

World Golf Hall Of Fame Induction Ceremony

Monday, June 10 2019

Dennis Walters

Induction Speech

BARBARA NICKLAUS: Jack and I were so honored when Dennis asked us to present him into the World Golf Hall of Fame. And to be honest, we think it's only fitting to share in this opportunity. No, not because we've been a package deal for almost 59 years, we think it's fitting because having two voices better represents how Dennis has touched the lives of thousands, if not millions, in his five-decade journey.

JACK NICKLAUS: When I was 24, my golf career was really just beginning. Climbing that mountain, as I like to say. But for Dennis, at the age of 24, he suffered a tragic golf cart accident and was paralyzed from the waist down.

Until that life-altering moment, Dennis was a terrific golfer. Just three years earlier he contended in the U.S. Amateur, and made it to the finals of the PGA Tour Qualifying School. But on a day competitive golf was taken away from Dennis, that's actually the day his legacy began writing itself.

BARBARA NICKLAUS: So began Dennis's journey, and over the next five decades Dennis traveled more than 3 million miles and made more than 3,000 appearances to share his message.

That message: To help people, to give them hope and inspiration, and to show them what is possible. Dennis believes that if your dream doesn't work out, simply go get a new dream. And that is exactly what he did.

JACK NICKLAUS: Dennis could have complained about the hand God dealt him, yet he didn't. Dennis took what most of us would view as a weakness and made it a strength.

BARBARA NICKLAUS: Dennis has not had to strike a golf shot in competition in 45 years. But if you want to measure his impact on the golf world, just listen to this short list.

Dennis is a national ambassador for The First Tee; the PGA of America honored him with its Distinguished Service Award; Dennis was the Golf Writers 1978 winner of the Ben Hogan Award for Courage; and 40 years later the USGA bestowed on Dennis its highest honor, the Bob Jones Award.



His unwavering spirit, his ability to give back, his uniquely special gift to give joy to children is how Dennis wins every day of his life.

JACK NICKLAUS: But after tonight, Dennis will be remembered by one more honor to add to those he's already received, World Golf Hall of Fame member.

Dennis, you have touched our lives, just like the lives of millions of others, more than we can express tonight. But for tonight, just know that we love you and we could not be more proud of you.

BARBARA NICKLAUS: Dennis Walters has given so much back to the game of golf, and in that process he has given millions of people, as we said in the video, hope and encouragement and inspiration.

JACK NICKLAUS: So, ladies and gentlemen, it is our honor to have the pleasure to welcome and present for induction into the World Golf Hall of Fame, our friend, Dennis Walters.

(Applause.)

DENNIS WALTERS: Thank you. Thank you very much. Never, ever in my wildest dreams could I have imagined a night like this. Jan, Billy, Retief, and the Kirk Bell family, I would like to congratulate all of you for your contributions to golf. It is indeed a privilege to be inducted with such outstanding individuals.

Barbara and Jack, thank you so much for making this night even more special. I was honored to have you as my presenters as last year's Bob Jones Award, and I'm thrilled that you are once again here for me tonight.

My thanks to the entire staff of the World Golf Hall of Fame and to all the members of the selection committees for choosing me for this high honor.

When I received a phone call from Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player congratulating me on my selection, I was filled with gratitude and shed many tears. I can't walk, but when I got that call, I felt like I could fly (laughter).

Having two of the most iconic figures in golf on my side makes me feel like I really do belong to this esteemed

group. My sister, Barbara, the best sister a brother could have, is here to share my joy. If there was a Hall of Fame to sisters, she would be a first ballot selection.

(Applause.)

Thank you for all the love, support and advice you have given me through the years. I wish I could cut this crystal trophy in two and give you half.

I'm so happy that my niece, Brody; her husband, Daniel; and their three children -- Jacob, Hannah, and Sara -- are here.

A special thanks for my best friend of nearly 60 years, Wayne Warms. Through the years, Wayne has been my swing coach, a sounding board, and the brother I never had.

And to Duke Butler, he and I have been friends for 50 years since we first met playing golf in college when we were introduced by my roommate, Guy Cullins. Thanks to my longtime supporters, Titleist, Jersey Mike's, and Fairway & Greene. I would also like to thank everyone at Trump National Jupiter for making it a great place for me to live, practice, and play.

One of my deepest regrets is that my mom and dad, several mentors, and some close friends are not here tonight. I'm also saddened by the recent passing of my beloved dog and teammate, Mr. Bucky. If he were here tonight, I'd ask him this question: What's the par on the 18th hole at Pebble Beach?

(Dog barking.)

Absolutely correct.

(Applause.)

That kid was a genius (laughter).

To honor his memory, a paw print, along with my signature, will be on the granite walkway that surrounds the Hall of Fame. All of my dogs have been adopted from animal shelters or rescue groups. And when you're looking for a dog or a cat, I hope you'll do the same.

Each of us in the Class of 2019 has a unique story to tell, and here's mine. To borrow a line from The Beatles, my life's journey has been a long and winding road. This seemingly impossible and implausible odyssey has taken me from the depths of despair to golf's ultimate destination.

It all began for me in Neptune -- not the planet -- but a small town on the New Jersey shore. Now I live in

Jupiter.

(Laughter.)

Not the planet. But a small seaside town in Florida.

My mom and dad instilled in me a strong work ethic and gave me every opportunity to follow my dreams, both before and after my accident. Golf became part of my DNA the moment I picked up my first club. And I've had a love affair with golf ever since. My goal was always to play successfully on the PGA Tour.

It was almost a reality, but fate intervened on July 21st, 1974, the date of my accident. And from that day on I've been paralyzed from the waist down. It certainly seemed at the time that my dream of becoming a professional golfer was over. But because I loved golf so much, I couldn't see living my life without it. I made up my mind 45 years ago that if I ever got out of that hospital bed, I was not going to give up or quit. I was going to battle against all odds to find a new way to play golf.

First I tried to hit golf balls from my wheelchair. Then I progressed to a swivel seat mounted on the passenger side of a golf cart. That single and simple invention totally changed my life, and my life love affair with golf grew even stronger.

My new professional career started with my first performance at the PGA Merchandise Show, 1977. During the first 17 years, my dad traveled with me. And almost all the lessons I have used to battle paralysis came from the long talks he and I had in our van as we crisscrossed America. My dad must have teed up over a million golf balls for me and never once said, That's enough. Let's stop.

During the course of my career, I've done over 3,000 shows and traveled over 3 million miles. Ben Hogan watched me hit golf balls, Sam Snead told me dirty jokes (laughter), and Byron Nelson stood so close to me that I had to ask him to take a few steps back (laughter). I've performed with Jack, Gary, Arnie, and I've done 30 shows with Tiger. Can you believe I'm in the World Golf Hall of Fame before Tiger Woods?

(Laughter and applause.)

It's true. In the beginning, bookings were sparse. But in the early '80s, my dad wrote a letter to Jack Nicklaus, who at the time owned MacGregor Golf company. MacGregor signed me to my first contract, and my career took off.

My show is not only about golf lessons but also about life lessons. At each show I encourage everyone to

reach for their dreams and to strive for excellence. I also challenge each person in the audience, and I will do the same to all of you tonight, do something in your life that you think is impossible.

I have found that with hard work, dedication, and perseverance you can achieve success at anything. Never let anyone tell you that your dream is impossible. And if your dream does not work out, that's okay. The solution is simple: Get a new dream. That's exactly what I did. And this evening is the culmination of that new dream.

I always wanted to be on Tour. I've now been on tour for 42 years. This is not the tour I originally had in mind. Rather, it is my own tour created by my passion for the game and fueled by a burning desire to replace what I felt was taken from me because of my accident.

What started out as a bewildering nightmare turned into a mission of hope that has allowed me to show others what is possible, not only in golf but in life itself. I've been able to share the gift of hope, encouragement and inspiration with so many people, and I have realized that these are some of the most precious gifts you can give someone.

I've tried to prove with every swing I make that golf can be for everyone. And by showing others with disabilities that they, too, can experience the joy that golf can bring into their lives, I feel like I have left the game a little better than when I found it. And that pleases me very much.

I would like to continue this journey for as long as it is fun for me and I can still do it, the way I know it should be done. My original dream was to make it through this world on my golf skills. And I did. I will be forever grateful to our wonderful game. Golf has given me far more than I could ever repay because it literally saved my life and made it a meaningful one with a purpose.

In closing, I would like to revisit the immortal words spoken by Lou Gehrig as he stood at home plate at Yankee Stadium. These words ring as true for me today as they did for him 80 years ago: I may have been given a bad break, but tonight I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

Wow. I'm in the World Golf Hall of Fame. Thank you, and good night.