

The Big on Golf's

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Big Dilemma

Player, Palmer and Nicklaus talk about what can be done to grow the game

They're known as the Big Three in golf's universe. In fact, they're such luminous stars in that universe that the trio — Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player — is known as much by their first names as they are for their surnames.

Arnie, Jack and Gary won 34 Major championships among them, led by Nicklaus' record 18 titles. With their stellar play, good looks and charisma, the Big Three also are credited with popularizing golf throughout the world.

Even though they're older, the soon-to-be-80 Palmer, the 69-year-old Nicklaus and the 73-year-old Player are still heavily involved in golf through their respective course design firms and other endeavors.

Realizing the game will live on long after they're gone, the Big Three still have a tremendous passion for golf. They want to see the sport continue to grow.

Golfdom recently spoke with Palmer, Nicklaus and Player about the game, which has struggled the past few years because of growth issues. More golf

courses have closed in the United States the past three years than have opened, which obviously means demand has not kept up with supply. There are fewer golfers in the United States — about 28.6 million — than there were in 2000 (28.8 golfers), according to the National Golf Foundation. There were about 30 million golfers in 2005, the NGF estimates

Rounds have dropped since 2000, when the NGF estimates there were about 518 million rounds played compared to 489 million rounds played in 2008.

Golf's problems are no secret, and there has been extensive debate about what to do to grow the game. Interestingly, the game has its own "big three," as in complaints, which have hindered its growth. People gripe that the game is too expensive, takes too long to play and is too difficult to learn.

Palmer, Nicklaus and Player offer their advice on these issues and others, and what can be done to address them.

Supply and demand

2008 marks the third consecutive year more U.S. golf courses closed than opened. The NGF reports 72 18-hole courses opened in 2008, the lowest

number in 20 years. The NGF said there were 106 closures last year. In 2007, the NGF estimates 121.5 18-hole courses closed while 113 opened. In 2006, 146 shut down and 119.5 opened.

"I don't think closing golf courses is a good thing for the industry," Palmer says. "But I guess that's the reality of the world we live in."

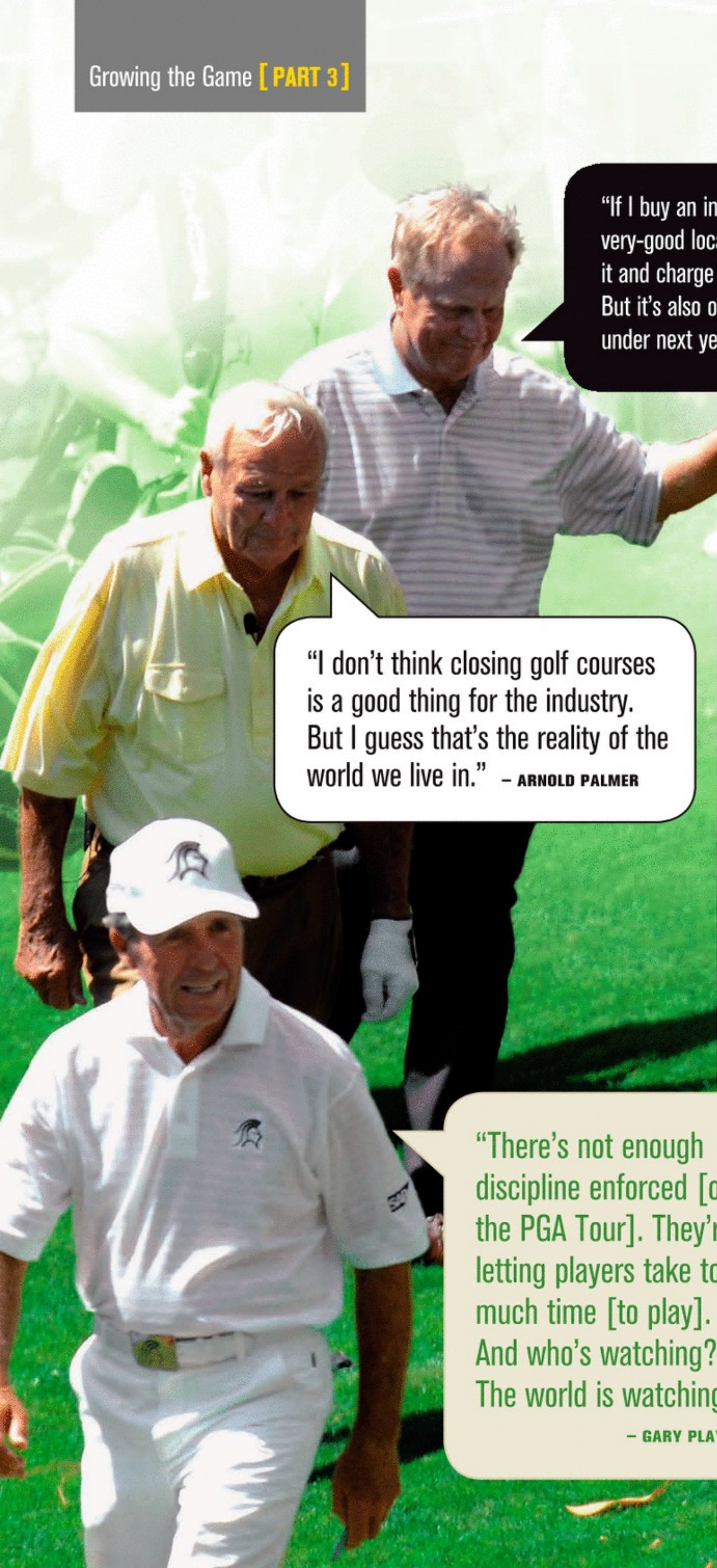
Palmer doesn't deny the courses closed because there aren't enough golfers to support them. He says courses should be built in areas where they'll be supported and, ultimately, successful.

"Given the right situation, we will recover from this and get back to where we should make sure golf courses are used [resourcefully] in an area," Palmer says.

Nicklaus, who says 95 percent of his design business is currently outside the United States, believes most courses that have closed the past three years are the result of "ill-conceived projects." He also says some of the courses that closed were "decent projects" that could open again in the future.

"But the ones that were ill-conceived — poor golf course, poor location and poor facility — might not

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reopen,” Nicklaus adds. “And maybe that’s good.”

“Good” because today’s golfers are smart enough to know the good facilities from the bad ones, and they won’t play the bad ones, Nicklaus adds.

“You just can’t go find an old field some place, cut the grass and expect people to flock to it to play,” he says.

As far as new construction, Player suggests American developers build facilities that include more than golf courses so the entire family can enjoy them. “We have to change the whole concept of golf,” he says.

Player points to his 12,000-acre ranch in South Africa as an example. It includes far more activities than any American country club. Player’s ranch not only includes a golf course, tennis courts and a swimming pool, it also includes farm animals, a fishing hole, mountain climbing and motorcycle riding, among other activities.

Player’s idea is that while the men of the family play golf, the women and children can partake in the other activities. While his plan doesn’t cater to getting more women and children involved in playing golf, it at least places family members together at the same facility — which Player says is a better scenario than just the men leaving the house for several hours to play 18 holes. Player says the wives and children will have so much fun at the “new” club, they’ll want to go there whenever possible.

“The children will be asking, ‘Dad, can you take us to the golf course this weekend?’ ” Player says. “This is the thing of the future.”

Golf’s concept needs to change so the entire family can become part of the experience.

“We can’t keep going the way we’ve been going,” Player says.

The cost factor

Nicklaus, who has made millions playing golf, says he would never spend the \$495 it costs to play a round at the prestigious and picturesque Pebble Beach Golf Club.

“I won’t pay it,” he says.

Nicklaus could afford to play Pebble, but the fact he says he wouldn’t speaks volumes about how he views high green fees.

Golf’s cost, from green fees to Big Bertha drivers, is constantly debated. While the game has tried to shed its “white, rich man’s game” label, it hasn’t exactly done so.

How people feel about the game’s cost depends a lot on how much money they earn and where they live. High-end private clubs in upscale neighborhoods cost thousands to join and play, and have mostly wealthy members. Resort places like Pebble Beach also cost a pretty penny to play. But there’s a large portion of golf courses whose greens fees are economical for many people when one considers the median, peak-season weekend golf rate at an 18-hole nonresort public facility is \$42 (with golf car), according to the NGF.

Nicklaus says new golf courses don’t have to be the most expensive facilities in the world. That said, as an architect, Nicklaus will give an owner what he wants.

“My philosophy has always been if an owner comes to us and he has \$1 million to build a golf course, he gets the course for a \$1 million,” Nicklaus says. “If an owner has \$20 million to spend, he gets the course for \$20 million. But it’s his budget, not my budget. It’s our job to produce the best facility possible for whatever amount of money [the owner] has to spend.”

Reducing the game’s cost would help attract more players, but it’s not as easy as it sounds for some courses and clubs, Palmer says. Their prices are high because their costs are high, and that includes the cost of maintenance.

“It certainly sounds very attractive, but how do you reduce costs at the same time if your [course] is not able to pay the bills?” Palmer asks. “It’s something you have to look at carefully.”

Player believes increased maintenance costs are driving up green fees, and that has to stop if the game is to grow with new players.

“People stop playing because [the game] is too expensive,” he says.

Player contends “people would be astounded” at the numbers if the top 100 U.S. golf courses revealed in a survey their “true” maintenance costs.

Player is also an advocate of shorter courses, saying longer courses also have driven up maintenance costs because there’s more acreage to maintain. Player stresses golf courses can reduce their

water use to reduce costs. He calls over-irrigation an unnecessary maintenance.

Nicklaus says it could be difficult to lower the green fees at some clubs considering their costs of doing business.

“There are a lot of facilities where the cost of golf, generally speaking, is based on what you’re putting into the facility and what you need to get for a return,” he says. “If I buy an inexpensive piece of property in a not-very-good location, put a not-very-good golf course on it and charge \$20, then, yeah, it’s very affordable golf. But it’s also one of those courses that’s going to go under next year.”

Speeding up slow play

Many people don’t play golf because they don’t want to spend five or six hours on a course. Pace of play continues to be detrimental to the game’s growth.

Televised PGA Tour events, which often show players playing painfully slow, haven’t helped matters because the people watching at home tend to imitate the players. Consider that somebody somewhere is doing his best impression of Sergio Garcia — grip, regrip, grip, regrip. ... But this is no charade. This person, having watched Garcia play on television, wants to be like him on the golf course. Unfortunately, the only thing the person is doing is slowing down play for people behind him.

Palmer and Player have a problem with the pace of players on the PGA Tour. Their message is the same: If

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[ABOUT THIS SERIES] “Growing the Game” is *Golfdom*’s quarterly series – now in its fourth year – that focuses on how the golf industry can attract more players to generate more rounds. In addition to this installment featuring the Big Three’s views on growing the game, we’ve also explored the impact women, minorities, disabled golfers and baby boomers can have on increasing play. We’ve also talked to golf course architects about ways they can make the game more friendly, and we’ve highlighted creative marketing programs used to attract new golfers. The next installment of the series appears in November. Visit our archives at www.golfdom.com to view the “**Growing the Game**” series.

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the pros speed up their games, the Joe and Jane Golfers of the world will do the same.

“This is something [the industry] needs to look at very seriously and concentrate on,” Palmer says, noting golfers need to be encouraged to play faster.

Player is bolder in suggesting ways to speed up the game, noting the PGA Tour must take action now to help speed up play

“There’s not enough discipline enforced [on the tour],” he says. “They’re letting them take too much time. And

who’s watching? The world is watching.”

If it was up to Player, a time limit would be introduced to professional play: A foursome would have four hours and 40 minutes to complete their rounds. And if they don’t finish in time?

“Each player would get a two-shot penalty,” Player says.

Part of the problem with pace of play is green speed, which also has its problems rooted in the PGA Tour. Should Joe and Jane Golfer putt on greens with the same speed as the pros?

“My humble answer to that ques-

tion is to find an average speed everybody is comfortable with,” Palmer says. “In my humble thinking that would be around a nine.”

The fear factor

Many adults new to the game are reluctant to take it up simply because they’re afraid they’ll fail. Palmer says new players should take a glass-is-half-full approach to the game. A message needs to be conveyed that golf is an enjoyable experience in a picturesque setting, not necessarily a good walked spoiled.

“It’s also about being with your friends and [getting some] exercise,” Palmer says. “All of these things should help [new players] overcome the fear factor.”

Perhaps the fear factor could be offset if the game is introduced to people at an earlier age, like when they’re children. Player is an advocate of getting golf in the schools through clinics. And he says PGA players need to play a role in the process by going to the schools and talking to the children about golf’s benefits. “We need to get children to understand this wonderful game,” he says.

Once the children are taught the game in schools, local golf facilities should offer them a time window to play for free one time during the week, Player adds.

The PGA and LPGA tours should get children involved in tournaments, Player says. He suggests the tours select academic-achieving students from cities at each tournament stop to walk golfers to the tees to begin their rounds. The exposure would be magnificent for the tours and participating children, not to mention the game itself.

“Can you imagine a young boy holding Tiger Woods’ hand and taking him to the first tee?” Player asks.

Player’s plan is definitely a different approach to growing the game.

That said, it’s exactly the type of plan the game needs — now. ■

JACK: Arnold Brought More Than His Game to Golf

This isn’t the first time Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus appeared together on the cover of *Golfdom*. In 1962 — 47 years ago — a 32-year-old Palmer and a 22-year-old Nicklaus graced *Golfdom*’s cover.

The two men, along with Gary Player, are credited with popularizing golf throughout the world. The Big Three’s great play brought tremendous media attraction to the sport. But Nicklaus credits the elder Palmer with bringing more to golf than just his game.

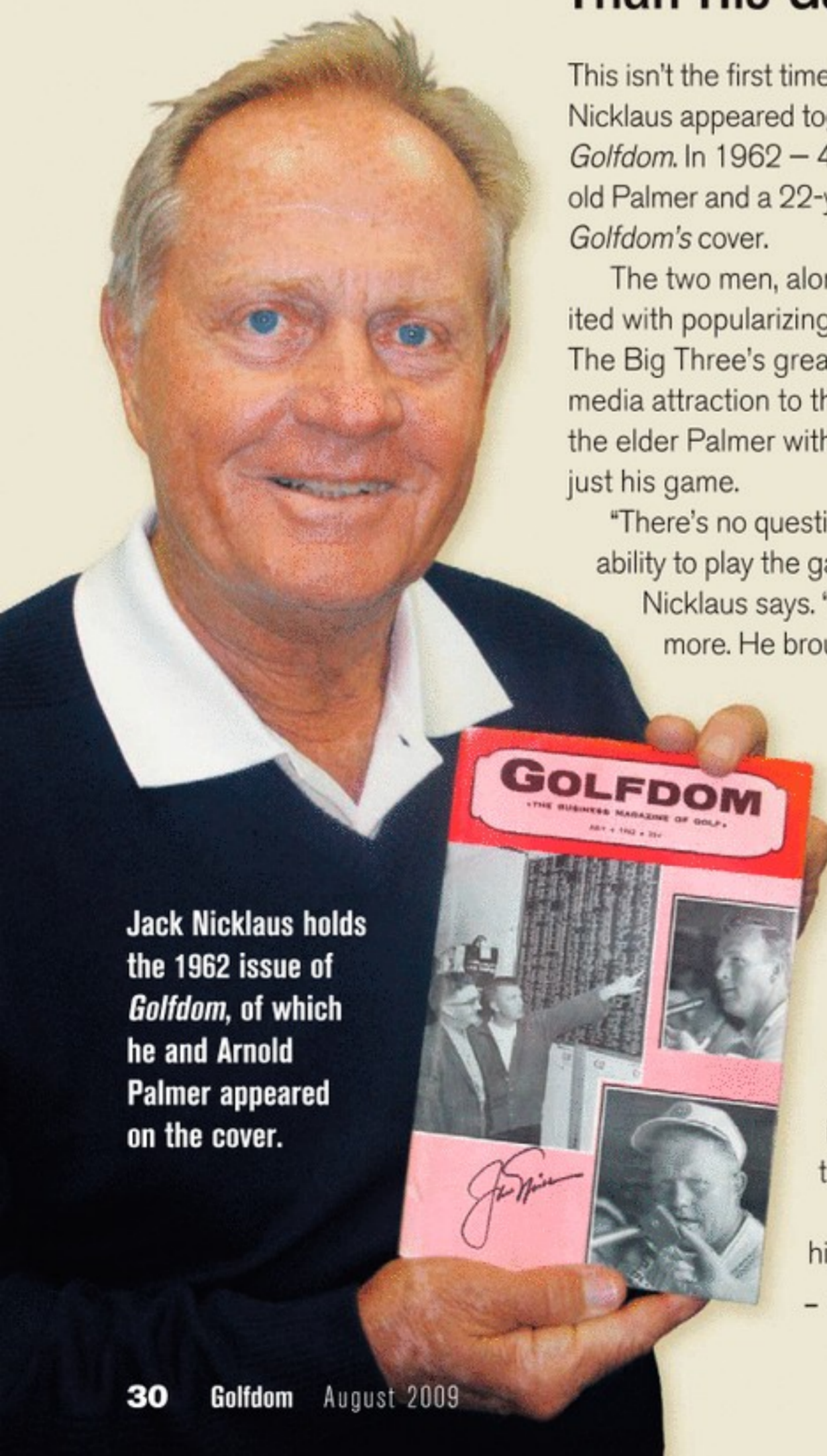
“There’s no question about his record and his ability to play the game; he was very good at that,” Nicklaus says. “But he obviously brought a lot more. He brought flair to the game.”

And Palmer brought an army of fans, otherwise known as Arnie’s Army. Nicklaus credits Palmer with “sort of inventing TV golf.”

“He really didn’t [invent it], but a lot of people would think that,” Nicklaus says. “He was there at the right time ... and his flair and charisma was something that was really very important to the game during that time period.

“He brought more than just his golf game.”

— Larry Aylward



Jack Nicklaus holds the 1962 issue of *Golfdom*, of which he and Arnold Palmer appeared on the cover.