



The PGA Tour's Traveling Gym— How It Began

Terry Todd

The scene that day in the small gym was, in most ways, unremarkable. The year was 1985. Two men stretched, one rode a stationary bike, three others lifted weights, another did sit-ups and one simply stood by and observed. The mood, as it is in most of the thousands of gyms around the U.S., was relaxed and rather clubby. Talk about the weather, sports, and even the relative merits of a Walker hound and a Black and Tan — this from a Tennessee boy — was interspersed with more exercise, greetings to new arrivals, and some good natured ribbing about each other's lack of flexibility.

One of the ways, however, in which the scene, if not remarkable, was different was that the men using those facilities were all professional athletes, some of them very highly paid athletes. But so what — most pro athletes have been looking for Mr. Goodbody by conditioning themselves in gyms for some years now. Ask any professional playing football, basketball, or baseball. Or ask any of the *de facto* pros in track and field. For most highly paid athletes, gym training is a year-round, in-season-out-of-season thing, most pros being understandably reluctant to forfeit an edge to either a competitor or to Father Time.

These were not, however, your everyday big-time athletes, most of whom are usually initiated as boys into the world of liniment, wind-sprints and bench presses; these men were from a sport steeped in tradition and resistant to change—a group of athletes for whom the word “conditioning” has usually referred not to their bodies but to their hair. These men were professional golfers.

One of the men in the gym was the legendary Golden Bear, Jack Nicklaus, and he was training in a traveling fitness center—a sort of spa on wheels. During this particular week, the mobile gym was set up on the hallowed grounds of the Augusta National Golf Course, home of the Masters and scene of Nicklaus' electrifying come-from-behind victory the following year — 1986.

But how did Nicklaus come to be in this sweatshop-on-wheels? And what did the time he spent there have to do with the fact that after five years of disappointing play, he suddenly found himself—at the age of forty-six—hitting the ball farther and straighter and putting with regained confidence?

The actual germ of the idea that led to the traveling spa dates back to 1980, when a man by the name of Lanier Johnson was a subject in a research project aimed at determining the effects of weight training on middle-aged, basically inactive men. An avid golfer, Johnson was initially concerned that weight training would hurt his game by making him tight or causing him to lose his “touch.”

“I guess I was a victim of my background,” Johnson will say, smiling, “but I'd always heard lifting would mess up your game. But the ten weeks or so of hard training I did not only didn't make me lose flexibility, it actually made me more flexible and it also helped me by giving me ten or twelve extra yards off the tee.”¹

Johnson was then an executive for Diversified Products—a large Alabama sporting goods manufacturer—and after his experience with the weights percolated in the back of his mind for a couple of years, he began to consider ways in which fitness training or conditioning could be introduced into the change-resistant world of professional golf. To this end he began to visit the PGA Tour whenever he could: and, as time went by, it became clear that it was the PGA Tour to whom he must sell his bold concept. So he set himself the task of building the strongest possible case before making a formal presentation. First, he decided to go to the top sports medicine people in the U.S., since he had been unable to find any specific golf-related fitness research. And as he asked around to find who those top people might be, a name kept surfacing — Dr. Frank Jobe, team physician for the Los Angeles Dodgers.

One of the people who had spoken of Dr. Jobe to Johnson was Terry Forcum, the 1984 professional long distance driving champion, who told Johnson that Jobe had already done some preliminary research work on the muscles involved in the golf swing. Armed then with this fact, plus the related fact that the sports of baseball and golf were somewhat similar, Johnson decided to go to Los Angeles and visit Dr. Jobe at his sports medicine complex.

Johnson made the trip in the spring of 1983; and it was the first of many, as a relationship quickly developed between his company and the Biomechanics Lab at Centinela Hospital, which Dr. Jobe co-directed. The crux of the relationship was that Diversi-

fied Products agreed to fund a certain number of basic research studies into the physiological intricacies of the golf swing and the way to train to improve the golf swing. The next step in Johnson's quest—now that he had a solid agreement with a prestigious sports medicine facility—was to convince the leadership of the PGA Tour that it would be in their best interest to work with Dr. Jobe and his staff to jointly develop a mobile training facility which would travel from Tour site to Tour site and thus enable the golfers to have state of the art training facilities and supervision. What happened to Johnson next is the sort of thing which often happens in stories involving a quest—the Gods smiled on him and he had the good fortune of encountering a man who had the background to really understand. The man was Dean Beman, who was then the Commissioner of the PGA Tour.²

"Back when I was playing on the Tour in the Sixties," Beman recalled, "I used to work out a lot, and I was just about the only guy on the Tour who did. I really didn't know what to do, but I did push-ups and also carried a sledgehammer while I did my roadwork. And when I could, I even carried a set of barbells with me in my car on tour. And I'm absolutely sure it all helped me with distance, control, and endurance. I'm only 5'7" and I needed help to compete with the other players."³

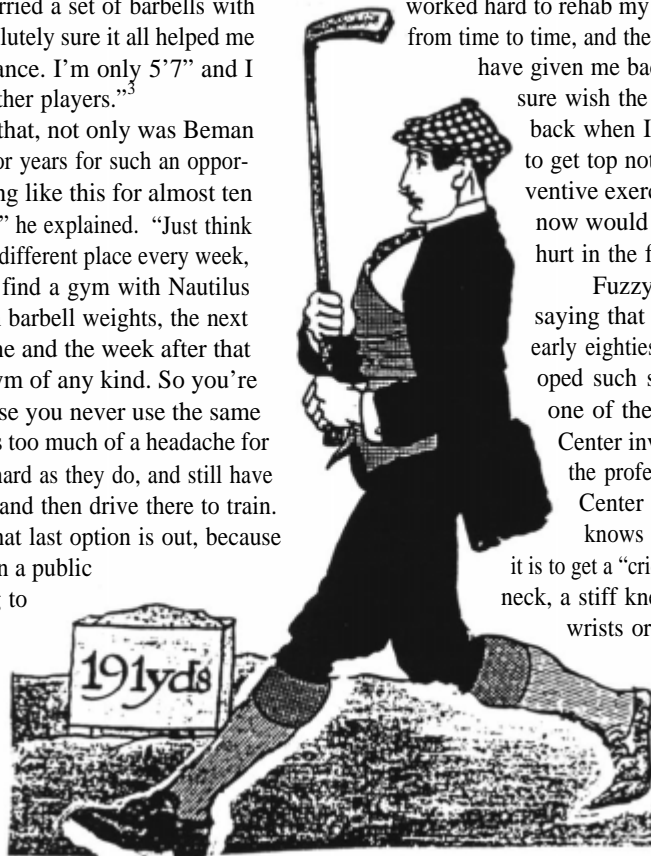
With a background like that, not only was Beman ready to talk business, he'd hoped for years for such an opportunity. "I'd wanted to do something like this for almost ten years because the need was so great," he explained. "Just think about it. If you're a pro, you go to a different place every week, so one week you might be able to find a gym with Nautilus equipment, the next week one with barbell weights, the next week one with some other machine and the week after that you might not be able to find a gym of any kind. So you're likely to keep yourself stiff because you never use the same equipment often enough. Also, it's too much of a headache for most guys to play, then practice as hard as they do, and still have the time and energy to find a gym and then drive there to train. And for the well-known players, that last option is out, because they'd never get a chance to train in a public gym. Imagine Jack Nicklaus trying to train in a public gym. Plus the fact that most of the guys wouldn't know what to do once they got to a gym since they've never had a chance to learn.

"But even though we've understood the need for a good training facility, the legis-

tics and complexity of it required such a large financial commitment that we'd never found a way to make it all work. But when Lanier Johnson came along it allowed us to do it right. The way it worked is that Diversified Products funded the basic research by Dr. Jobe. Diversified Products also funded the PGA Tour's purchase of the traveling Fitness Center and they gave us a grant to pay the salaries of the men who staff the Center. In return, we provided the people for the research and we helped co-ordinate the whole operation. And now that we've gotten started with it, I'm more convinced than ever that it's the best thing to come along for the PGA Tour since I've been Commissioner."⁴

Strong words, even for an old Iron Gamer, but to hear some of the Tour pros talk, not too strong. Listen to Ray Floyd, a regular, early user of the traveling fitness center. "A few years ago my back really began to give me trouble. And about that same time, I'd also noticed that I wasn't hitting the ball nearly as far as I had when I was younger. And the two things together really hurt my game. But I've worked hard to rehab my back, and I'm playing good golf now from time to time, and the extra strength and flexibility I've built have given me back most of the distance I'd lost. But I sure wish the Fitness Center had been on the Tour back when I got hurt, because I'd have been able to get top notch help immediately. In fact, the preventive exercises all the players are doing in here now would probably have kept me from getting hurt in the first place."⁵

Fuzzy Zoeller echoed Floyd's sentiments, saying that if the Center had been around in the early eighties he would probably never have developed such serious back trouble himself.⁶ Indeed one of the primary components of the Fitness Center involves the rehabilitation work done by the professional staff members who go with the Center around the country. And anyone who knows much about golf understands how easy it is to get a "crick" in the back, a tight shoulder, a "wry" neck, a stiff knee or a problem of some sort with the wrists or hands and how easily such problems can upset the regal cohesion of a Tour—level golf swing. This being the case, it's easy to understand that now, when such problems occur, the players can turn to the Fitness Center. It was, in fact, no accident that Nicklaus spent



part of every evening during the 1984 Masters in the Center, exercising and being treated by the physical therapist. Early in the '84 season, several players besides Nicklaus were on record that the only reason they were able to play at all in one tournament or other was because the Center was available. And, as the seasons wore on, and more big names were "saved," the benefits to the network bosses, the advertising execs, the Tour site sponsors and, of course, the fans have been enormous.

The Center itself—the site of all these high-tech goings-on—was housed in an oversized, customized forty-five foot trailer which expanded on each side to a width of seventeen and a half feet. Inside was a wet bar, a whirl-pool, a massage and therapy room, a giant TV screen, an excellent sound system, a computer, a sitting area, and, of course, the exercise area itself. Strictly off limits to anyone but PGA Tour players, the Center was usually set up at a Tour site by Monday, depending on the drive between sites, and it remained in place and available from early morning till early evening through Sunday afternoon. In 1984 — that first year — the Center was available at thirty-seven of the forty-two PGA tournaments in the continental United States.

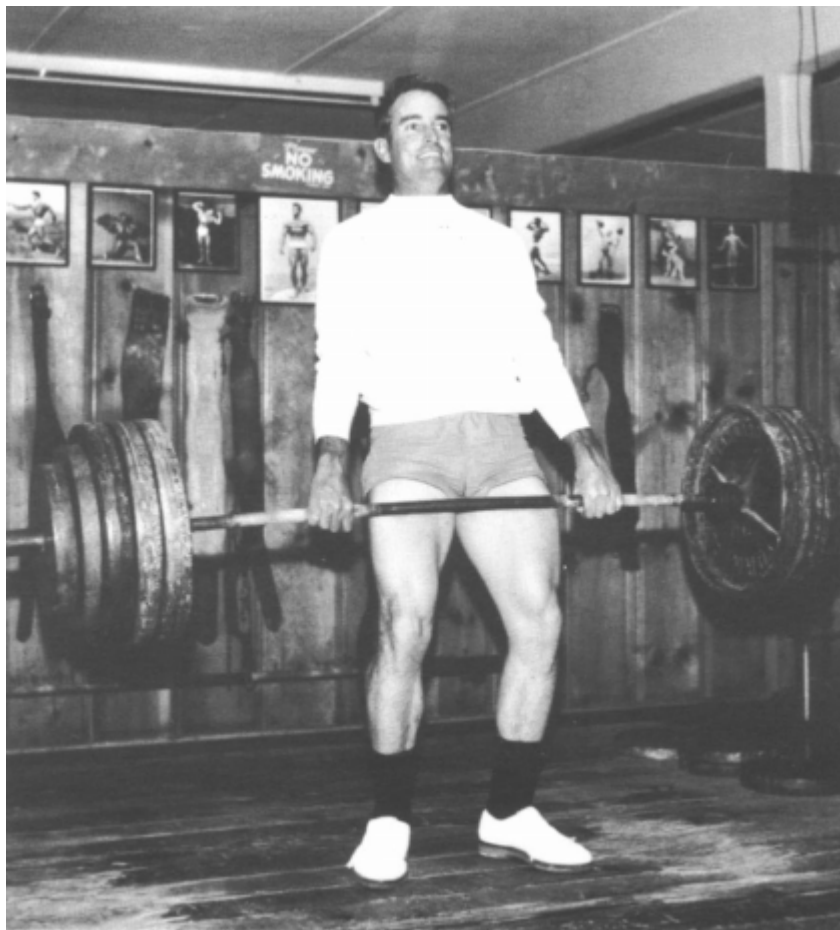
The way the Center worked was that players would come in and be put on an individualized fitness program by one of the staff members. This program was then fed into the in-house computer so that whenever a player returned, he'd

know what he did last time and what he should do that day. The Center's computer was linked with one at Centinela so Dr. Jobe could have instant access to each player's progress.

Almost all of the eighty or ninety players who were then using the Center on a fairly regular basis went through a thorough physical conducted by Centinela Hospital in the early part of 1985 and most of them were given tailor-made training routines based on the results of the tests. The testing included various strength and flexibility measures as well as a maximum stress test using an electrocardiogram, an oxygen consumption test and an underwater weighing procedure to determine the percentage of bodyfat each player had. Later, each player received a detailed analysis explaining how he stacked up against the other players and what his goals should be in

terms of improvement in these various areas. That same season a test was done to determine how much progress — individual and collective — had been made.

The specific exercise routines the golfers used were determined by Dr. Jobe's team of specialists at the Biomechanics Lab at Centinela. And this is where the basic research into the golf swing proved so valuable. This research began with a process called electromyography, which includes the placing of wires into the muscles of a particular area of the body in order to determine — as a physical act like a golf swing is done — the intensity and duration of the electrical impulses



FRANK STRANAHAN TRAINED WITH HEAVY WEIGHTS THROUGHOUT HIS SUCCESSFUL AMATEUR GOLF CAREER. DEADLIFTS WERE ONE OF HIS FAVORITE EXERCISES.

PHOTO: TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

which occur in that area. In addition, ultra high speed filming of the golf swing is done to better understand the sequence of the swing. Together, these techniques allow a sports scientist to more clearly understand which muscles are used in the swing, how much they are used and exactly when they are used. The techniques also allow any biomechanical imperfections in a swing to be seen with more precision as the swing is broken down into hundreds of segments.

As in any research study of this type, human beings were needed. and in the fall of 1984 eight people volunteered to begin undergoing this somewhat uncomfortable procedure. Most of the eight were Tour players, and they included Tom Kite, Howard Twitty and Tom Purtzer, but several average golfers were also included to determine if they might have significant variations in either the swing or the patterns of electrical activity in the muscles, or both. One of the primary purposes of this procedure was to learn whether any muscles were particularly important to the swing so that specific exercises could be recommended to develop these muscles. And in testing the shoulder and upper back area, which was the first area studied, one of the things Dr. Jobe learned was that the rotator cuff muscles of the shoulder were very active.

How this information can translate into improved performance was explained by Hank Johnson, a thoughtful, well-spoken teaching pro in Tuscaloosa, who was the first of the eight research subjects tested.

"Once I learned that the rotator cuff muscles were involved so much in keeping the right arm in the correct position as it comes to the top of the backswing. I reasoned that the specific rotator cuff exercise Dr. Jobe recommended might help some of my students reach that position more naturally. And the way my students reacted was even more dramatic than I'd expected. Not only did the ones with whom I worked who had this problem improve the positioning of the right arm throughout the final part of the backswing, but they scored lower, and that's why I'm so excited. Quite simply, it gives me and other teaching pros tools we never had before to scientifically improve a player's game. It's an historic breakthrough."

Not everyone, of course, shared this opinion, as the fear of becoming "musclebound" kept some players on the golf tour frightened of doing any kind of special conditioning work. One such player was Lee Trevino, who — when asked his opinion in 1985 — first said no one his age who had a twenty-six year old wife needed any exercise. But then he added "Look, this whole thing with the fitness trailer is just a fad. It won't last because golfers don't need

muscles. Muscles can hurt a golfer. They can do all that lifting they want but it won't help them score better. Golfers are born, not made. And another thing, by the time I practice, play, and practice some more, I don't want to do any exercise. I want to have a beer."

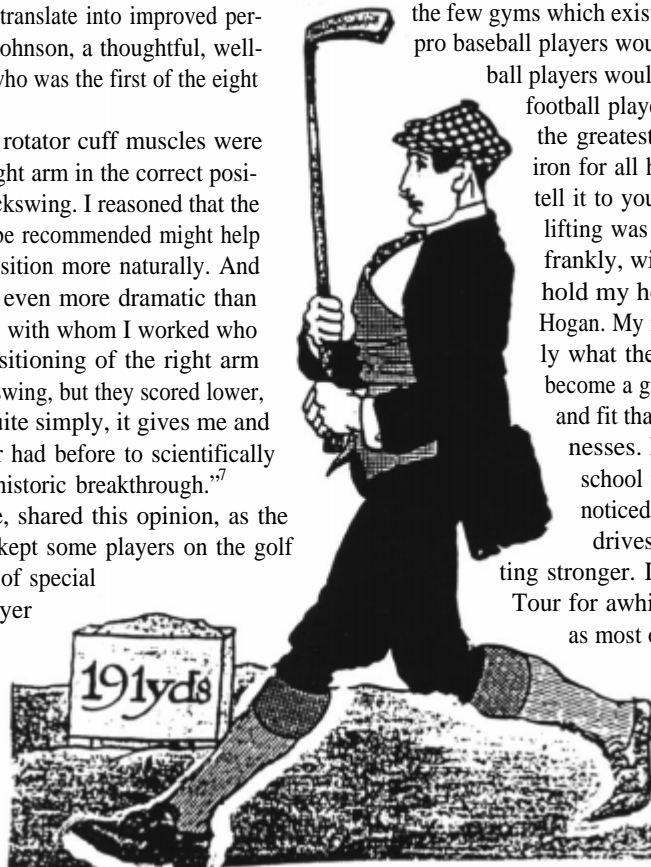
But Trevino's partner in the booth, Vin Scully, a longtime observer of both baseball and golf, disagreed. "It'll happen just like it did in baseball. In the old days, ballplayers didn't train. Now they do. They come in the Spring strong and fit. When you have this kind of money on the line, the guys will be looking for that edge."

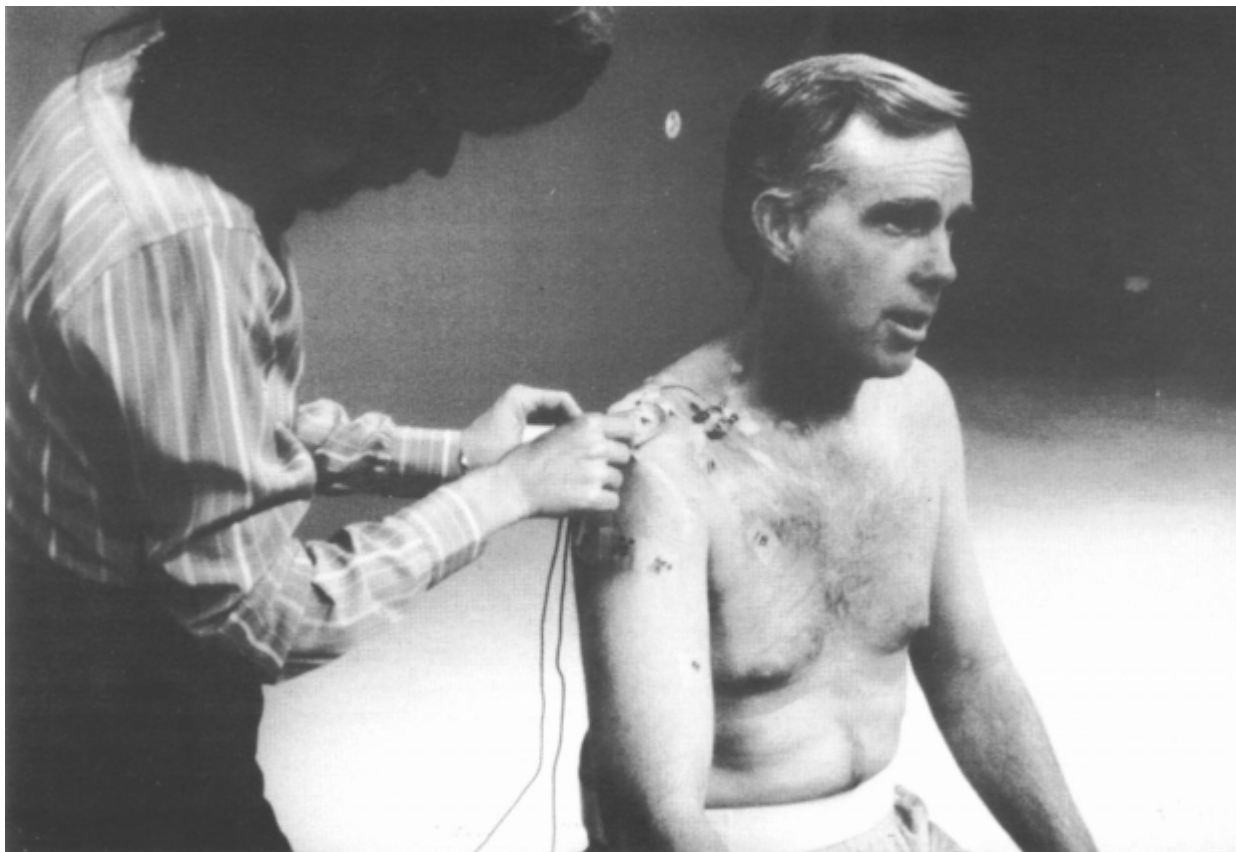
As to what sort of edge this will ultimately turn out to be, it might be instructive to consider the opinions of a former Tour player who, based on the increasing importance of conditioning in other sports, may have been no less than fifty years ahead of his time. The man is Frank Stranahan, who still lifts weights or runs every day.

In the decade after World War II, Stranahan was the finest amateur in golf, winning four Tour events and seven national titles in amateur competition. Besides that, however, the 5'9", 180 pound Stranahan was a terrific weightlifter, surely one of the strongest few men in his weight class in the United States in the early 1950s. And he took his weights with him wherever he could, or sought out

the few gyms which existed back then. Thus in the days before pro baseball players would touch a weight, before pro basketball players would touch a weight, and before even pro football players would touch one, here was one of the greatest golfers in the game hauling on the iron for all he was worth. It was unheard of. "I'll tell it to you straight," Stranahan explained, "My lifting was an enormous advantage to me. Quite frankly, without it, I'd never have been able to hold my head up with the likes of Snead and Hogan. My natural talent for the game wasn't nearly what theirs was, but I was so determined to become a great golfer that I made myself so strong and fit that I could overcome some of my weaknesses. I started lifting when I was in high school to help me with my other sports but I noticed that it really put some distance on my drives. And through the years I kept getting stronger. I was even the longest driver on the Tour for awhile. But I was almost twice as strong as most of the other men and I got that way by

doing full body exercises with heavy weights—things that make your whole body strong. I'm glad to see the PGA Tour has a place for men to train but unless I miss my guess what they've got now is only going to be an appetizer.





TUSCALOOSA GOLF PRO HANK JOHNSON SERVED AS A SUBJECT FOR ONE OF THE BIOMECHANICAL STUDIES OF THE GOLF SWING JOINTLY SPONSORED BY DIVERSIFIED PRODUCTS AND CENTINELA HOSPITAL. HERE, JOHNSON IS BEING WIRED WITH ELECTRODES TO MEASURE THE MUSCULAR ACTIVITY IN HIS SHOULDER.

PHOTO: TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

What will probably happen is that once the players begin working with light weights and see they don't get musclebound or develop short muscles, which is what I used to be warned against — what baloney!— they'll begin to experiment with the heavier lifts for their major muscles and then it'll be every man for himself and look out, par."¹⁰

An interesting bit of corroboration for Stranahan's theory of distance through strength came from Commissioner Beman, who tells the story of a sixty-seven year old man he put on a basic weight program in the early 1960s. The man added thirty yards off the tee and cut five strokes off his game. But forget thirty yards. What would happen if a touring pro improved his distance ten yards with no lack of accuracy. Hank Johnson maintains that this would take as much as a stroke off a player's score, an advantage which would mean more money in the bank.¹¹

Other advantages golfers can expect from the conditioning programs designed by Dr. Jobe are increased flexibility — which can effect both distance and control — and increased endurance, which can be critical, especially on the fourth hot day of a tournament. John Mahaffey spoke about this last point in 1984, saying,

"Early this year, after I'd been working hard for about six months on my conditioning program, I shot two of my best rounds on the last day of a tournament. It was unusual for me, and I think that's significant. I've played for sixteen years now on the Tour — I'm thirty-seven — but after all this work I'm in better shape now than I was when I was twenty-five. My best years should be ahead of me."¹²

Mahaffey and many other Tour golfers got a headstart on the 1985 season by installing exercise equipment in their homes— wall-mounted exercise machines, free weights and stationary bicycles. In the opinion of Dr. Jobe, this equipment is invaluable, because it allows the players a chance to prepare for the Tour in the off-season, and also allows them to continue their individualized exercise programs during the weeks they take off from the Tour each year.¹³

Tom Kite had such a package in his home in Austin Texas, and he shared the enthusiasm of the other golfers. "The weight machine and the bike are great," he said in late February of 1985, "because they allow me to not miss any work when I'm at home. I'm really committed to the program, which is why I volunteered to be one of the research subjects. I think many of the guys know they should be doing something but we just didn't know what to do or

where to go. But Dr. Jobe and his staff are so professional that everyone has confidence in them. They're bringing us all along very slowly, too, so as not to scare anyone or make anyone sore. I've never seen the guys on the Tour so excited about anything as they are about the Fitness Center."¹⁴

But as excited as John Mahaffey was, Lanier Johnson was even more excited, to see what had been wrought by his vision and hard work. Johnson was also happy—in the way only a true lover of a sport could be who had been able to provide a real service to that sport. Johnson had a good idea whose time had come and he was able to bring the idea to vivid life. "There were two main reasons I wanted this to all work out," Johnson explained the year before Nicklaus' win at the Masters. "For one thing, I really believed that if we could find out which exercises golfers needed and how to do them that tens of thousands of average golfers all over the country would benefit by having fewer injuries and by enjoying the game more because they played better. But the other reason was more personal and had to do with the best known veterans on the tour, particularly Jack Nicklaus. I'm like most fans; I think Jack's the greatest player we've ever had and nothing would make me happier than to think that something I did might have helped add a year or two to the big guy's prime. To any of their primes. And that's really what we're talking about here. It's a fact that as we age we get weaker and less flexible and a weaker and less flexible golfer is going to have less distance off the tee and less control. But exercise can turn that around. At least for a while. I know because it happened to me. And I think it's going to happen to Jack."¹⁵

Prophetic words. But Johnson knew when he spoke them that Jack Nicklaus had already outfitted a special room back home in Boca Raton with the same machines used in the traveling Fitness Center. And he also knew that Nicklaus was absolutely serious about wanting to regain some of the flexibility and power he had as a younger man.

In a sense, flexibility and power — along with endurance — are the goals of the conditioning programs of all the best athletes in the world regardless of age or sport. Young athletes lift weights, run, and do stretching exercises in order to increase their power, endurance, and flexibility. Older athletes lift, run and stretch in order to either enhance these characteristics or, at least, to maintain them. In either case, a good conditioning program can work wonders on any athlete — young or old, novice or pro, male or female, rich or poor. One thing on which coaches, athletes, and

sports scientists all agree is that proper conditioning can not only improve the health of an athlete, it can also enable that athlete to be better at his or her chosen sport. A lot better. Sometimes, it seems as if conditioning can even work miracles.

And didn't those who shouted or wept along with Lanier Johnson as Nicklaus marched triumphantly through the last nine holes at Augusta in 1986 feel as if they were watching some sort of miracle — some sort of time warp in which the years had been rolled back and the greatest golfer in history was once again the terrible bear of old? Maybe Nicklaus' sixth Masters was a miracle, plain and simple, a kind of lucky blessing in which his many fans could share. But maybe Nicklaus' sixth green jacket came like most miracles. Maybe it involved a lot of plain hard work of the sort he did in the traveling Fitness Center every day during the Masters. Nicklaus thinks so. He said as much at the press conference after his victory. Who would contradict him?

Notes:

Diversified Products continued to sponsor the Fitness Center on the PGA Tour until 1987, when the entire sponsorship was assumed by Centinela. Lanier Johnson left Diversified Products in 1986 and now serves as Vice President for Marketing and Promotions for HealthSouth in Birmingham, Alabama. HealthSouth has sponsored the Ladies Professional Golf Association's Fitness Center and the Seniors Fitness Center since 1989. Jack Nicklaus still trains in his home gym in Florida.

1. Interview: Lanier Johnson, Opelika, AL, 15 March 1986.
2. Ibid.
3. Interview: Dean Beman, Augusta, GA, 14 April 1984.
4. Ibid.
5. Interview: Ray Floyd, Augusta, GA, 16 April 1985.
6. Interview: Fuzzy Zoeller, Augusta, GA 13 April 1985.
7. Phone interview: Hank Johnson, 7 April 1985.
8. Interview: Lee Trevino, Austin, TX, 25 March 1985.
9. Interview: Vin Scully, Austin, TX, 25 March 1985.
10. Phone interview: Frank Shanahan, 9 April 1985.
11. Hank Johnson, 7 April 1985.
12. Interview: John Mahaffey, Augusta, GA, 10 April 1985.
13. Interview: Dr. Frank Jobe, Los Angeles, CA, 22 April 1985.
14. Interview: Tom Kite, Austin, TX, February 1985.
15. Lanier Johnson, 15 March 1986.

