



Jack Nicklaus
Gary Player
Tom Watson
Press Conference
Thursday, April 9, 2026

THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and what a great morning it is. I am delighted to be joined by Honorary Starters and Legendary Masters champions, Mr. Jack Nicklaus, Mr. Gary Player, and Mr. Tom Watson.

Thank you to all three of you for officially starting the 90th Masters Tournament and joining us in the interview room.

Each of you has a vast trove of memories from 140 collective Masters and 37 Honorary Starter ceremonies. The following question, please. What came to mind when Chairman Ridley introduced you and you once again heard and felt the patrons' excitement and admiration? Please start with Jack Nicklaus.

JACK NICKLAUS: It's always nice to have Fred introduce you and everything, and I walked up to the tee, and I said, well, I'll have Jackie tee the ball up so I don't fall over. I said spread out on both sides because I don't want to kill anybody. If it had been a little closer, I might have.

I got it high enough to hit it about 110 yards over their heads on the left. I don't know what was running through my mind other than not hurt anybody, Rob. But it's always a great privilege and an honor to do that and start off the Masters.

It's a great place and a great place to be. I've been doing it for a few years now. So it's pretty special.

TOM WATSON: When I first played the Masters as an amateur in 1970, I teed off early in the morning, playing with Doug Ford. I went to the Honorary Starters, and it was something very special. I continued to do that when I teed off early in the tournament when I was playing regularly.

I remember seeing Gene Sarazen tee off, Sam Snead, Arnold Palmer, Jack, and Gary. It was something very special. I thought it was just part of the aura of the tournament, and I wanted to witness it.

GARY PLAYER: First of all, getting to the 1st tee with the enthusiasm of all the people, which is an essential ingredient in life, I think, enthusiasm, the love they give you out there is quite remarkable.

Funny enough how your mind goes back very quickly, and I thought of President Eisenhower, who I admired so much, who was a member of this club which started it off, how much I love coming back here every year of my life, an integral part of my life, and such a fantastic tournament.

I think the word, as you get older, is gratitude. Just to be able to be on that 1st tee is an honor.

Q. Mr. Nicklaus, as someone who is one of three golfers to have won the Masters back to back, what is the key to doing that, and do you think Rory McIlroy could do it this year?

JACK NICKLAUS: Well, the key obviously is to win two years in a row. That's the first thing. I think Rory is the only one that's got a chance to do that this year (laughter).

What is the key to doing it? I played -- when I was here in '65, I broke a tournament record and shot 271. I don't think -- when we came back the next year, I remember Gary going to Mr. Roberts and saying, Mr. Roberts, the fairways are much longer this year. He said, Hit nothing but fliers, and the greens are like rocks.

And Mr. Roberts said, Well, the greens are cut exactly the same as they were.

Well, they weren't, but that's what he said. I don't know.

Anyway, I shot 288 that year, and I won in a playoff. You had totally different conditions, and that's what you put up with. If you're going to win two years in a row, you'll find conditions you like and maybe you don't find conditions you like, but you've got to adjust to both of those. I was fortunate enough to be able to do that.

I think Rory is talented enough to be able to play it. Rory's got the monkey off his back, and I think he has a very, very good chance to repeat.

Q. Gary, you're 90 this year. The wisdom of 90, I'm wondering, looking back on your life, if you could do it all over again, if you would do anything differently?

GARY PLAYER: Absolutely nothing. I was brought up basically in a hobo jungle, had a lot of adversity in my life, and through this wonderful game of golf -- sir. And I've had the opportunity to travel more miles than any human being ever through golf. What it's done for me, I never go to bed one night of my whole life without saying a prayer of thanks. Thank you is a small word with a significant meaning.

I wouldn't change anything.

Q. Mr. Player, you played your first Masters in 1957, I believe. I'm just thinking back to that time. Could you have imagined what this tournament and this week and this event have turned into back when you first played it?

GARY PLAYER: Well, this is my 68th visit here, and you think how this tournament has evolved. At one stage I said I thought the Masters was the fourth most important of the four majors, and people were offended by that, but there was a reason.

When I was a young man, we stood there -- I'm sure Jack, I don't know about Tom because he's a lot younger than us, but when we stood there, we'd say this is a putt for the British Open or Jack would have said this is a putt for the U.S. Open. The Masters was just coming along. They've evolved faster than any other tournament. It's one of the greatest events in the world. It's one of the most beautiful places historically, and there's nothing but admiration for what they've done.

Every year you come here, you're absolutely in awe. Buildings that would take years to build, they do in nine months. It's quite remarkable. It's now inundated with history, and it will go even from more strength to strength in the future.

Q. Jack, it's the 40th anniversary of '86, and I was wondering, we talk about when someone wins their first major or certainly their first Masters, it changes their life. I'm wondering if and how, if it did, how did winning your last one change your life?

JACK NICKLAUS: Well, I don't know whether it changed my life, but it was a nice way to finish a career, you might say, particularly here at Augusta, a place I loved throughout all the years.

I remember coming here at 19 and being invited down to Bobby Jones' cabin. My father and I were invited down.

Through the years of the respect I had for Jones and his game and what he meant to the game, and it looked like I was pretty much done with playing golf when I won the U.S. Open and PGA in 1980, and I really wasn't, you might say, expecting to win anymore.

All of a sudden, I found a little lightning in the bottle, and it was kind of fun to find that. At 46 I have my son Jackie on the bag, and my mother, my sister come to the Masters for the first time since 1959, all very special circumstances. It had been a lot, as it relates to that.

I think to a lot of people it sort of -- I don't know if the word is verified my career, I suppose. Is that the correct word? I don't know. But it was a way that -- it gained some career-ending respect, I suppose, for that and for me too. I couldn't have been more thrilled obviously.

Q. Chairman Ridley said yesterday that failure is not an option regarding the length of the golf ball, and I know that all three of you have some thoughts on that as they come to a conclusive decision here in the next several months and years. I'm just wondering what your thoughts are now as this technology is now guys hitting par-5s in two, par-4s in one, and it just keeps growing and growing. I know I'm not supposed to say all three of you, but if you would allow them all to say something, please.

TOM WATSON: I'm in agreement with the move to reduce the distance to the golf ball. How far that is removed is a question.

I know when we started playing on the TOUR with the balata and wound golf balls, many of them are like eggs. You'd hit a golf ball, and it would waver in the air. Today's modern golf balls, they're all good. With the event of Titleist's Pro V1 in 2001, the game changed because everybody then produced golf balls that conformed to the USGA standards but went further.

You add the equipment, the large-headed drivers, and you also have to add the fact that the players are stronger, and they work out, and they create more club head speed.

Where do you draw the line on the distance is the real question? But I do believe it should be drawn back.

GARY PLAYER: I believe the ball should be cut back 60 yards, only for professional golf. Leave everyone to golf as it is. They're the heart of the game, but professional golf is not. With regard to professional golf, cut the ball back 60 yards.

It's a tragedy. We got away from the concept of golf when it started originally, a par-5, a par-4, and a par-3. There is no such thing as a par-5 in the world today. We saw Rory with a 7-iron last year when he won the Masters, they're hitting 8-irons and 7-irons to par-5s.

Now I remember Jack, who's as long as anybody playing golf today other than DeChambeau, at the 3rd hole is vivid in my mind. He used to hit a driver and a wedge, and now they drive over the green.

We were in our infancy. We've never had a big man play golf of note. Wait until LeBron James comes out, Michael Jordan, and they are because incentivization is so great. There's so much money that people around the world are exercising and going to the gym, which originally I was criticized and condemned for doing that. They're lifting weights now. They'll drive the 1st green here very easily. They're going to be driving many, many par-4s. So where are we going?

Here's the crucial thing. The amount of money that we're spending around the world probably rates to \$100 million. Whatever the figure is, it's exorbitant. They're putting that money into making golf courses longer. We're running out of water in the world, fertilization, machinery is so expensive, labor, oil, whatever cost you want to put in there. Where are we going? That money is being wasted, or if they cut the ball back, we don't have to make these changes.

Look what they've done here. It's amazing when you think what this golf course used to play and what it plays now. That money could be allocated to African American areas where they need to be able to play golf and encourage them to play golf, for schools, for hospitals. We're just wasting the money. That's the crucial thing for me.

I don't know where we go. What's going to happen in 30 years' time is going to be beyond one's imagination.

JACK NICKLAUS: I first went to the USGA in 1977 when the Titleist came out with the big (indiscernible) golf ball, I saw it went further. They said, eh, you don't know what you're talking about.

But in 1995, when they first brought out the composite golf balls -- the golf ball from 1930 to about 1995, the golf ball probably increased maybe 5 or 6 yards just through the skill of the manufacturer to make it more consistent and better. From 1995 to 2005, the ball increased about 50 yards. That was just through them being able to circumvent the rules and what they are and allow the ball to go further.

Now, obviously, what does that do? That makes everything -- Gary and Tom are both very accurate at what they're saying about what's going on. The golf ball needs to be reined in. What they're doing right now is throwing a deck chair off the Titanic, and it's not getting enough done. It needs to really come back.

I know a lot of people don't like that, but I think Gary is absolutely right. It's land costs, water, fertilization, the cost to play the game of golf, the time it takes to play -- all those things are factors in why the golf ball needs to come back.

Now, the program that they have, as I understand it, will amount to about 12 yards for maybe a Rory McIlroy. It will amount to you all out there less than a yard. It really isn't going to affect you very much, but it will affect the pros a little bit. That's a little bit close to the bifurcation that Gary was talking about.

My feeling is that they're never going to bring it back to the level they need to bring it back to. Bobby Jones and his -- I don't know which book it was, one of his last books, he wrote in and he said, the biggest danger we have in the game of golf today is how far the golf ball goes and where it may go. Now, that's back 1930 sometime, and it really hasn't changed.

So we need to really -- it needs to come back just for the sake of the game and preservation. Augusta's had the ability to be able to go buy part of another golf course to lengthen the 13th hole.

TOM WATSON: It's right there (indicating).

JACK NICKLAUS: Who could afford that? If there's anyplace else that could afford that, and it's not necessary. The 13th hole is one of the great holes in the game of golf if the ball went the right distance without having to change it.

GARY PLAYER: I will say the trouble is, if this does occur, being such a litigious society, there's going to be lawsuits. I'm sure the R&A and the USGA don't want to be involved in that because these lawsuits last for years and years and years. I'm sure they don't want to cut the ball back.

Bobby Jones was so wise that 30, 40 years ago he said this.

Q. Tom, as the last winning American captain in the Ryder Cup on European soil, who do you think should be captain (indiscernible) that Tiger is out of the equation? And as a follow-up, would you like to be in Luke Donald's shoes as he goes for the unprecedented hat trick of wins?

TOM WATSON: It comes down to the team and how they play. That determines who wins and who loses the Ryder Cup. Captain is certainly a part of that, but you put the onus on the players themselves.

This last Ryder Cup, it was an amazing event for three days. The first two days, it was a whitewash, and the last day it almost became another whitewash to the other way. The competition is based on the players. The players perform, you win. If they don't perform, you lose.

The captain can do so much, but it really goes down to the players. As far as who should be the Ryder Cup captain, that's really out of my arena. I don't really have much of an opinion on that.

Basically, the captain is there to organize, create the teams -- that's the most important job of the captain -- and to be there when it's necessary to say something to the player. That's the job of the captain. As far as who should be the captain, that's not in my arena.

Q. In 1998, a year after Tiger set the record here, you almost won this tournament at age 58. Did the fact that you finished ahead of Tiger on the leaderboard that year mean something to you, and if so, why?

JACK NICKLAUS: You say I finished ahead of Tiger on the leaderboard?

Q. Yes, you did.

JACK NICKLAUS: Nice going, Jack.

(Laughter).

But I didn't win the tournament, no.

Q. You and Tiger are always going to be compared historically, so did it have meaning in that context for you?

JACK NICKLAUS: I never thought about it until you asked about it. Would it have a meaning? No, not really. To me, wherever you finish in the tournament is really not that important unless you win.

I finished second 19 times in majors. To me, I just kick myself for finishing 19 times. I should have won some of those.

TOM WATSON: That's a good thing.

JACK NICKLAUS: What was that?

TOM WATSON: It's a good thing you finished second 19 times.

JACK NICKLAUS: It actually was a good thing, but I didn't like it.

(Laughter).

Anyway, I don't think it's important too much about that. It wouldn't have entered my mind.

The last time that I played with Tiger in 2000 at Louisville at the Valhalla. We played the first two rounds together, and after playing with him for two rounds when he was in the prime of his career, I said, I should have passed the baton a long time ago. He was pretty good. He was really good. And I was really bad.

(Laughter.)

Q. Mr. Nicklaus, it's a very special ceremony that you all take part of this morning, and I know Sam Snead played as long as he could till the end on that 1st tee, and Byron Nelson chose to -- he said it was too hard to get ready for that one shot every year, and he retired from that role. What are your thoughts, do you expect to keep coming here year after year and playing as long as you can?

JACK NICKLAUS: Well, I don't know. I think that I was a little worried I had -- I had carpal tunnel surgery about five, six weeks ago, and I was worried about being able to hold onto the golf club and hurt somebody. That was my issue today.

I'm fortunate that I got it over somebody's head. I didn't hit it very well, but I got it over their heads and didn't hurt anybody. As long as I can still hit the golf ball. I played once this year, I played in February. I played once last year. I don't really play golf anymore.

But it's such a nice ceremony, and it's a real honor to be invited. I hope to be able to do it as long as I can not kill anybody.

(Laughter.)

Q. Mr. Watson, if you could make one change to one hole on this course, what would it be and why?

TOM WATSON: I'd fill in the creek in front of No. 12.

(Laughter.)

GARY PLAYER: Touché.

JACK NICKLAUS: Good move.

TOM WATSON: That's the critical hole on the golf course, to be honest with you, and I think everybody in this room understands that.

JACK NICKLAUS: How many times you ever hit it in the water?

TOM WATSON: Don't brag that you only hit the water once, right?

JACK NICKLAUS: I did once, that's right.

TOM WATSON: I've hit it more than one time, Jack.

(Laughter.)

JACK NICKLAUS: I just asked the question.

TOM WATSON: I didn't count how many times I hit it in the water, but it was too many times.

JACK NICKLAUS: That's all right.

GARY PLAYER: It's a great example for golf architects to realize you don't have to make the holes all that long. That's an 8-iron, and it's crippled more people than polio. This hole, it's really some hole. The most miracle of all time, when Fred Couples stuck on the bank. If you think of everybody, look what happened when Tiger won the last time. Three guys came along with double bogeys.

And how about Jordan Spieth?

TOM WATSON: It's a great hole.

GARY PLAYER: Jordan Spieth might have hurt his career, a 70. He might have had a four- or five-shot lead going into that hole. I think the secret of that hole is always to -- funny enough, Bobby Jones said this to me, make your pin at the back of the green, and there's a lot of merit to that.

I knocked it in the hole from the bunker one year. You can't knock it in from the water unless you've got a helluva underwater stroke.

Q. This is for anyone who has an opinion on it. The major championship schedule has been condensed to within about 100 or so days to make way for the FedExCup playoffs and some years for the Olympics. Do you all have -- does anybody have a view on whether that's a little bit too tight of a window to play four majors within such a short span of time?

JACK NICKLAUS: You want me to handle it to start with?

I don't like it that short, but I'll tell you what has happened, if you look at the four tournaments, the Masters weather always plays a factor -- wind, cold, whatever it might be. You went to the U.S. Open in June, generally speaking, weather always played a factor. You went to the Open Championship in Scotland or England, the weather always played a factor. You came back to the PGA Championship in August, and the weather was very benign.

By moving the PGA Championship to May, all of a sudden we have weather becoming part of that too. So all four championships can be determined a large time by whatever can happen with the weather. I think that's a good thing.

However, I'd love to see them spread a little bit more only because it really concentrates too much emphasis on too short a period of time, and there's too many other tournaments that are good tournaments that can sort of get shut out because of that.

THE MODERATOR: Tom, would you like to share an opinion on that?

TOM WATSON: No.

THE MODERATOR: Mr. Player?

GARY PLAYER: My father was -- to make a living, he had to leave school at 15 to support family. The only job he could get at that stage was a gold mine, in which he went down for 30 years 8,000 feet every week of his life. He loved golf, and I remember saying, Dad, what do you think I should do to fill out my schedule?

He said, Son, remember this, it's in the mind. He said, If I could play golf every week of my life, I wouldn't take a week off, compared to what I'm doing now.

So we do get spoiled. I think we get spoiled to a great degree. How many people in the world can have the opportunity of making tens of millions of dollars and being fussy about it?

(Laughter.)

Q. Jack, just curious if you had a message for Tiger with everything that he's going through at the moment? Tom, if I may, I'm curious to get your thoughts on Brooks Koepka returning to the PGA TOUR and Patrick Reed seeking the same reinstatement, and your thoughts on PGA TOUR and LIV Golf at the moment.

JACK NICKLAUS: I'm getting part of it, and part of it I lost in your accent. Something about Tiger?

Q. Did you have a message for Tiger at the moment with everything he's going through?

JACK NICKLAUS: Just whatever you need to help you and get back, because I think golf needs him, and we'd love to have him back.

Q. Tom, just your thoughts on Brooks Koepka?

TOM WATSON: The TOUR made a decision to renege on what they promised when the players left for LIV. They felt that the compensation that he's paid is good enough.

I thought the LIV players, when they left, they were supposed to be banned for life. If I was commissioner, that's what I would do. I'd say if you're finished with your contract with LIV Golf, if you want to play the PGA TOUR again, you come back, and you must play the Korn Ferry Tour for a year to qualify for it.

They saw it differently. When the players left, they violated the number one rule that we really had out here, which is to protect the sponsors. Sponsors need players. They need the names to be able to promote their tournaments. If the players play wherever they want to play without a conflicting event rule, where you had to seek the permission of the PGA TOUR to play in a tournament opposite of a PGA TOUR tournament, the sponsors would be hurt by that. I think

we all understood that.

When the players left for LIV, I think it was basically over. They chose to go for the money, which is fine, but to return to the TOUR, I thought, was a nonstarter, but apparently it's not.

Q. Similar question to Gary. If Tiger Woods were to come to you for advice right now, what would you tell him?

GARY PLAYER: You know, it's very easy, the human being is so critical of everything. If I or any of you in this room had the pain that Tiger Woods had -- think of the excruciating pain that this man has been going through for a long time.

I personally think in my opinion -- if I'm right or wrong, I'm sorry -- but he was trying to be a Navy SEAL scout for a while. Funny enough, I had a friend who was a Navy SEAL scout. He said this long ago. He said Tiger will really suffer in future with his back and with his legs. Look what's happened? I think it's 20 operations on either the back or the legs, but many, many operations on his leg and his back. So he's in pain.

Do I blame him for taking medicine? Hell, no. He has sleep deprivation. Do I blame him for taking something to help him sleep? No. But I don't think he should drive a car. When you're taking that medicine, it's dangerous when you're driving a car, same as it's dangerous when you look at your cell phone in the car. There's 6,000 accidents a day in motor cars.

So I think all he's got to do is just not drive a car and get a chauffeur. My reflexes, I think, are as good as when I was 20, but I don't drive anymore. I get a chauffeur. I think that's the answer to it.

But my heart goes out for him. There's nothing worse than living in pain every day of your life. You can't think of anything worse. I just hope he can get it all sorted out because he's such an asset to golf and has done so much for the game.

There was never -- when we were young people, there were no Blacks playing the TOUR, guys. I remember going to Charlie Sifford in 1957, and I said, Mr. Sifford, how did you play today? He said, I'm not allowed to play, I'm Black. So I experienced Apartheid in South Africa and in America. Tiger comes along, and you realize what he does for the Black man around the world, you can never work out what he's done for golf. So my heart goes out for him.

Q. Jack, going back to 1986, anyone who watched that thinks it was the greatest Masters, if not the greatest tournament they've ever seen. I'm curious, where does it rank for you in your pantheon of Masters victories?

JACK NICKLAUS: Absolutely number one.

Q. How about overall?

JACK NICKLAUS: I don't know. Here I'm answering for myself. I don't know whether -- you get your own judgment from what it is. From my standpoint obviously, people think what was your favorite win? I love them all, but obviously '86 was the one that I wasn't expected to win. I was over the hill and the whole routine, and I won. So that was very special.

It happened to be the most special to me, absolutely. How does it go with everybody? Tom's got his special win, and I'm sure that Gary has his special win, and I'm sure Arnold had his special win and so forth.

Q. When the writer Dave Kindred, he covered the game for many years. Do you remember Dave? Dave missed one Masters in 52 years that he was coming here, and it was 1986. You heard about that later and wrote him a letter saying how much you admired that he chose to go to his son's wedding instead of come to the Masters. You wrote a lot of letters throughout your life. I'm wondering what motivated you to reach out and write letters to people like that, to Dave, to let them know that you appreciated that their values were sort of in line with yours?

JACK NICKLAUS: I don't know, I just sort of -- I see different things that happen to different people and different

things that go on. Some things move me to do things like that, and I do.

I think we all need to know that somebody cares about you and that it's -- a lot of that comes from the blessing that -- I know that both Gary and I have. Tom isn't quite as far along with as many grandchildren and great-grandchildren that we have, but you start to see all the different things and all the help they need and how they need to be mentored, you might say, in life and how you need to be a role model to them. Those are all things that are important.

When you have friends of yours that are doing different things, sometimes you think, hey, reach out and tell them how you feel.

THE MODERATOR: Mr. Player, any concluding thoughts for our press conference today?

GARY PLAYER: I think it's fantastic. Isn't it wonderful to be able to discuss all these things, particularly with two great champions like this who have contributed so much to the game. Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Mr. Watson, any concluding thoughts?

TOM WATSON: It's always a pleasure to be at the Masters. When I was a kid, I watched the Masters in '58, '60, '62, '64, and then this guy came along and beat my king right here.

JACK NICKLAUS: Sorry.

(Laughter.)

TOM WATSON: It was the beginning of golf in Kansas City, and the Masters Tournament came on, and it got you so pumped up for the game. It still does.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you so much. Well done once again. It is a joy and honor to be with you this morning.

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