

Forty Years On...

With support from its stars, most notably Jack Nicklaus, players assembled all the pieces to form the PGA TOUR

BY ALEX MICELI

TIGER WOODS RETURNED from a career-threatening knee injury, Phil Mickelson made inroads into overtaking Woods as the No. 1 player in the world, and Angel Cabrera captured his second major by winning the Masters and denying Padraig Harrington his third straight grand slam victory. Those were the early 2009 headlines on the PGA TOUR as it celebrated its 40th birthday.

Today, the TOUR is the behemoth of the golf world. With purses over \$277 million and the best-known athlete in the world between its tournament ropes, America's top golf circuit is flourishing. But it wasn't always that way.

Four decades ago, Jack Nicklaus and his chief rival, Arnold Palmer, were the unquestioned leaders in the game through their talents and popularity. Together they helped drive professional golf to new heights, and they also were instrumental figures in helping it achieve a new identity through the creation of what is now the modern PGA TOUR. Nicklaus, in particular, was a steadfast supporter of a movement led by Gardner

Jack Nicklaus has never been afraid to take a stand for what he believes in, and he showed that in 1968 when players sought to have a greater say in their fortunes.

Dickinson that eventually resulted in touring pros breaking away from the PGA of America.

"It was impressive to me in 1968, what guys like Jack Nicklaus were doing," says former TOUR member Bob Murphy, who now works as a golf broadcaster for NBC Sports.

The world in 1968 was a very different place. World War II was not just a memory; it was still something real and palpable, and, in fact, a number of professional golfers served in the Armed Forces during the war. The Cold War was getting chillier and tensions in Southeast Asia were rising as the Presidential election drew nearer. Many people worried over the direction of the country.

Against this backdrop, more questions of leadership were being bandied about—these on the fairways of Riviera Country Club, Doral Golf Resort & Spa and Westchester Country Club. From raw beginnings, golf was finally finding itself despite significant growing pains that went on for decades.

In 1895, the United States Golf Association hosted the first U.S. Open, the first significant tournament of any kind in America. For the next 65 years, golf attempted to gain a foothold in America and was led mostly by the Professional Golfer's Association of America. Founded in 1916 in New York City, the PGA was formed to be golf's national organization. The association's goals were to promote interest in the game and elevate the vocation of the golf professional.

The PGA dutifully followed its mandate in the early years, and the popularity of tournament golf expanded slowly under its Tournament Bureau. A tour was established and consisted of events played throughout Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas during the winter months, which gave club professionals a way to keep their skills honed and earn extra money before returning to their jobs at their respective clubs during the summer. In 1930, the PGA took the first steps toward creating a formalized tour, establishing a tournament bureau and naming Bob Harlow its first manager. Harlow had been a reporter for the New York Tribune and followed Walter Hagen on his barnstorming trips around the United States in the early 1900s before becoming Hagen's manager in 1921.



The Tour's first five years under Harlow were difficult, due primarily to the Great Depression, but his ingenuity kept tournament golf going for the professionals. During the 1930s, '40s and '50s, the PGA of America was a responsible advocate for golf and its members, but by the 1960s, the game started to enjoy increasing popularity. Change was inevitable.

The PGA Tournament Bureau had been renamed the Tournament Players Division soon after World War II. Interest in golf in the '50s started to blossom thanks, in part, to President Dwight D. Eisenhower's love affair with the game and also due to the onset of television coverage and the exploits of the telegenic and charismatic Palmer. A worthy foil to Palmer arose in the supremely confident youngster from Columbus, Ohio, and their rivalry captivated sports fans around the world.

By 1968, Nicklaus, Palmer and a diminutive but feisty South African named Gary Player were the dominant figures in the game—so much so that they established their collective identity as the Big Three. Not only did they drive interest in the game, they also impacted tournament purses.

Consider that in 1938 the total purse of the PGA Tournament Bureau was \$158,000, and Sam Snead was the leading money winner with \$19,534. Not until after World War II did any player's earnings exceed \$20,000. By 1960, purses on tour totaled \$1.33 million; Palmer was the leading money winner with \$75,262. Eight years later, total purses had escalated to just over \$5 million, and Billy Casper led in earnings with \$205,168.

The PGA of America started to see the touring professionals as its benefactor, a group that would grow the purses, which the PGA could use to support its organization of thousands. In 1968, there were 225 touring professionals on the books, making up only 4 percent of the total membership of the PGA. Because of this and other issues, the touring pros and the hierarchy of the PGA of America had grown increasingly at odds. Money had been flowing nicely to both sides, so discussions to resolve any issues were slow to materialize.

"Others were more engaged in the original conflict, but Jack was recruited because of his great relationship with the PGA of America,"



While Jack Nicklaus was one of the vocal supporters of touring pros on the front lines, Arnold Palmer worked diligently behind the scenes.

Former PGA TOUR Commissioner Deane Beman said of Nicklaus' involvement.

But by 1968, even with Nicklaus' input, the two sides were at loggerheads.

In a September 1968 article in *Sports Illustrated*, Nicklaus penned a story that appeared under his byline detailing the thorniest issues between the PGA of America and the touring professionals. His points discussed the lack of player control of several issues, including: tournament schedule; the approval of courses and sponsors; purse sizes and distribution; conditions of play.

The main reason players did not have any control of crucial operational issues was because the PGA of America had the ultimate veto. Months

“OTHERS WERE MORE ENGAGED IN THE ORIGINAL CONFLICT, BUT JACK WAS RECRUITED BECAUSE OF HIS GREAT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PGA OF AMERICA.”

— DEANE BEMAN, PGA TOUR COMMISSIONER FROM 1974-1994



Bringing in Joe Dey, the former executive director of the USGA, to be the first commissioner of the new Tour was the final piece of the puzzle.

before Nicklaus' article, the PGA of America tried to assert its authority over the players and tournaments by requiring players to sign a new entry form that granted additional powers to the PGA of America. Included in the form was control over where the players could play and, in some cases, it could mandate entry in certain sanctioned PGA of America events. The most egregious example centered around the British Open;

“JACK’S INFLUENCE HELPED US PUT THE PGA TOUR TOGETHER AS IT IS TODAY.”

— ARNOLD PALMER

competing in golf's oldest event required a waiver from the PGA because the Greater Milwaukee Open was scheduled the same week.

Led by a tournament committee that consisted of touring professionals Nicklaus, Gardner

Dickinson, Doug Ford and Frank Beard—and later joined by Palmer, a non-committee member but easily the most influential player not on the board—the players issued a resounding “no” to the PGA. Both sides retained legal representation. The players hired Samuel Gates, a senior partner at

Debevoise, Plimpton, Lyons & Gates out of New York, and the PGA of America retained William Rogers from Arnold & Porter in Washington D.C. Eventually the players decided to break from the PGA and form the American Professional Golfers Inc., or APG.

In Nicklaus' book *The Greatest Game of All, My Life in Golf*, Nicklaus wrote that the reasons for forming the APG were, “to conduct the tour tournaments and to handle all contingent matters in the future.”

Today, Nicklaus remembers it in more simplistic terms. “It was all about our ability to make a living and have a say like other professionals,” he says. That made perfect sense. Tour professionals had a chance to earn a good living, but, unlike in team sports, expenses were also borne by the pros themselves. The ability of players to better control their income streams more directly was essential considering the fact that they had to make decisions on their expenditures.

Forming the APG was intended to address that. The members of the tournament committee established the organizational makeup; today the PGA TOUR's Policy Board made up of four players, four independent directors and the president of the PGA of America.

“We worked out a deal where we made an organization that would be the Tour, but we wanted the PGA officers to be part of that, so that's where that tournament policy board came from,” Nicklaus says.

“Jack's influence helped us put the PGA TOUR together as it is today,” Palmer recalls. “We collaborated on selecting the four businessmen who became members of the first board of the new PGA TOUR.”

Beman agreed. “He was very much involved in getting the independent directors and played a significant role when a settlement was reached.”

Dickinson was unquestionably the driving force of the movement and was voted president of the APG. As the game's dominant player, Nicklaus, the vice president-elect, couldn't avoid becoming the public face of the movement—and the lightning rod. Nicklaus was the person whom Leo Fraser, then secretary of the PGA, criticized when legal maneuverings proliferated and the



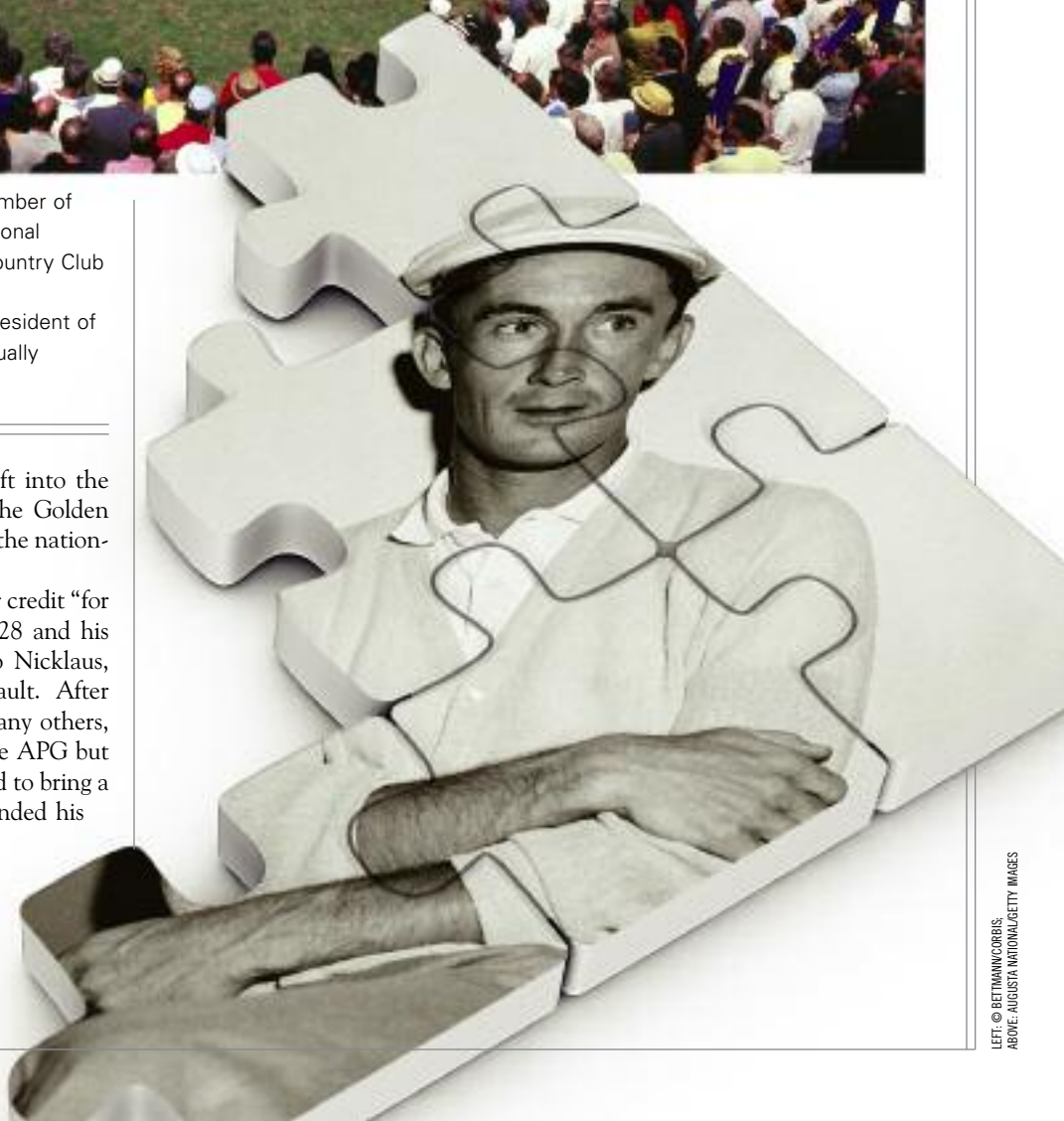
Above: Frank Beard, who became a member of the board of the new American Professional Golfers, Inc., tees off at Westchester Country Club in front of a huge crowd in 1967.

Right: Gardner Dickinson was named president of the new players organization that eventually became the PGA TOUR.

fate of the touring pros began to shift into the players' hands. Those attacks riled the Golden Bear, prompting a written response in the national magazine that fall.

In the article, Nicklaus gave Fraser credit "for getting two things right—his age of 28 and his name." Everything else, according to Nicklaus, was inaccurate and a personal assault. After defending his actions and those of many others, including Palmer, who did not join the APG but was instead working in the background to bring a resolution to the impasse, Nicklaus ended his response with the following remarks:

"As you can see, the PGA controls the golf tour. Now we want the right to cast the decisive vote in matters that affect our livelihood. We have gone as far as we can in these



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deliberations. We have formed the APG. This is not designed to destroy the PGA. Instead, we want to provide a better vehicle for the operation of professional golf tournaments. The next action rests with the PGA.”

The PGA's response was to go to court.

The Associated Press reported on Nov. 9 that the APG had raised \$2.3 million in purses for 19 events for the 1969 season, that another 13 tournaments had expressed interest in joining the APG ranks, and that the PGA was fighting the APG in court. But the handwriting was on the card. Dickinson and Nicklaus remained steadfast amid the harsh public spotlight, Palmer influenced minds behind the scenes, and the PGA and APG settled their dispute in December.

In a Dec. 14 Associated Press story, Gates said: “We didn't go into this looking for a victory. We sought agreement by eliminating the sources of disagreement. This has been accomplished by putting full authority for the conduct of the tour in

the hands of the tournament policy board. It constitutes a restructuring of the entire tournament program. In effect, it's a new organization for tournament golf.”

Assisting the transition was Joe Dey, a respected administrative figure. The former executive director of the USGA, the man whom Nicklaus called before deciding to turn professional in 1961, became the first commissioner, and he helped smooth over assorted rough spots while bringing more validation to the process. In 1969, the new PGA TOUR featured 47 events and offered a total purse of \$5.4 million. A year later, there were 55 events and purses of \$6.8 million.

Professional golf was on its way to new horizons. **MT**

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