

up close

Wired to Win

Whether he's playing bocce, poker, or his beloved golf, Yankee legend Yogi Berra is as competitive as ever | BY ADAM SCHUPAK

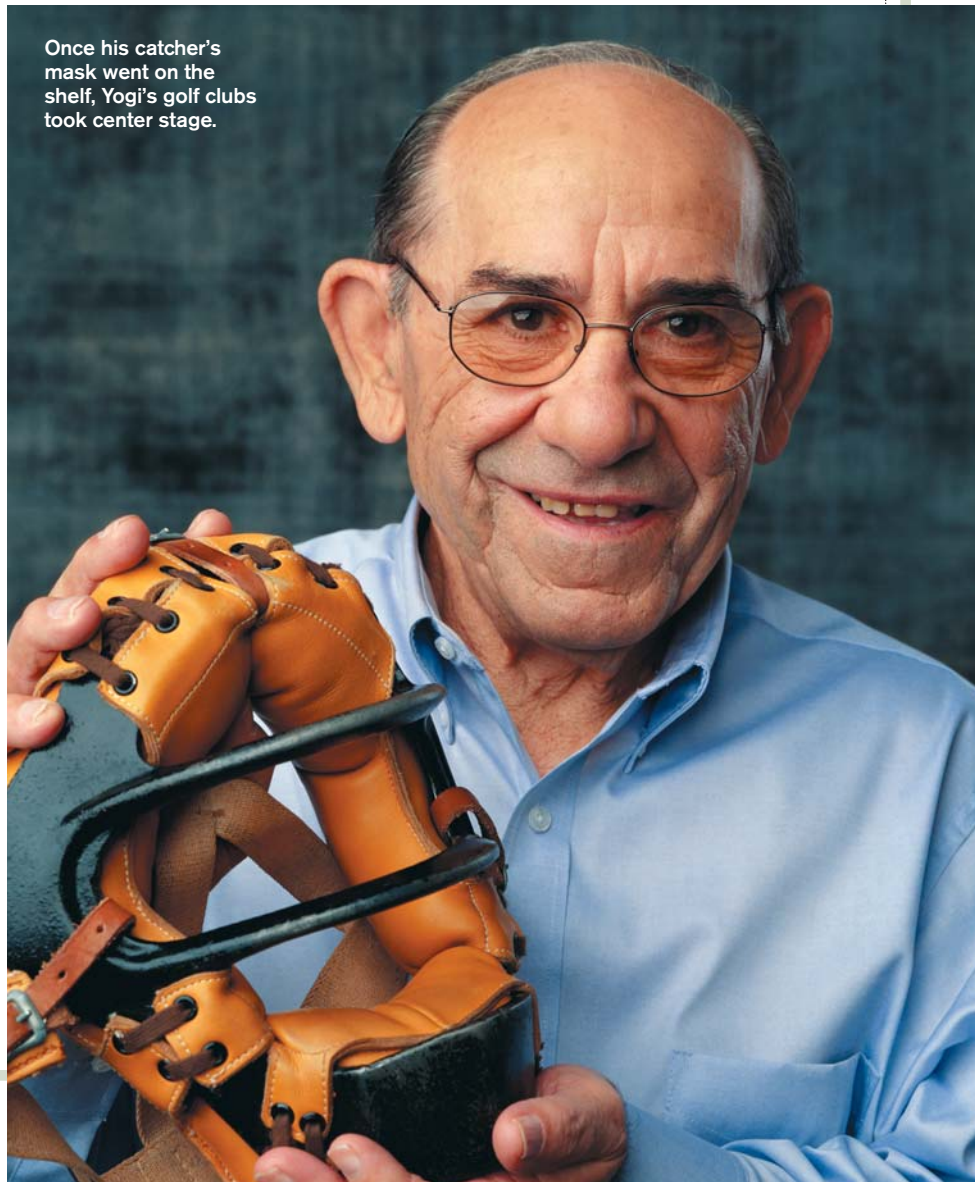
ALL HIS LIFE LAWRENCE (Yogi) Berra has been playing games. He was a pitcher and outfielder in the street and sandlot games growing up in St. Louis. "It was all we did," said Joe Garagiola, who grew up across the street from Berra and remains a lifelong friend. "He was the best athlete in the neighborhood—football, soccer, horseshoes, you name it." Berra grew up to be the only thing he ever wanted to be—a ballplayer. If playing sports gave him a happy childhood and baseball a wonderful career, then golf has been the source of his happiness in retirement.

Berra played his first round of golf in 1947 at Sunset Country Club in St. Louis with Henry Ruggeri, a St. Louis restaurant owner, and Cardinals Stan Musial and Joe "Ducky" Medwick. Berra started playing golf left-handed, but he switched to righty after about 10 years. "I had a big slice," Berra explained. "One day I hit it behind a tree and I couldn't hit it lefty so I borrowed my partner's right-handed club. I hit it good and decided I'm going to get a full set of these." Although he still putts lefty, Berra taught himself to play right-handed and became good enough to shoot a career-best 78 at Pinehurst.

While growing up in the Italian neighborhood called The Hill, Berra received his nickname from a childhood friend who noticed his resemblance to an Indian snake charmer he saw in a movie. Since then, Yogi has charmed baseball fans with his spirited play, unique sense of humor, and inimitable way with the English language. He is the true "Lord of the Rings," winning a record 10 World Series rings in 14 appearances. An all-star catcher for 15 consecutive years, Yogi was voted American League Most Valuable Player in 1951, '54 and '55. He retired in 1965 and was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1972. He remained in baseball, with stints as manager and coach of the New York Yankees and New York Mets, and later as bench coach of the Houston Astros, a job he held until 1989.

Golf has become an extension of the

Once his catcher's mask went on the shelf, Yogi's golf clubs took center stage.





Yogi's Celebrity Golf Classic has raised more than \$5 million for charity.

eliminated on the next to last hole, but then Yogi canned a lengthy putt. He reacted as if he knew it was going in all along. "Yogi doesn't show excitement. He shows determination," Garagiola said. "He kept saying, 'We can win this.'"

At the last hole, Yogi hit his typical drive, down the middle but not too far. Garagiola described his own next shot—a solidly struck 5-iron to the edge of the green—as “an out of body experience.” He was proud of the effort. Yogi expected better. “You didn’t hit it close enough,” he said. So the pressure shifted back to Yogi, considered one of the greatest clutch hitters in baseball history. “Paul Richards, the former manager of the White Sox, said Yogi was the toughest guy in the league to get out in the seventh, eighth, ninth inning,” Garagiola said. “The more pressure, the more he relished it.” Yogi’s chip almost rolled in the hole for a natural birdie and stopped inches away. Garagiola tapped in for the victory. Like a couple of teenagers who had just won the state title, they made up a sign trumpeting their victory and drove in to the banquet with it attached to the windshield.

Those who know him best since he retired from the game have experienced Yogi’s perennial spirit of competition. Rose Cali bought her house in Montclair, NJ, from Yogi 30 years ago. She and her husband invited Yogi and his wife, Carmen,

baseball experience for Yogi. Athletic careers often end with a crisis of identity. Many arrive at the point of retirement believing their life is over. Others know their life will never again have the same rush, a feeling that casts many a former star into deep depression. Yogi, who turned 80 on May 12, wears his age as if it was a well-worn but comfortable set of bathrobe and slippers. Yogi is who he always was. Golf has filled the void left by his departure from baseball. It’s as if he never stopped playing and in a way he never has.

“My dad loves to compete,” said Dale Berra, 48, the youngest of Yogi’s three sons. “He was a clutch baseball player. In golf, he relishes the opportunity to make

a putt that means something and he still makes a lot of them. He lives for those moments and times on the course. It keeps him out there now.”

Winning never grows old. Several years ago, Yogi teamed with Joe Garagiola to win the Bryant Gumbel Walt Disney World Shootout. “We made up the rules,” Garagiola explained. “Anyone over 65 could hit from the ladies tees.” No one objected. Despite that advantage, it looked like the team was going to be

Golf has been the perfect pastime for a man who has played sports his whole life.

to the christening of their bocce court two years ago. Yogi corrected everyone’s technique, especially his team members. The man is wired to win. “It’s the first time I got to see his competitiveness.

That’s the basis of his excellence,” Cali said. “At this stage in his life, he still wanted to win.”

Golf is as much a game about the camaraderie, the walk together, as it is about flailing away at the ball. For Yogi, it’s become a way of life in retirement. “Every day is around golf,” said Rene

Lagasi, a fellow member at Montclair Golf Club. He plays at least three times a week. Yogi just wants to be one of the guys. He enjoys making a small bet among friends and the good-natured kidding that goes on both on the course and in the locker room. It's the same type of innocent, friendly banter he often employed to try to break a hitter's concentration. Consider the story Hank Aaron tells about the 1958 World Series, with Yogi chattering at him from behind the plate. Yogi kept telling Aaron to "hit with the label up on the bat." Finally Aaron turned and said, "Yogi, I came up here to hit, not to read." Yogi is a fixture in the Montclair locker room. Whether it's playing poker on Wednesday nights, watching a sporting event or taking his daily shower there, Yogi thinks he's still in the Yankee clubhouse. "He's a locker room rat," said Kevin Carroll, a longtime golf partner and neighbor of Yogi's.

Camaraderie, competition, and charity all converge each year at the Yogi Berra Celebrity Golf Classic. Yogi's former teammates and friends come back to make up the biggest celebrity field in the state. He always picks an off-day in the season so current Yankees can participate. This year he timed the tournament, scheduled for June 13, to coincide with a reunion of the 1961 World Championship team. He convinced Tony Kubek to play for the first time. "He personally called me twice," Kubek said. "How can you say no to Yogi?" Berra only needed to call Kubek's double play partner, shortstop Bobby Richardson, once. "He told me Bobby Turley would pick me up in his Lear jet," Richardson said. It will be his second tournament appearance. How could he say no? Before his death, Mickey Mantle used to play a par-3 with every group. Now Yogi spends the day at the eighth hole of the first nine at Montclair. And he makes things interesting. Players can bet \$25 that they can hit their shot inside Yogi's. If they do, they get an autographed ball. Yogi has never had an official hole-in-one but he did knock one in from 140 yards with a 4-iron during his tournament in 1998.

Berra has given generously of his time to youth organizations and char-

itable causes, including his golf tournament. Now in its 15th year, the Yogi Berra Celebrity Golf Classic has raised more than \$5 million to help support educational programs at the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center, scholarship funding for inner-city youth, summer camps, and the Carmen and Yogi Berra Endowment Fund for scouts with special needs. On June 21, he will receive the Bing Crosby Tournament Sponsor Award from the Metropolitan Golf Writers Association for his contributions to the game. "The tournament is a wonderful reunion of many of my childhood heroes," said former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, who serves as the tournament's honorary chairperson, "and it supports a number of worthy causes. Yogi has always cared about kids."

Yogi dropped out of school at age 15 to help support his family. When people asked him how he liked school, his answer was "Closed." But that answer belies his regret that he never got a formal education. When the Yankees gave him \$9,800 in cash on Yogi Berra Day in 1959, he endowed a scholarship at Columbia University to a student who excels at baseball and academics. In 1996, he received an honorary doctorate from Montclair State University. Two years later, a baseball stadium was named after him on campus. In 1998, the Yogi Berra Museum & Learning Center opened, paying tribute to his lifelong commitment to the education of young people.

Yogi has lived a full life and he believes that if someone has been as lucky as he has then there's a responsibility to give back. Golf has given Yogi so much; it's only right that he should use his tournament to give back to the one game he never had to stop playing. It's been the perfect pastime for a man who has played sports his whole life. Yogi's friends and family agree that he loves golf too much not to have it part of his life. "Al Lopez [the Hall of Fame manager] is 96. He told me keep playing until you can't. He played until 93," Yogi said. "I'm going to keep playing as long as I walk." ■

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