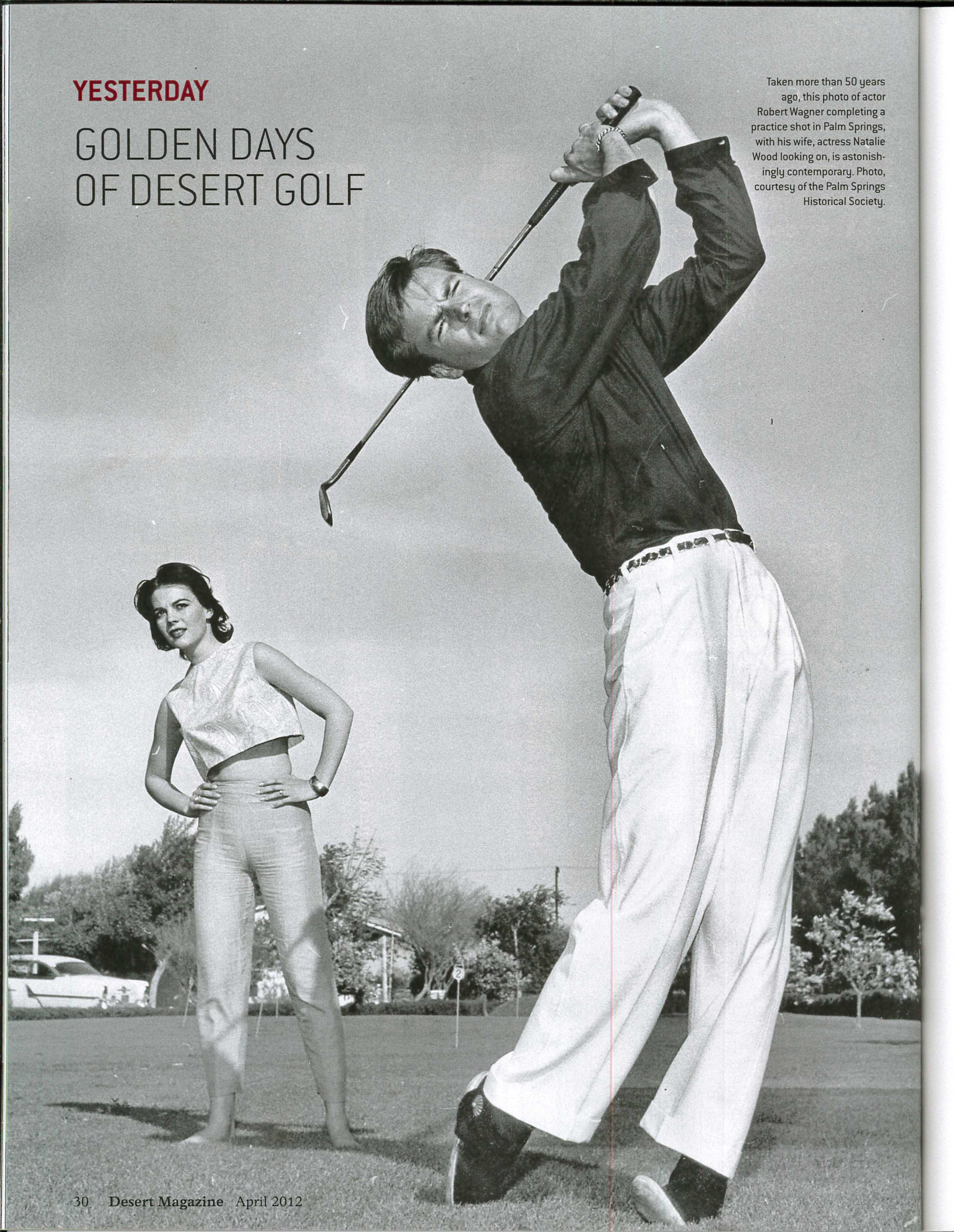


YESTERDAY

GOLDEN DAYS OF DESERT GOLF

Taken more than 50 years ago, this photo of actor Robert Wagner completing a practice shot in Palm Springs, with his wife, actress Natalie Wood looking on, is astonishingly contemporary. Photo, courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society.

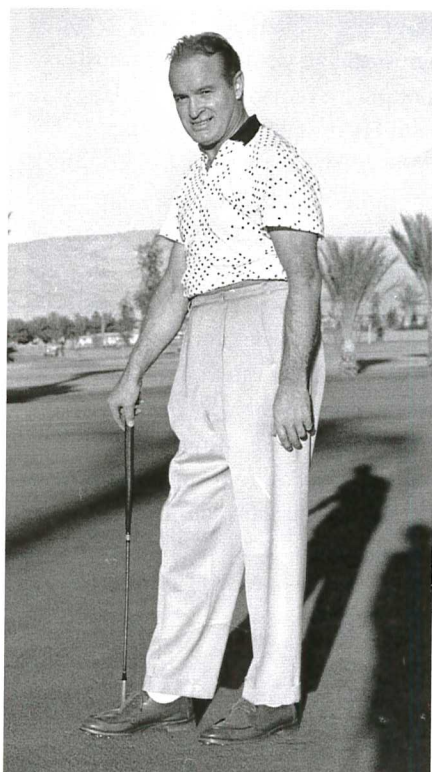


With some 120 private and public courses scattered from Palm Springs to Indio, calling our desert “the Golf Capital of the World” seems a natural. But, as recently as 1950, there wasn’t a single 18-hole course here.

FIRST COURSES

The El Mirador purportedly had the first course, with the O’Donnell Golf Club being second. It’s now the oldest golf course in the Coachella Valley. Wealthy oilman Thomas O’Donnell was an avid golfer and in the early 1920s he created a course at the base of San Jacinto as his front yard. His course provided front-nine play for his friends and the guests of the Desert Inn, with the inn’s Mashie course serving as the back nine.

At the other end of the valley, famed aviatrix Jacqueline Cochran in 1945 developed a nine-hole course at her guest ranch in Indio. Helen Dettweiler was her golf professional. The course survived to become the nucleus for the Indian Palms Country Club.



Comedian and actor Bob Hope plays the O’Donnell course. Photo courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society.



Singer, bandleader and actor Desi Arnaz gets around the Thunderbird Country Club course with an unidentified friend using the just-invented golf cart, emblazoned with the club’s iconic Thunderbird kachina logo. Photo courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society.

THE NEXT LEVEL: THUNDERBIRD

The first 18-hole golf course in the valley was developed around Frank Bogert’s Thunderbird Ranch, located in today’s Rancho Mirage. It was actually a gambit to help save the then-faltering dude ranch concern.

Pre-dude ranch, in 1927 Raymond Cree bought 663 acres from the Southern Pacific Railroad in Thunderbird Mesa. Cree retained the Indian name and erected a wooden depiction of a thunderbird on the hill at the top of his property. Then, in the 1930s, Charlie Farrell and Ralph Bellamy opened the Racquet Club in Palm Springs and because of its cachet, celebrities discov-

ered the desert. By 1938, Bogert was the Racquet Club’s manager as well as an adept marketer and publicist and, accordingly, tennis became the desert’s dominant sport.

Bogert went out on his own in 1946 and bought Cree’s 663 acres with help from investors after ascertaining there was plenty of underground water to support a golf course. He then opened a dude ranch with chuck-wagon cook-outs and horseback riding. When it became apparent that this approach wasn’t successful, Thunderbird Ranch was transformed into a golf community, with Johnny Dawson, a three-decades-long top amateur golfer, driving the



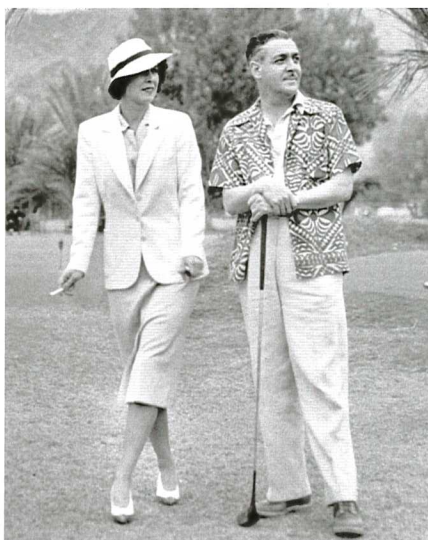
vision to build a full 18-hole course. The now-standard concept of selling lots all along the fairways to build houses, thus paying for the course, began at Thunderbird. La Quinta Resort's architect Gordon Kaufmann was hired to develop the new club and cottage buildings in a distinctly western style.

The first group to put their money into this development were celebrities Bob Hope, Randolph Scott, Phil Harris and Desi Arnaz, as well as sports figure Ralph Kiner, with the first and biggest investor—to the tune of some \$100,000—being Texas oilman D.B. McDaniel.

Architect Bill Cody was later hired to expand the club dining room and create additional lounge areas around the swimming pool. Velma Dawson, Johnny's wife, created the kachina-doll motif, the Thunderbird spirit-symbol, to adorn the clubhouse interior. Three hundred trees were imported and the sand was supplanted by greens. Jimmy Hines was hired as the first pro. His buddy Eddie Susalla was part of the deal.

McDaniel, the club's earliest investor, was unable to walk the course due to a bad leg. On a visit to Long Beach, Susalla saw a contraption called an autoette that was manufactured there. He immediately had it shipped back to Thunderbird and the golf cart was born. Originally a three-wheeled conveyance with "wings" at the side to carry the clubs, soon everybody wanted one of their own.

Interestingly, the famous sports car,



Top, a view looking south over The Desert Inn's Mashie Golf Course, courtesy of Tracy Conrad, photo by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle Studios. Middle, actress Lola Hotelling, with an unidentified man, exhibits stylish attire for a game. Above, Etta Lee and Lucille Ball Arnaz at Thunderbird, après golf. Both photos courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society.

which was Ford Motor Car's answer to the popular new Chevy Corvette, would be named after the club in 1954. The auto company's head maintained a winter home at Thunderbird and requested permission to use the club's name. The first car off the assembly line in October 1955 was shipped to the club for the Dawsons to drive. Ultimately, Thunderbird Ranch became the Thunderbird Country Club and Frank Bogert was replaced as manager.

The club's first golf invitational was for women in 1951, and by the mid-'50s, Helen Dettweiler was recruited from Cochran's Indio course and became Thunderbird's first female pro. In 1955, an impressive four years after its opening, Thunderbird would host the Ryder Cup.

EISENHOWER YEARS

Golfer Dwight Eisenhower traveled to the Coachella Valley as a sitting president in February 1954. He stayed at Smoke Tree Ranch in Palm Springs with friends Paul Helms of Los Angeles and Paul Hoffman, chairman of Studebaker Company. Eisenhower played at Tamarisk, which had opened in 1952 across the way from Thunderbird, along with famed golfer Ben Hogan, Paul Helms and Paul Hoffman. In his haste to get started that day, Eisenhower put his sweater on inside out. The following day the president played at Thunderbird.

After his return to Washington, Eisenhower made more courses possible by signing the Equalization Law, which opened the way for Indian tribes to make for-profit land deals. Years later, after retiring to Palm Desert to live at Eldorado Country Club, now in Indian Wells, Ike would hit a hole-in-one at Seven Lakes Country Club in Palm Springs.

THE CELEBRITIES

A slew of professional golfers and their celebrity friends would subsequently populate the famous area courses that followed. Everybody who was anybody was here: Ben Hogan, Ken Venturi,

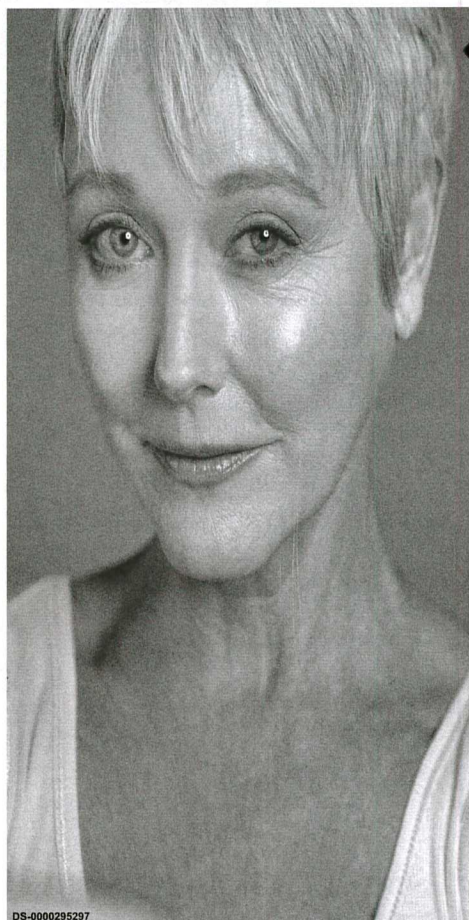
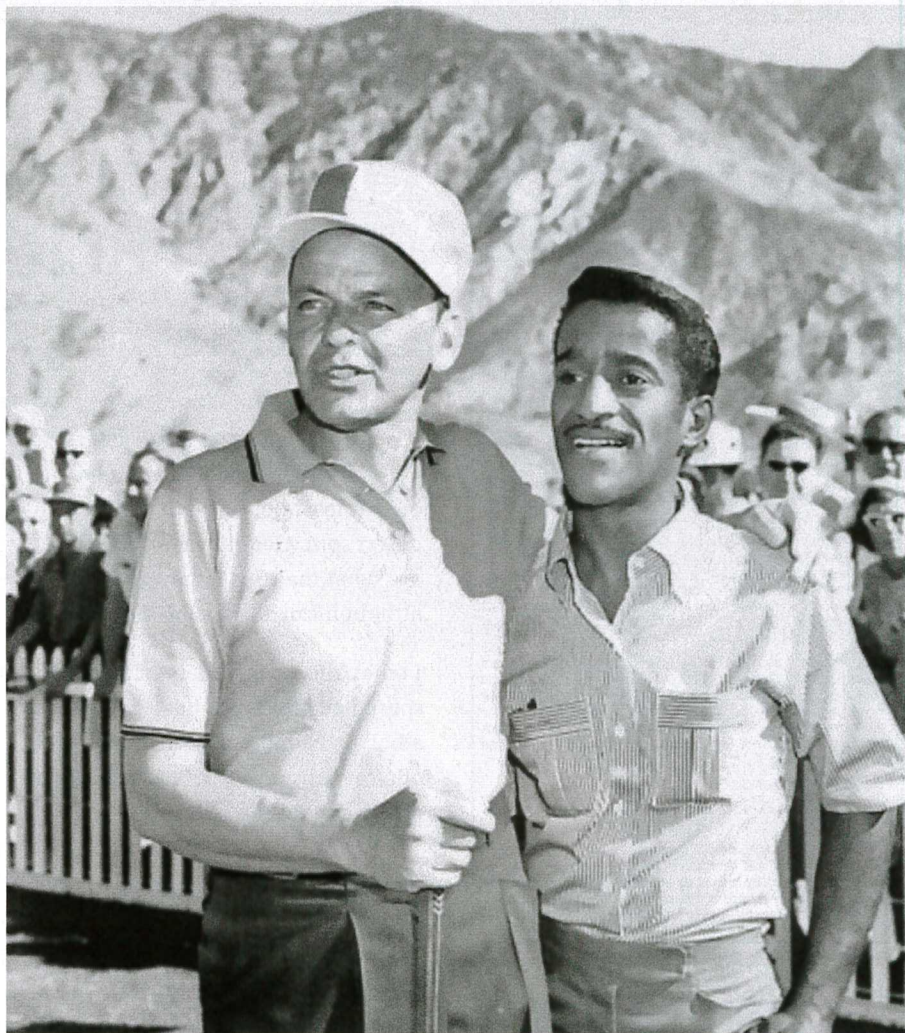
Byron Nelson, Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus. And the celebrities hosted their own tournaments, from Bob to Bing. Dinah Shore would complete the pantheon of high-profile tournaments in the desert with the inauguration of her own eponymous competition. Subsequent presidents would come to play, making the desert today synonymous with the world of golf.

—TRACY CONRAD

Right, singer, actor and longtime desert resident Frank Sinatra with his close friend entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. Photo courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society.

DETAILS

Tracy Conrad is a board member of the Palm Springs Historical Society and also of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has served on the Historic Site Preservation Board for the city of Palm Springs and is currently a Palm Springs Planning Commissioner.



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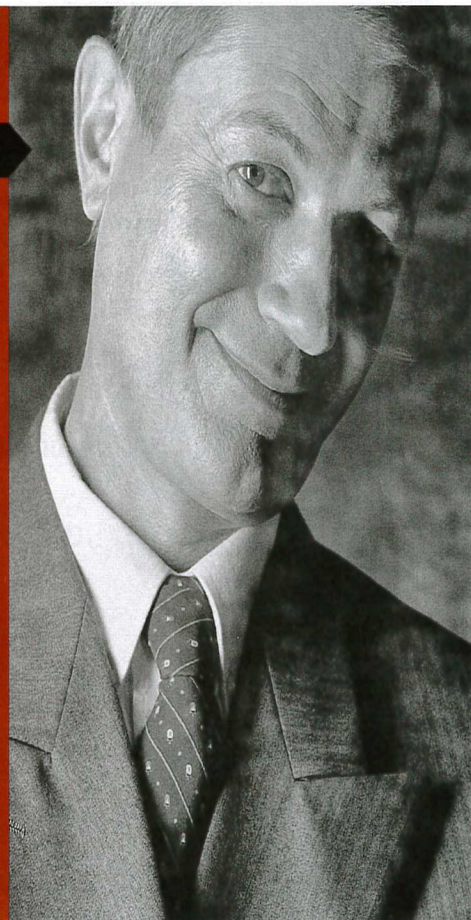
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