

# Making a Difference

## Player's Purpose

An Interview with  
Gary Player, Black Knight International



Gary Player winning the 1965 U.S. Open golf tournament (above); traveling with his wife and children in the 1960s (below); and recently working out (right)

**EDITORS' NOTE** Gary Player has won 167 professional golf tournaments worldwide and is one of only five men to capture golf's coveted career Grand Slam. He won nine Major Championships on the PGA Tour and nine Major Championships on the Senior Tour and is the only player in history to complete the career Grand Slam on both Tours. Off the course, Player has raised more than \$62 million for underprivileged children's education globally through the efforts of The Player Foundation and the Gary Player Invitational series in South Africa, China, U.S.A., U.K., U.A.E., and Japan with a goal to raise \$100 million by 2025; he has designed nearly 400 golf courses worldwide; he has bred more than 2,000 winning racehorses on the Gary Player Stud Farm in the Great Karoo of South Africa; and in recognition of his achievements in golf as well as his dedication to charity, Player has received numerous awards including the Laureus Lifetime Achievement Award and the PGA Tour's Lifetime Achievement Award. He currently serves as the Global Ambassador to the World Golf Hall of Fame and has been dubbed the Black Knight, Mr. Fitness, and The World's Most Traveled Athlete™ having travelled more than 26 million kilometers. In 2016, he captained the South African Olympic Golf Team in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Black Knight International ([garyplayer.com](http://garyplayer.com)) is a global holding company for The Player Group and the constantly expanding family of Gary Player® brands. This rapidly growing firm is diverse and infused with the same tenaciousness and drive as world-renowned golfer Gary Player.

**Do you see the sport of golf being well positioned for the future?**

The professional game of golf is healthier than it's ever been, thanks to people like Bobby

Jones, Ben Hogan, and Sam Snead, and those who came before our time and helped build a tour for when Arnold, Jack, me, and a host of others came along as television came to the fore, which gave it a big boost.

The game is extremely healthy for professional golfers and unhealthy at the moment for amateur golfers – the rounds are down, the golf courses are being made too difficult, the greens are too undulating, they have bunkers in front of the greens, so members are resigning more, and the game is taking too long. It's time consuming, which is bad because everyone's time is so valuable.

We just designed a 13-hole golf course in Branson, Missouri. People can play while their families eat breakfast and be finished quickly. They can play 6, 7, 13, or 20 holes depending on what they want to do. We've tried to make it quicker, less expensive, and more enjoyable.

The game has evolved most via the golf equipment. I was playing recently and, at the age of 81, I was hitting the ball 250 yards, which is what I hit when I was 25 years old.

There are grooves on the clubs and bunkers being raked with a machine – we used to rake them with our feet. The whole game is different. The greens are slick now, and they were slow when we played. They didn't have



mowers to cut the fairway short so we had a lot of flyers off the fairway. We couldn't spin the ball like they can now.

Another big change is the travel. It used to take my wife and I 40 hours to get from South Africa to a tournament in a propeller plane with no reclining seats, no beds, and no television.

**Have some of those advances taken away some of the skill players used to need?**

When we played, there is no question. Ben Hogan was the best player I ever saw from tee to green. Nicklaus has the most majors and I have the most world titles. Lee Trevino and Ben Hogan were the best shot makers. They had such an advantage over a lot of players. Today, if one hits the ball on the toe or heel, or high on the club, it still goes straight. When we had those old wooden clubs with the heavy shaft and a shanky grip and the thing was glued together and heavy, if we hit a ball slightly offline, it was exaggerated.

The other thing is, we have a 64-degree club now and the most we had was 56, so when we hit the ball, we had to flip our wrists to add lift to try to get it to 60.

The people who had the most skill in those days came to the fore. We have so many guys who stand there today and wallop the ball, but there isn't a separation of truly high technical feel, imagination, or shot making. It's very structured today. Those who make comparisons to the way people played in the past don't know anything about golf.

There has never been another athlete like Sam Snead. In 1927, at Saint Andrews Golf Club, the home of golf, he won The Open Championship with a score of 285. He had a broomstick as a shaft, and he had no grooves on his club, and he had a ball that went 100 yards less than it would now. That's as good a score as I've ever heard of in my career, but young guys today don't know that exists. They play for so much money and get paid by sponsors, so it's a different world. When we played, we were more interested in the history of the game – how people played with that kind of equipment and what the courses were like. I've seen it all so I can speak with authority.

**Many players today have partnerships, but those tend to change, while you still have relationships with many brands. What has made those partnerships work so**

**well, and how important was it for you to be associated with brands of a certain stature and class?**

It was very important, because I love people, and I love working with the amateur golfers. Most golfers today are working during a time when they can make a lot of money and don't have to do this sort of thing. My first job was for 30 British Pounds a month for three years. My father was very poor, so when I was able to play with a member, it was ingrained in me to enjoy it. I'm not critical that the players today don't do this, because it was a different time. However, for me to be associated with a good company that is game to adhere to what I want to do, which is to promote the game of golf and to be able to travel around the world and meet different people, is a thrill for me.

Through SAP, for example, I've just been to Mexico, Dubai, and Nice. Also, I work for Berenberg Bank and they help sponsor our Gary Player Invitational series, as do Coca-Cola and Rolex. These are classy companies that contribute to society. They do so much for people. It's hard to imagine all that is put into charity events and the good that is done. It's such an honor to be with these companies. To work with these companies, one has to study and be intelligent, well spoken, and well dressed. My advice to these young pros is that they learn how to speak well and familiarize themselves with the history of the game because they won't always be able to play. It's not just about hitting a golf ball. That, for the average person, goes by very quickly. With golf, there is longevity if you can make it work. I won a tournament at 63.

**Did you always know you had an interest in business and the acumen to be good at it?**

I don't profess to have good business acumen because that's something you have to devote time to. I bring common sense to the table, as well as my experience having traveled more miles than any human being that has ever lived. I've had 64 years of constant travel.

One of my great dreams to fulfill is to continuously travel and raise money for people who are suffering, because I suffered greatly.



*Gary Player (center) taking a selfie at the Gary Player Invitational*

I also use that time to preach, because I preach about fitness and eating properly.

I still do 300 sit ups, I push 300 pounds with my legs, run the treadmill at max, and do all my other exercises. This is what I'm trying to get through to people, because the youth of our nation are the trustees of its posterity. When President Obama came into office, the first thing he did was take the bust of Winston Churchill out of the Oval Office. The first thing Donald Trump did was put that bust back, because if it wasn't for Winston Churchill, we would not be here today. In spite of his faults, all politicians must remember they too have faults.

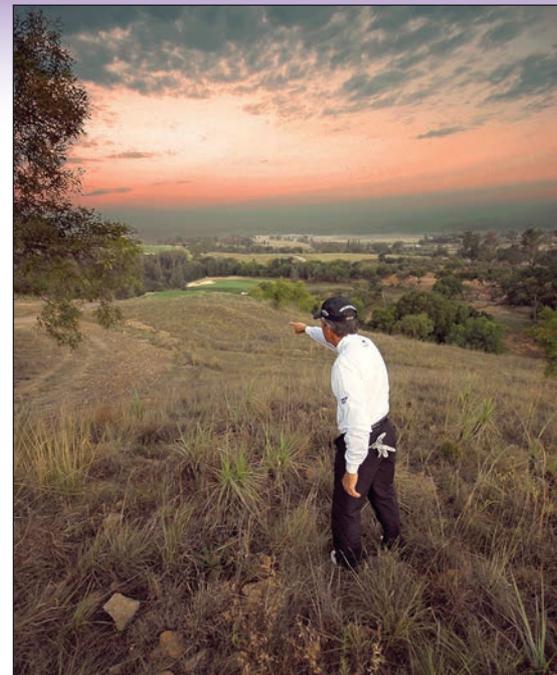
I bring up Winston Churchill because he is a hero that young people of the world can aspire to. He inspired a nation. He had a great command of the English language, and he was a courageous man and education was of prime importance to him, a trait that America is lacking at the moment. Better education is so critical because having a well-educated country is terribly important.

If we took our 20 best schools in South Africa, I don't think the U.S. has one school that can compare to those 20. Kids speak five languages, there are great sporting facilities, they know about the world, and they have a dress code. They say a prayer before school – it's not religious, it's about kids being grateful.

**Your foundation has done a great deal to help underprivileged children around the world. As much as you get excitement through your career, it seems you almost get that same excitement from the foundation. What does that mean to you?**

I'm the only man on the planet who has won the Grand Slam on both regular turf and senior turf. It's a divine gift that has been bestowed upon me, and I never forget to say "thank you." But that is a different thrill – the thrill of the happiness of achievement, and I've worked hard to get those results. When I see a kid who can't walk and I can put him on an airplane and fly him to a hospital where they can operate on him so he can walk again, that brings tears of joy to my heart. That is a different feeling and something that far surpasses any athletic endeavor.

We went to China and built accommodations for school-aged children, and we went to Abu Dhabi and are doing work with the sheikhs there in building a Gary Player gymnasium for special needs children. When I see how my six children and 32 grandchildren are so healthy and then I see other children who are unhealthy, it makes me realize how fortunate I am and not to take things for granted.



*Gary Player surveying the Blaire Atboll landscape where he designed a golf course on property he and his wife had raised their children for 25 years.*

It's a reminder how blessed we are, and if we can change the lives of people living in misery, without hope and in despair, that is something special.

**Are you able to take a moment to celebrate these special wins?**

I don't linger on my achievements because I have more to achieve in the future.

I believe a legacy is to achieve things now and contribute to society now and not to worry about a gravestone with one's name on a rock – it's about carving one's name in the hearts of people and making change while it's possible.

In 1969, I went to our Prime Minister Vorster, who was a staunch believer in apartheid, and I played golf with him much to the disgust of our public, but I don't play with a man for his political views as much as for his respect.

I see athletes turning down invitations from the White House. I don't understand that. They don't have to endorse him. It's an honor to be invited by the President and every person, whoever they are, should respect that while the President or Prime Minister is in office. He was duly elected and we should do everything to show respect. That's how I have been brought up.

I played with our Prime Minister and I'm anti-Communist. I asked him to invite Lee Elder from America to play in our PGA. He pondered for a while, but then said he would do it. If I had not played with him, that would not have occurred. Everyone loved it, and that was a stepping stone to crushing apartheid.

**At 81, there is no slowing down, but will that time come?**

I'm a farmer and I run a big farming operation. I have to study genetics and work on the farm when I'm there. I get up in the morning, and I shovel cement or manure and ride a tractor. Our farmers look at me as part of their team, so I don't want to relax and do nothing. I don't want to die early. One has to keep moving and keep interested in something to keep themselves occupied. ●