

RECALLING A MOST *Masterful Win*

IN 1986, age 46 seemed older than it does today.

Don't think so? Consider this. When Jack Nicklaus won the Masters that year at age 46, didn't it seem like one of the greatest accomplishments of all-time? Didn't we consider it perhaps his greatest major victory, winning a green jacket at the lofty old age of 46?

In 2011, 46 just doesn't quite carry the same mystique that it did 25 years ago. Vijay Singh was 48 at this year's Masters, and the notion that he could have won another green jacket in 2011 wasn't too far-fetched, even though he missed the cut. And how about Freddie Couples? Freddie turned 51 last October and was among the leaders after two days, finishing at a tie for 15th. Steve Stricker is 44 and at the top of his game.

Why the change of perspective? Just look to Tom Watson's miraculous British Open run at Turnberry two years ago, when at the tender age of 59 he was one little nine-foot putt away from

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What were you doing 25 years ago when Nicklaus had his most memorable win?

By Ron Furlong,
Contributing Editor

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A Masterful Masters



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hoisting the Claret Jug one last time. Watson raised the bar for all of those considered past their prime.

But let's turn the clock back 25 years. In 1986, it was a big deal. Nicklaus truly did defy all odds when he walked away wearing the green jacket that year.

The fact that it was Jack Nicklaus who did it added to the mystique. Had he been a lesser known golfer, his victory probably wouldn't have felt the same. But this was Nicklaus. The greatest golfer of all-time. It was truly magical.

In his new book, "One For The Ages," author Tom Clavin recounts the 50th Masters in vivid detail.

Clavin tells how *Golfweek* writer James Achenbach recalled that before the Masters that year, "Nobody was picking Nicklaus." Achenbach said, "I remember throwing \$10 into a Masters pool and watching with curiosity as Nicklaus remained unselected until one of the late rounds."

My own memory of that Masters was that I felt similar to Achenbach. I was a big Tom Watson fan and gave Nicklaus little chance. I was 21 in 1986, and I remember that although I watched the occasional major championship now and then, I was far from being hooked on the sport. That would change after that weekend.

The superintendent

Being the golf course superintendent at Augusta National carries with it a certain honor that only an elite few in this business will ever achieve. It might just be the top position a superintendent can reach. And being the superintendent at Augusta National in 1986 must have been even more special, thanks to that magical run by Nicklaus.

The man who holds that honor is none other than Billy Fuller, who was the superintendent at Augusta National from 1981

to 1986. In the early '80s, it was Fuller who was credited with the smooth transition of Augusta's greens from Bermudagrass to bentgrass. And he knew Nicklaus even before he made his memorable run at the '86 Masters.

"I got to know Jack really well prior to my going to Augusta National," Fuller told me, "when he and Bob Cupp designed Turtle Point at Kiawah Island, where I was then director of golf maintenance. Once I got to Augusta, that relationship continued."

"Jack always came in a week before the tournament to practice. Typically he would climb in the cart with me sometime during that week to look at various tree limbs that he recommended be pruned."

Fuller said that before the 1986 tournament even began, Nicklaus felt like he could win it. That was despite the fact that



No. 15 at Augusta National,
a 530-yard par 5 over water.
Nicklaus eagled the hole in
1986 with a 12-foot putt.

he hadn't won a major since the 1980 PGA Championship six years earlier, and he hadn't won a green jacket in 11 years.

"Before talking with him that year," Fuller said, "I had watched him play the course three days in a row and noticed how well he was playing. As we parted ways after looking at a couple limbs, I said to him, 'Jack, you are playing well enough to win.' He looked at me as only Jack can and stated, 'I wouldn't be competing if I didn't think I could win.' Of course, the rest is history."

The first two rounds

The '86 Masters was the 50th Masters ever played. After the first round there was no reason for anyone to think history was about to be made. Nicklaus shot an uninspiring 74 and was already six shots off the pace.

On Friday, Nicklaus fared a little better, shooting a -1 round of 71. But he still had no sniff of the leaderboard.

Before the tournament began, Tom McCollister wrote in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that Nicklaus was "done, washed up, through."

Nicklaus admitted the article ignited him a bit.

"I kept thinking all week, 'Through, washed up, huh?'" he said later. "I sizzled for a while. But then I said to myself, 'I'm not going to quit now, playing the way I'm playing. I've played too well for too long to let a shorter period of bad golf be my last.'"

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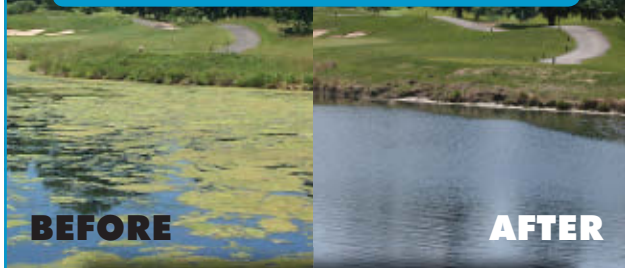
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Billy Fuller, former superintendent of Augusta National, now works as a golf course designer.

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The weekend

Nicklaus began to turn it around on Saturday, Moving Day at Augusta. He posted a 69 to get within five shots of the lead. But Nicklaus received very little attention as he teed up for the final round on Sunday.

Nicklaus' old rival Tom Watson was among the players ahead of Jack on the leaderboard. Watson, 24 years later, recalled in “One For The Ages” that he didn't doubt Nicklaus could pull it off.

“That night, I saw no reason why Jack couldn't do it, even at 46 years old,” he said. “Especially at Augusta National. No reason at all.”

Sunday dawned slightly overcast and warm, with no wind. Fuller followed Nicklaus around the front nine.

“As he made his way to Amen Corner I headed back to the shop to be prepared for a playoff if necessary,” Fuller said.

Too bad for him, because Amen Corner is where the magic started for Nicklaus. After staying even par for the day through the first 8 holes, Nicklaus promptly birdied 9, 10 and 11 to thrust himself onto the leaderboard.

The roars began.

“I sat in front of the TV (at the maintenance shop) as he marched through one of the greatest back nine holes of any championship,” Fuller said. “I just remember the roars being so deafening as they rose through the valley.”

Golfweek's Achenbach wrote: “The ground felt like it was moving. It was a surreal experience. I half expected the trees to bow down in homage to Nicklaus.”

Nicklaus birdied the 13th then sank a 12-foot putt on 15 for an eagle that put him within two of the lead. The place went crazy.

On 16, Nicklaus had another birdie. As the famous story

goes, Nicklaus hit his tee shot and his son Jackie, who was his caddie that week, told the ball as it was in flight to “be right, be right.” Nicklaus, without looking at the shot, picked up his tee, handed his club to his son with a wink and said, “It is.”

It is the image on the next hole, the 17th, that sticks the most in the minds of those who witnessed it. Nicklaus, putter raised to the sky as he watched his 18-foot birdie putt fall in. A par on the 18th gave him a 30 for the back nine, a record at the time. He played the final 10 holes 7-under.

Nicklaus held off the likes of Greg Norman, Tom Kite, Seve Ballesteros, Tom Watson and Nick Price. Not bad.

A place in history

It was Nicklaus’ final major championship. In fact, it was his final victory on the regular tour.

Sports columnist Tom Boswell summed it up best by saying, “Some things cannot possibly happen, because they

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are both too improbable and too imperfect.... Jack Nicklaus cannot shoot 65 to win the Masters at age 46.”

I firmly believe Nicklaus’ magical win at Augusta was the primary reason I not only became a huge fan of the game but also was drawn to a career in the golf course field. Two years after the 1986 Masters I was working on my first golf course, and 23 years after that I’m still on the golf course. Thanks, Jack.

For Billy Fuller, the ’86 tournament was to be his swan song at the famed course. Following the ’86 Masters he joined Bob Cupp in the design business.

Fuller shared one final thought on his last days as Augusta’s superintendent.

“It was very special for me that my parting memory was Jack slipping on his sixth green jacket in what will always be remembered as one of the greatest wins in golf.” ■

Furlong, a contributing editor to Golfdom, is superintendent of Avalon Golf Club in Burlington, Wash.

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