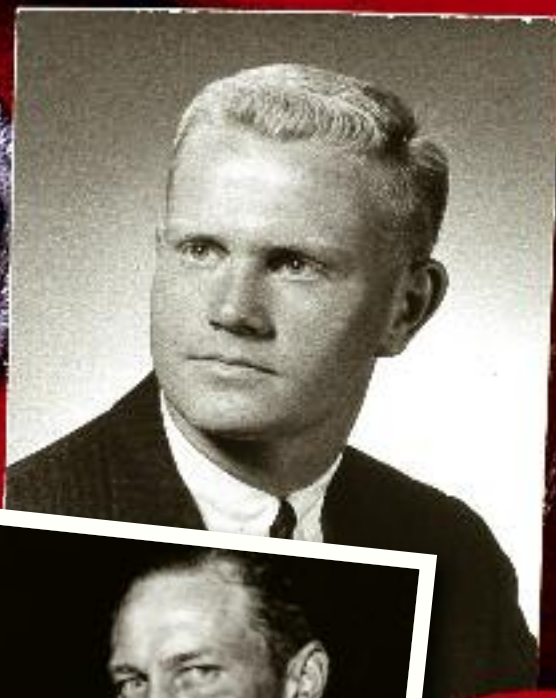
Nicklaus was of all 19 at the time, but he was mature beyond his years as a man and a golfer. No less than Gene Sarazen, one of five men to win the career grand slam, said early on of the youngster from Columbus, “I’ve never seen a player who could shut himself off from all around him the way Nicklaus does.”

Though preternaturally patient and perspicacious, he didn’t have the game to win a national title until he went through, as he calls it “a sort of finishing school,” in the summer of ’59.

The lessons began in Muirfield, Scotland, where Nicklaus played beautifully for two days in his first taste of golf abroad. A missed cut at the U.S. Open at Winged Foot actually furthered his education. After watching his playing partners, Doug Ford and Gene Littler, scramble to scores that made the cut while he shot two 77s, Nicklaus realized he had not yet figured out how to manage his game on days his ball-striking was



1960-61



Left: After serving as his captain in the 1959 Walker Cup, Charlie Coe lost to Jack Nicklaus in that year's U.S. Amateur Championship.



Jack Nicklaus says his first national title win was one of the hardest fought of his career.

lacking. In assessing how to grasp the intricacies of such management, Nicklaus in the summer of '59 became a devoted student of golf course design.

He brought all of these newfound enhancements to his competitive makeup at the Broadmoor, where he engaged Coe, his Walker Cup captain, in one of the most exciting finals in the history of the amateur championship—a showdown Nicklaus still ranks among the toughest in which he's ever participated.

Nicklaus had not advanced past the fourth round in his previous U.S. Amateur appearances, but the young golfer trumpeted his improvement early that fateful week when he dismantled a talented player with a famous name in the first round.

The player was Robert T. Jones III, the son of the celebrated Grand Slam winner, and Nicklaus took him down with disarming ease, 7 and 6.

Reminded of this result recently, Nicklaus laughed at a memory he had not recalled in decades.

"The funny part about that is that Bob and I talked a bit after the match, and he told me the story of how he called his dad beforehand to see if he was going to come out and watch," Nicklaus said. "He told me that he asked his dad after the pairings came out if he were coming, and Bob said his dad asked who he was going to play. 'Oh, I'm playing the young Nicklaus kid,' Bob told his dad, to which his dad asked, 'Is that Jack Nicklaus?' Bob told him it was, and his dad

replied, 'Well, I'm not coming out and watching you lose 7 and 6.'

"We both kind of laughed that the score ended up being that way. But, yeah, that was fun playing against Bob. Obviously, he was a very good player in his own right."

Young Jack's road got bumpier in the later rounds. He survived a close call over Dave Smith in the fifth round, which was played in a fog bank so thick that spotters were needed throughout the course to follow the golfers' shots, and another over former U.S. Public Links champion Gene Andrews in the semifinals, 1 up.

Then came the final, and it was a nail-biter against the two-time Amateur champ.

Despite a fine par-birdie-birdie start, an incredulous Nicklaus found himself 1 down to Coe, and he fell behind by as many as three in the morning 18 holes before ending up two adrift at the break. A lanky Oklahoma oil broker, Coe actually held or shared the lead for the first 31 holes and led outright for the first 20. In contrast, Nicklaus, who shot 71-69 to Coe's 69-73, led for only four holes total. Nicklaus finally nosed ahead on the 32nd hole thanks to his hallmark patience, as he converted his 10th par in 11 holes.

An uncharacteristically sloppy bogey by Nicklaus at 17 set up a dramatic finish. With the match square, the two men drilled 3-woods into the fairway at the Broadmoor's home hole, a 430-yard par-4 that doglegs sharply right and up

a hill. Their drives came to rest three crucial yards apart, with Nicklaus' ball stopping just beyond his opponent's, meaning he would have the advantage of hitting second into the green.

That advantage made all the difference to a young player who was proving to be savvier than he had shown to be only months before when he played in his first Masters and missed the cut at the Open.

Choosing an 8-iron, Coe took dead aim at the flag, but his approach failed to hold the green, and his ball raced over the putting surface and down a slope into a grassy hollow. Fingering his own 8-iron, Nicklaus watched Coe's shot intently and then opted to hit a punch 9-iron. His approach trundled to within 8 feet short of the hole.

Coe, not conceding, nearly chipped in from the almost impossible spot, but the opening was there and the precocious Nicklaus took it. He holed his left-to-right birdie putt for a 1-up victory to become the youngest U.S. Amateur champion in nearly a half century.

Although Charles Coe led for the first 20 holes of the 1959 U.S. Amateur final, the young Nicklaus beat him 1 up.

In his autobiography, *My Story*, Nicklaus wrote: "If there is ever really a moment when a man can say a dream began, and he began to try to give it substance, this for me was the moment."

Years later, that sense of discovery he felt that summer was still vibrant.

"I think in some ways I still didn't know how good I was at golf, even when I was named the No. 1 amateur at the end of the year," Nicklaus said. "But I figured that I must be better than I thought, and so winning the U.S. Amateur was probably my first stepping stone to realizing that I might really have a future in the game."

Maybe young Jack didn't know, but his father, Charlie did. In calling home to herald his son's victory, Charlie Nicklaus was moved to proclaim, "I believe our son was born to greatness." MT

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—JACK NICKLAUS

