

Breakfast with Jackie

A straight-shooting Texan shares his views on golf and golf courses.

BY JIM MOORE

In November 2007 at the Champions Golf Club in Houston, Texas, a two-hour meeting took place that will almost certainly help shape the careers of two young men. The principal participants in the meeting were Jackie Burke Jr., Charles Joachim, Brandon Mabry, and Travis Moore.

Compared to Jackie and Charles, Brandon and Travis (both in their early 20s) have just started their golf careers. Brandon is the assistant professional at Ridgewood Country Club, in Waco, Texas, while Travis is the golf course superintendent at the Twin Rivers Golf Club, also in Waco. Both have worked at numerous courses, starting from the bottom and gradually working their way up the ladder.

Charles Joachim developed his love for the game at age 15 on a golf course south of Houston. He played at the high school and college levels before injuries and schoolwork took precedence. While attending Texas A&M, he worked on turfgrass research plots and found a side of the game he had not considered before. Graduating in 1971, he began working on courses and eventually joined Jackie Burke's team at Champions Golf Club, where he has been the golf course superintendent for more than 20 years.

Jackie Burke Jr. is well known in the game of golf for a variety of reasons, not the least of which are his Masters and PGA Championship wins, playing on five Ryder Cup teams, and serving as captain of two more. He has received the PGA Tour Lifetime Achievement Award, the USGA's Bob Jones Award, and is a member of the World Golf Hall of Fame. This past year he received the PGA's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award. In spite of these accomplish-

ments, Burke may be best known for his love of the game of golf and his willingness to share his passion for the game with others.

Along with Jimmy Demaret, Jackie founded the Champions Golf Club and continues to operate the course to this day. Champions has the well-deserved reputation for being a club for serious golfers. Now 84, Jackie has not lost a step and continues to teach all aspects of the game to those fortunate enough to share his time. Predictably, Jackie has strong feelings about the management of golf courses. This article is a compilation of his opinions shared with the author during a recent meeting and in his book *It's Only a Game — Words of Wisdom from a Lifetime in Golf*.

ON BEING CONSIDERED A "PROFESSIONAL"

When it comes to working at a golf course, the term "pro" should stand for *promoter*, not *professional*. Whether you are the golf pro or the superintendent, your job is to promote the game and your club. You should do everything possible to promote people's love of the game. For the superintendent, come to the board meeting and explain what you're doing out there — don't hide in the barn. Get in here and get it on with these guys. How can they possibly outdo you when it comes to grass? There is no way. But you need to keep it simple so you don't come across as trying to shoot the board member down. You have to make them understand that there are 365 different golf courses out there — that a golf course is different every day. It can't possibly stay the same from day to day. That is part of the player's job — to adapt to the changes. The golf pro-

fessional's job is to teach the player the game. If you promote the game and your club, you will become a *professional*.

DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS FROM GOLFERS

The way you teach the game of golf is the way you should manage your affairs. The golf swing takes two seconds. You can't manage every aspect of those two seconds and try to control all of them. Instead, you have to learn to trust your swing. When it comes to your work, you have to be able to teach those you work for, and work with, to trust you. You can't manage whispering or bickering. You can't do much about petty complaints. Just concentrate on doing your job as best as you can. People will learn to trust you if you do.

WOULD YOU RECOMMEND YOUNG PEOPLE GO TO WORK IN GOLF?

I definitely recommend they do. But I also recommend they be a big-time part of their community. Be a member of a church. Be a coach in Little League. Be a participating member of your community. Also, you should know all the employees at your club. If they need help, be the guy who offers to help them out. And you have to remember it will never be perfect. If you spend too much time at the course, you will get to the point that you don't love the job anymore. It is extremely important that you love the game. Superintendents and golf professionals need to play golf and play it enough to love it. They need to compete. That is how you learn to love the game.



Since founding the Champions Golf Club (Houston, Texas) in 1957 with Jimmy Demaret, Jack Burke Jr. has remained a hands-on manager. He discusses his golf course management philosophy with Charles Joachim, Brandon Mabry, and Travis Moore (left to right).

GETTING THE GOLF PRO AND THE SUPERINTENDENT TO WORK BETTER TOGETHER

It is simply a matter of communications. They need to let each other know what the other is doing so they can help each other be successful. As a golf pro, I don't need to know about calcium sulfate, but I do need to know that our greens don't drain very well and that they are going to be wet in bad weather no matter what the superintendent does. The golf pro needs to let the superintendent know how the course is going to be used so there are no surprises. In our case, the three of us meet almost every day. All of our department heads meet regularly. And they all know a great deal about all aspects of the club operation so they better understand why certain things have to be done. No one is allowed to be isolated in their operation because every operation affects all the others.

DEALING WITH EMPLOYEES

Charles' employees are dedicated to him because he teaches them to do a good job. He explains things to them; he doesn't just order them around.

THE COST OF GOLF

Golf is expensive. Not everyone can afford this game. The biggest challenge we have is trying to present a facility that people will come and play, and yet keep it reasonably priced so that the young player will be able to come here and be a member. The equipment makes the golf courses play too short, so golf course builders produce back-breaking golf courses that cost a fortune to create and maintain. And golf costs more across the board, from drivers that cost \$700 to lessons costing \$300 an hour to balls that set you back \$50 for a dozen. Green fees are off the chart and joining a private club costs more than a college education. The standards for golf courses have gotten

ridiculous. We expect them to be perfect. Anything less than the Gardens of Babylon is unacceptable. This increases the cost of golf and puts tremendous pressure on superintendents. Players see the Masters on television and want their course to look like that, not having any idea how much it costs. They want wall-to-wall green — unless they are watching the British Open. Then brown grass becomes charming. It's insane. It's no wonder the game isn't growing.

You can't grow golf with money. To grow golf you need to teach people to love the game. Good players coming out of college golf programs all want to go to the tour. They don't want to teach the game to others. As a result, we don't have enough good instructors at the course level.

"BAD" COURSES

Golf courses in the early part of the 20th century were often designed and

built by amateurs as a one-time thing. In most cases the amateur owned the course he designed, so he poured his heart and soul into it. These courses rarely were very good, even by standards of the time. Mistakes were part of their charm — poor drainage somewhere, a quirky hole or two with misplaced bunkers and misshaped greens, inconsistent turf, et cetera. These mom-and-pop operations were distinctive and had a pleasant atmosphere. They were affordable and gave working-class people and kids a place to play. Sadly, most of them no longer exist. It saddens me to hear an 18-handicapper refer to a course as a “dog track” or a “dump.” Those terms are a reflection of that person’s perspective and values, which have become warped.

HIGH-END PUBLIC COURSES

They cannot possibly work. A family of four for \$400? When it’s over, you look in your wallet and think, “I hope the kids don’t ask if we can do this again tomorrow.”

DEVELOPMENT COURSES

Be careful before taking a job at a development course. These development courses, they (the developers) don’t care anything about this game. The course is there just to sell lots. And when the last has been sold, the club is up for sale. And your job is up for sale. You need to find out what the game is and who is signing your checks before you take this type of job.

GOLF CLUB OR COUNTRY CLUB?

I have nothing against tennis, but I’d rather be shot in the leg than see tennis courts built at Champions. The reason I’m against tennis courts, swimming pools, lawn bowling, and the like is

that they siphon attention away from golf. I want the club to have some semblance of balance, but in my world that means 90–10 in favor of golf. When Jimmy Demaret and I built Champions in 1957, I had no intention of building a swimming pool or tennis courts. We wanted it to be a golf club, not a country club. Then, in 1960 the fire marshal paid us a visit. Because Champions was in an area that at the time wasn’t developed, we had no



Jackie Burke is well known in the game of golf for his playing ability as well as his many other accomplishments. (USGA photo)

water resource in the event of a fire. The fire marshal told us there was one solution we might want to consider. Then and only then did we build a swimming pool. I confess I’ve never liked it. I’ve always tried to conceal it as best I can, but it’s hard to miss because it’s right outside my damned office. The wives and kids love it, though, so I accept that it’s an imperfect world. And it’s only open two months out of the year.

THE ULTRA-PRIVATE CLUB

Many state golf associations are faced with a strange, almost unbelievable problem. When it comes time to line up sites for important state amateur competitions, associations have found that many clubs are unwilling to give up their courses for a week. These clubs invariably are extremely well

financed and their courses are among the best, which is why they are sought as venues for competition. But the members at these clubs are against such competitions because it means closing the course for a week. To these members, the attention and adulation the club receives don’t outweigh the fact that they won’t have a place to play for seven days.

I call such members “gate clangers.” They post the guards at the entrance and won’t let anybody in. They give golf a bad name. The worst of them are perversely proud of the way they reject entreaties to stage tournaments. “We don’t need the attention,” they sniff. Gate-clanging clubs usually are filled with members who can’t play worth a damn and really don’t have golf in their souls. They expect nothing from the game, and to ensure that the arrangement is fair, they give nothing to it.

It is best to let the gate clangers have their way.

As a private club, it is their right to manage their organization any way they see fit. The down side is that these clubs will never be all they can be. They have the illusion they are something special, but in truth they are little more than wheat fields.

ON DEATH

When I go down, don’t lower the flags. Leave them up. I am on the way to find the head pro and get a starting time.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *Jackie’s book, It’s Only a Game, is a must-read for everyone who loves the game of golf. It is published by Gotham Books, a division of Penguin Group, copyright 2006.*

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