

by Jimmy Roberts of NBC Sports



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# Presidential Power

**T**he calendar is now turned to an election year, and it's no surprise that George Bush is in the news. Only it's not the type of news you might imagine, and it's not the George Bush you're probably thinking of.

The 41st President of the United States, George Herbert Walker Bush, is being given the United States Golf Association's highest honor, the Bob Jones Award, on February 9 in a ceremony at the USGA's annual meeting in Houston.

"I just love the game," he told me recently. We are chatting in his Houston office for a book I'm writing. "But I never practiced... I think I'm allergic to it. I break out in hives if I practice."

The former President is 83 years old, but hardly acts his age. He's a constant fixture in the world of golf: He was there at Congressional Country Club to hit the ceremonial opening tee shot at last summer's inaugural AT&T Classic hosted by Tiger Woods to honor the military. In September, he was in Montreal for the President's Cup matches (he has yet to miss one) and he has — since its inception — been Honorary Chairman of the national First Tee, the Florida-based non-profit organization whose local chapters (including the First Tee of Metropolitan New York) teach important life skills to deserving youth through golf.

At his best, Mr. Bush was an 11 handicap and has broken 80 on his home course, Cape Arundel, near the family's vacation home in Maine. The former President tells me he's "on the D.L." after December back surgery on the heels of hip surgery last year.

"I don't take it seriously anymore," he says. "I like the history and the traditions of the game and I like the real golfer's adherence to the Rules and paying respect to others on the course...all those things my grandfather

Walker and my father helped inculcate in me and my brothers and my sister."

Many American Presidents have played golf through the years, dating all the way back to William McKinley in 1897, but none can match Bush's personal connection to the game. Both his father and grandfather were USGA Presidents. The Walker Cup matches are, in fact, named for Bush's maternal grandfather, who donated the trophy for which the competition is played. Bush, of course has made his own contribution to the game: a mindfulness of pace of play.

"He doesn't linger," the current President Bush (a.k.a. "43") tells me in a late January discussion at The White House. "I remember one time we played — and look, you don't putt them all out when you're playing with him. If you're playing best ball, he can really fly. I think we played 18 holes in under two hours."

The Jones award has been given out by the USGA for more than a half-century and seeks to recognize a person who emulates Jones's spirit, his personal qualities, and his attitude towards the game and its players.

I ask the former President Bush (a.k.a. "41"), what does it say about a person to watch them deal with their struggles in the game?

"I think that's pretty much how you deal with your struggles in life," he says. "If you're in there and you want to do well... the quest is excellence, then you stay with it and try to do what you can to improve."

"He's a fierce competitor," his son tells me, "disciplined, a man who, in spite of his desire to compete, never loses perspective. That's why this Jones award makes sense, as far as I'm concerned, because he's a gentleman."

Some people may think of George Bush and his thoughts about the game as un-hip and old-fashioned. With what I've seen lately in golf, I have just one question: Where do we find more people like him? ■

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