

by **Nicholas Evan Sarantakes**

As far as I am concerned I just want you to know that I like the job I have, but if I had to live my life over again, I would have liked to have ended up a sportswriter. —Richard M. Nixon

COMMANDER IN SPORT:

Dick Nixon and his Leisurely Pursuits

On a temperate day in April of 1994, the United States buried Richard M. Nixon, the 37th president of the United States. The outpouring of sympathy from the American public the week before surprised both Nixon's friends and foes. "I'm struck by—I think every American over 30 years old is astonished at this outpouring of affection and emotion for Richard Nixon," biographer Stephen Ambrose remarked as a commentator during the ABC News coverage of the funeral. "I just don't understand how this happened."

Why did the American people despise and love Richard Milhous Nixon? The answer to the first half of this question is so obvious that it deserves no serious exploration. At the same time, Nixon inspired admiration throughout his life, and this photo essay is an effort to provide some explanation for the regard and esteem in which many held this controversial man. Richard Nixon was—and remains—a cultural icon. His life and career seemed to be representative of those traits that the observers thought embodied the character of the nation.

Such factors were as important to his popularity as the programs that his administration pursued. Average Americans can only rarely explain correctly the policies of a presidential administration on matters of policy, but most have general opinions about their president. The resident of the White House is expected to do more than be the chief executive of the U.S. government. The president is expected to be a national symbol

like the flag. The office is bigger than its formal powers. Nixon's interest in sport, though, made him understandable to the American people and added to their sense of community.

Nixon's political use of sport contributed heavily to this symbolic status. During his years in office, he often used sporting venues to promote an image of himself as a man of the people. Sitting in the stands with other fans, cheering with them at amazing feats of physical dexterity, Nixon convinced the public that he was a man of the people, which he was. Yet, he avoided the down side of being one with the public; he never surrendered the authority of his office. He did what no other fan could do—but which many would have loved to do—he called the dugouts and locker rooms with congratulations, he got to meet the living legends. The president also used sport as a way to reach out to others. Nixon had little skill in light conversation and was awkward in social settings, and he always turned to sport as a topic of conversation, which often worked. Finally, Nixon used sport as a venue to reach out to sectors of the electorate and try to win support among various interest groups.

Nixon's attraction to sport, though, was genuine as these photos show.

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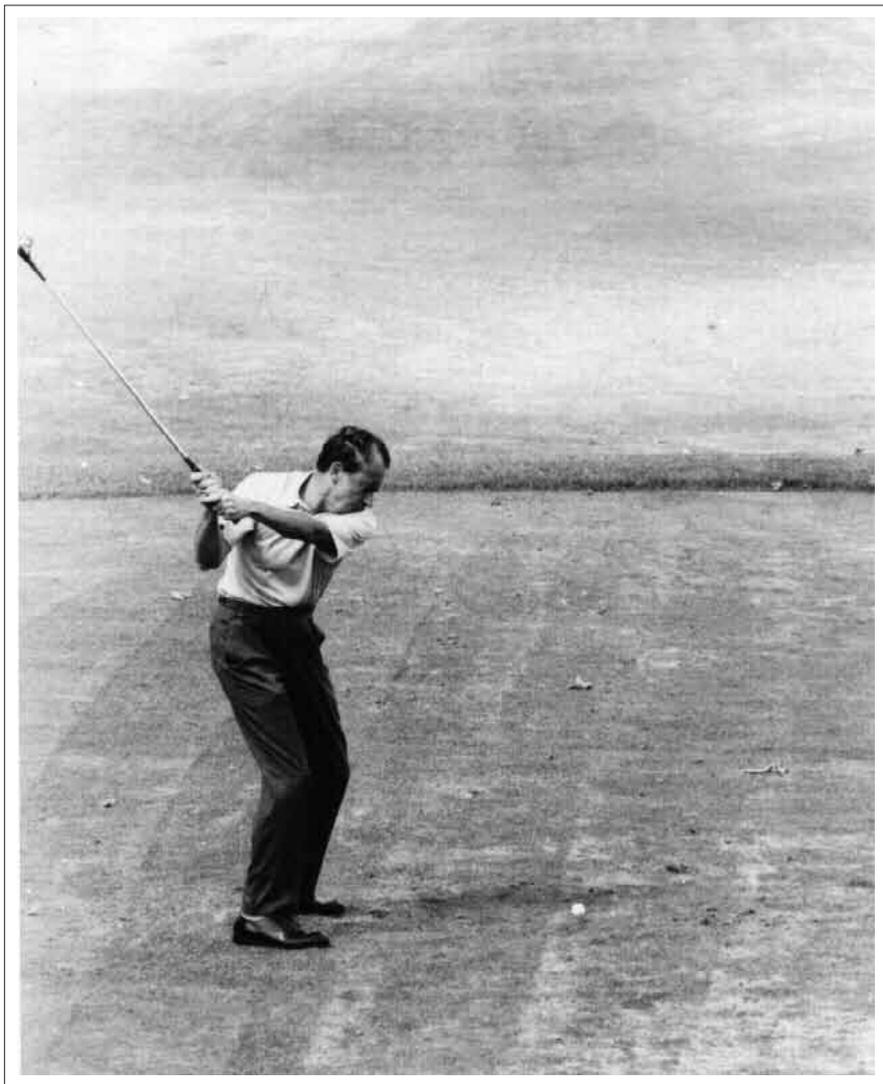
The windup and the inaugural pitch

In the United States, the president is expected to render both the ceremonial duties of a head of state and the tasks related to politics and policy associated with a head of government. One of the ceremonial functions of the president was to throw out the first baseball of the season. Nixon loved the sport. The nature of the game made it possible that a sudden reversal could take place at any point. Such a feature appealed to Nixon and his never-quit mentality. “Baseball is great because anything can happen through the ninth inning,” he remarked in 1969.



“Coors Light!”

Nixon used sports in ways that gave voters a way to relate to the president of the United States. When he attended ball games, Nixon normally watched the games from the stands like the average fan, rather than from a luxury box or from the dugout or sidelines. The Secret Service was quite worried about the first couple of trips Nixon took to the ballpark, because he went without access to the nuclear command codes, and there was no doctor standing by in case of an emergency. Here he is attending a Washington Senators baseball game in 1969 with Attorney General John Mitchell. Secret Service agents and the U.S. Army officer carrying the nuclear codes are visible around the President.



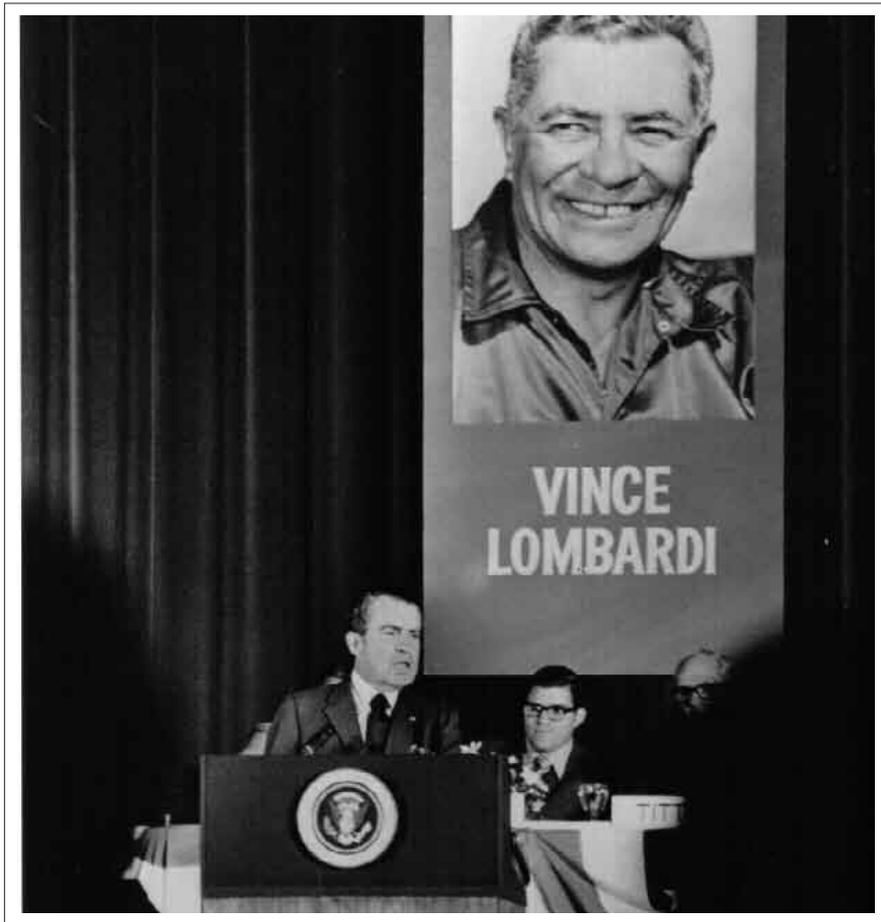
“I am not a hack.”

Golf was a sport that Nixon took up only after he moved into the White House. His feelings for the game were less than enthusiastic—he once called the sport “a waste of time”—but he quickly developed a real liking for the game. Nixon had clubs at the White House, Camp David, San Clemente, and Key Biscayne so he could play whenever he wanted. His scores were decent given his physical awkwardness and a job that kept him from playing on a regular basis.



Hook ‘em, Dick

In 1969, Nixon decided to award a plaque to the winner of the annual Texas Longhorns and Arkansas Razorbacks game—then pitched in a one verses two battle. Texas defeated Arkansas 15-14. Inside the Texas locker room Nixon said, “In presenting this plaque, I want to say first that the AP and the UPI will name Texas number one, as we know, after this game. What convinced me that Texas deserves that [ranking] is the fact that you won a tough one. For a team to be behind 14 to 0 and then not to lose its cool and to go on to win, that proves that you deserve to be number one, and that is what you are.” The room exploded in cheers and applause. Penn State’s Joe Paterno was less than happy. His Nittany Lions were undefeated for the second year in a row, and he thought Nixon’s declaration was premature. When Nixon offered to award Penn State a plaque for having college football’s longest winning, the coach refused. And he got the last laugh in a commencement address at Penn State four years later. He wondered, “I’d like to know, how the president could know so little about Watergate in 1973, and so much about college football in 1969?” The audience roared.



“Watergate isn’t everything...”

In 1971 Nixon gave a speech at the dinner the National Football League held in honor of the new inductees into the Hall of Fame. He expressed his belief that the sport helped shape the American spirit. “Unless you try to do your best, unless you give everything that you have to your life and in the service of your country, then you have not been the man or the woman that you can be.” The nation needed such vitalizing sentiment. The United States was still the strongest and most influential nation in the world. In challenging moments, the nation needed the spirit that football fostered in its fans and participants. “In the spirit of American football at its best,” said Nixon, “let’s always try to be number one, because we owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our country.”



Redskin Friend

In 1971, the Washington Redskins perennial losers in the National Football League, were winning and looked like they might make the playoffs for the first time since World War II. On November 21, the team lost at home to the Dallas Cowboys, 13-0. Redskin fans booed the players during the game. Two days later, Nixon took head coach George Allen up on a longstanding offer to visit with the team to give them a pep talk. Many of the players were stunned and elated to have the president show his support. The president told the players to ignore those who booed. "A great majority of people in this town back the team," he told the team. "You have been good for this city."