

R FIT FOR A LEGEND BY S. MURALI

Rolex testimonee and ambassador Gary Player is widely regarded as one of the greatest players in the history of golf. Known as the Black Knight, he has won more than 165 tournaments worldwide including nine Majors. S Murali caught up with the legend in a round-table interview at the Open Championships at St Andrews, where the 79-year-old talked on a wide variety of topics on the game. As Player answered all questions passionately, some have been organised and edited for clarity.

Murali: Hi, I'm Murali from Singapore.

Player (interrupting): From Singapore? Best run country in the world.

Q. What are your thoughts on the British Open?

It is the greatest championship in the world because it is the oldest, the most history, the most famous place in St Andrews and also tests the mind more than any other Major championship in the world. You get into a bunker, you got to play out backwards, it does not happen elsewhere.

On new rivalries

What I like about Jordan Spieth is that he is great putter. I think Rory McIlroy has a better golf swing than Jordan but Jordan is a better putter and it is great to see this wonderful rivalry that is going to take place between these two players, which is what golf needs. With Arnold (Palmer), Jack (Nicklaus) and myself, we had this great rivalry, really at the time television was starting and it could boost the game. And there will be someone else who can come in there, a Jason Day, who has a wonderful swing, or a Rickie Fowler. And that is great for golf.

On new equipment and balls

Things have changed. I'm (nearly) 80 years of age and I'm averaging (a score of) 70. This equipment, and the balls have made golf, for the first time in my life an easy game. It was always such a terribly tough game for me. I played this morning and I never missed a fairway. There is a man right now, who will stand on the first tee (at St Andrews) and drive over the first green. And that is what we are going to see in the future. We haven't seen a big man play golf. People like Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal and LeBron James. In other sports you are finished when you are 34, in golf, you are just starting. So all these great athletes in other fields are seeing what is happening in golf and now they are going to start turning pro. You are going to see 7-foot athletes coming and they are going to hit it 430 yards, 440 yards. They'll be playing St Andrews and driving 7 or 8 of the par fours.

Q. Would that be a problem?

This is what I have been saying for 20 years now and it falls on deaf ears. We got to cut the ball back at pro golf 50 yards. There must be a billion dollars spent in the last 20 years changing golf courses around the world. Why? Did you see what the US Masters is doing now? I believe they bought the two highways on the edge of the golf course so they can put the tees back. Golf is in a bit of trouble at the moment. We are going in the wrong direction. There are two different games. Pro golf and amateur golf are two



different games. Will if you think they are the same game, go and try putt with Jordan Spieth. Go on the tee and hit a ball with Tiger Woods. I'm a 100 per cent sure it's (making the ball go a shorter distance for pros) going to happen.

Q. Would you have liked to have played today?

I would love to play against these guys with the modern equipment. I would love to do that. On the other hand, I would not want to change. We had more fun. I would play a pro-am and I would stay at their (my amateur partner's) house. We had a different kind of camaraderie. Last night, we had the World Golf Hall of Fame event. There were four guys here at the tournament, and the Hall of Fame is taking place down the road at the (St Andrews) University, and they never came. That would have never happened at our time. Arnold Palmer came all the way from America for this event and these four, who have been inducted into the Hall of Fame, they never came.

Q. You were critical of US Open site Chambers Bay. But it produced Jordan Spieth as champion and Louis Oosthuizen and Dustin Johnson as runners-up. Wasn't it a good test?

Even if you played a golf course and you had barbed wire on the green, someone would win. Chambers Bay was unplayable. A man missed a green by one foot and the ball went 100 yards down the green. Did you see that? They were hitting a ball to the back of the green and it

would spin all the way back down. All the players were critical of it. I have never seen such a thing in my lifetime and it's a public course. If you are not a 10-handicap you are not going to break 100. That is not what you want. You want people to enjoy it. The only way you can encourage people to play is to have more public golf courses. We must make golf cheap. Encourage speed of play. Wide fairways.

Q. You are well known for your fitness. What vices do you have?

I eat too much sugar, that's the killer, I love chocolate. Love it so much I don't take the paper off. I do exercise a lot though. I had fun today. I went to Eely golf club and there was this 15-year-old boy, really fit. I said, 'Do you think you can beat me at pushups?' He said, 'I think so.' At the 18th hole, we had just finished and we went to the side of the green. We started doing pushups. He got to 36 and he went (slaps the chair, indicating the boy fell flat). I said 'I'm just warming up man.' I'm very fit.

On the best in the game

The best golfers that ever lived, lived 100 years ago, not now. The best golfers were Ben Hogan, Sam Snead and Bobby Jones. Jack Nicklaus has the most Major wins, I have the most international wins, but I have never seen anyone play golf like them. Bobby Jones, if you look at his swing, probably has the best swing you have ever seen in your life. But I'll tell you something interesting. The teachers of today would see his swing, change it and ruin him.