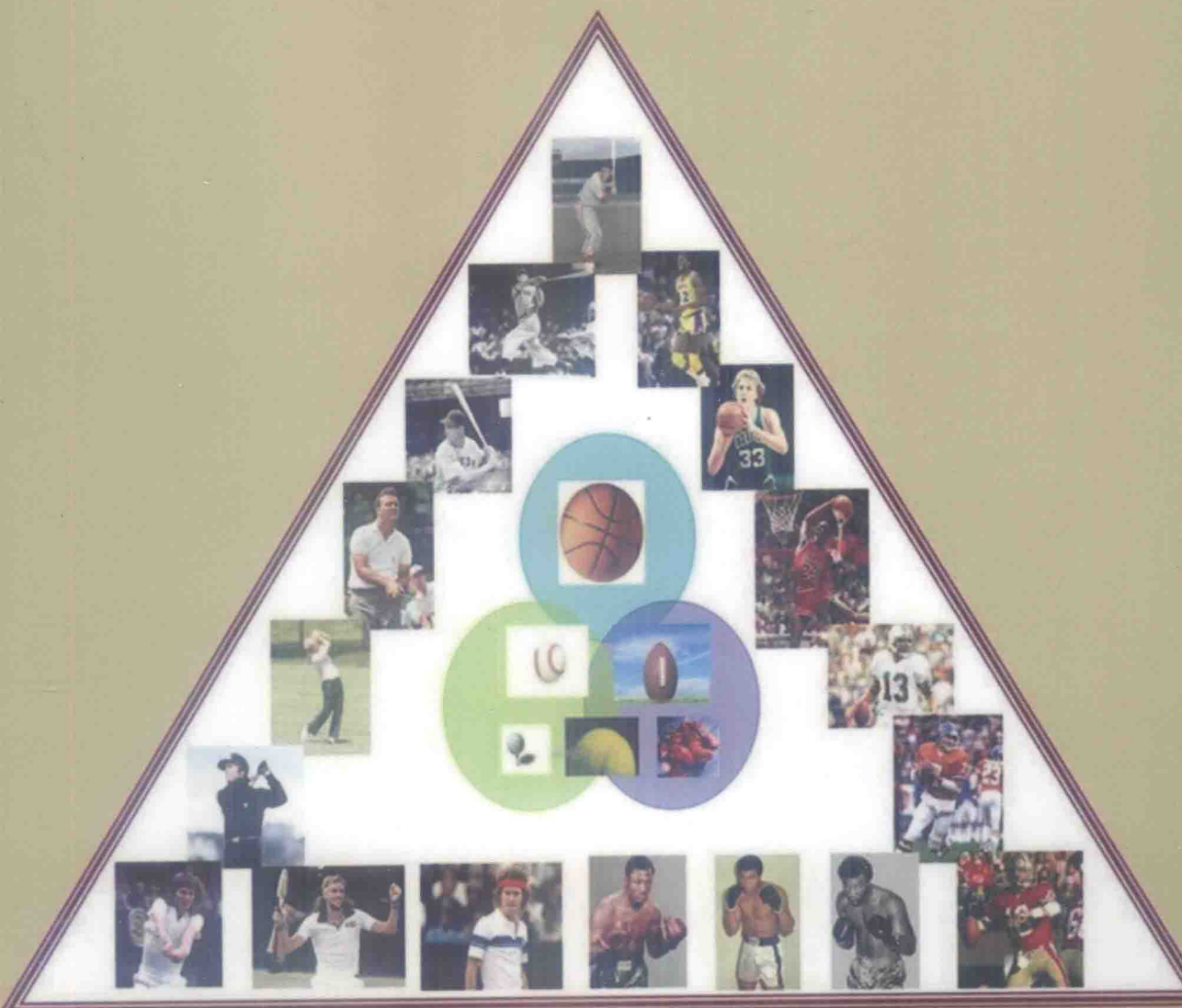


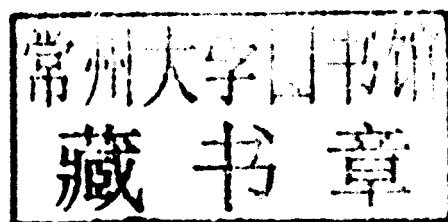
# The Greatest Three-Way Rivalries in Sports History



By

James Simpson II

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# **INTRODUCTION**

As an avid sports fan, what can I say: I'M HOOKED. Have been hooked, still am hooked, and will continue to be hooked (for better or worse). Where does the obsession come from? Heck, a number of things come to mind, but the one aspect of sports that has drawn fans even more to the game, lifts sports to prodigious heights, and hooks me the most is without a doubt: RIVALRIES! I'm staying off the subject of team rivalries and gearing my attention towards individual rivalries or as I like to call them, TWO-WAY RIVALRIES! When you think of the exceptional two-way rivalries that stand out throughout sports history, the obvious ones pop in your head: Ali-Frazier, Nicklaus-Palmer, Wilt-Russell, Magic-Bird, Manning-Brady, Evert-Navratilova, Agassi-Sampras, Federer-Nadal, Borg-McEnroe, Bradshaw-Staubach, Williams-DiMaggio, etc. Great list isn't it, although I want you to shift your attention – AGAIN -- to another type of rivalry that doesn't just include two players going at each other head-to-head...but involves three players. Remember the "Two-Way Rivalry" from earlier? Well, I'm bringing you the brand, spanking new, THREE-WAY RIVALRY! (I went with three-way rivalry over three-way triangle because it was more original, even though triangle sounds better).

A rivalry is defined as a competition for the same objective or for superiority in the same field. Well I like to define a "three-way rivalry", as "a fierce competition between three players in the same sport or field, that competed against one another, in the same league, during the same era, that played for different teams, who for at least a five to ten year period seemed to always be brought up in numerous discussions and debates worldwide -- that when it came to the fans and the media, the conversations were often enthusiastic, animated, and non-stop." I have created a top 10 list counting it down in reverse order that involves the greatest 3-way rivalries in history. These are three of the all-time best at their sport, who constantly battled each other year-after-year for Supremacy of their Sport. Whether championships, individual accolades, respect, recognition, or just seeking alpha dog status came into play, there was always something important on the line in these matchups. When it came to these trios, the labels, "Who's the best player in the league or in the sport?" or "Who's the best player at his/her position?", forever surrounded these athletes during their playing days and in the end that's what made it special. To make things

more interesting, at the end of each section, I ranked the players based on who I felt was better all-time and who got the better of the rivalry. With all that being said, let's jump to the list.

## **Honorable Mention**

- **Alex Rodriguez-Derek Jeter-Nomar Garciaparra.** The three best shortstops in the American League during the late 1990s and early 2000s in a bright era at that position.
- **Martin Brodner-Patrick Roy-Dominik Hasek.** When you think about the goalie position in hockey during the 90s and 2000s, these three usually come to mind. Without a question, three of the top 10 goalkeepers to ever step foot on the ice.
- **Sandy Koufax-Bob Gibson-Juan Marichal.** Not only were they the three finest pitchers in the National League during the 60s, but the cream of the crop at that position in all of baseball during that time. Throughout their careers, each pitcher intimidated the daylights out of opponents, had devastating stuff, and just plain overwhelmed batters in a way we've rarely seen since.
- **Greg Maddux-Roger Clemens-Randy Johnson.** With apologies to Pedro Martinez (my favorite pitcher ever), The Rocket, Mad Dog, and The Big Unit, edge out Pedro (barely) as the top three elite pitchers of the 90s. The three won a combined nine Cy Young awards throughout the decade. Nuff Said.

# **The Greatest Individual Sports Rivalries in 3's**

## **10. Troy Aikman-Brett Favre-Steve Young**

They might not have been the three premier quarterbacks in the 1990s (John Elway, Dan Marino, and Jim Kelly are the others that come to mind) but they were invariably brought up in the typical conversation as to, "Who's the top QB in football?" Most importantly each consistently had their team in title contention during the decade. When you're the quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys, Green Bay Packers, and the San Francisco 49ers (three of the top five NFL Franchises ever) your play is always scrutinized and the expectations are forever shooting through the roof, but when you deliver -- the fans are pretty much ready to build a statue of you. These three delivered. From 1992 to 1997, at least one of these three quarterbacks represented the NFC in the Super Bowl and in that five-year span they each led their teams to a Super Bowl title, with Aikman winning three, and Young and Favre one apiece. When it came to the playoffs, it seemed like every year each quarterback had to get past the other one to reach The Big Game and it was true. THEY USUALLY DID.

### **1992: NFC Championship Game #2 Cowboys def. #1 49ers, 30-20**

This was the first of what would be three straight NFC title game clashes between Aikman's Cowboys and Young's 49ers. The 49ers marched into the title game having the best record in the league at 14-2, with the Cowboys holding the second best record at 13-3. If you watched both teams closely that season, any football fan with common sense could have told you those were clearly the two best teams in the game. Both quarterbacks played well, but when it came down the stretch Dallas defense and Aikman made the critical plays to win on the road. A week later, Aikman would go on to win Super Bowl MVP as Dallas blasted the Buffalo Bills 52-17 to win their first Super Bowl title in 14 years. As for Favre, the Packers missed the playoffs in his first year as a starter.

**EDGE: AIKMAN**

**1993: NFC Divisional Playoff Game**  
**#1 Cowboys def. #6 Packers, 27-17**

**NFC Championship**  
**#1 Cowboys def. #2 49ers, 38-21**

Playing in his second career playoff game, Favre and up-and-coming Green Bay were overmatched by the defending champs. Favre put up big numbers with 331 passing yards, but the Aikman (28 of 37 passes, 302 passing yards) to Michael Irvin connection was too much on that day. In the NFC title rematch, Dallas overwhelmed San Francisco. Dallas rattled Young all day and even when Aikman suffered a concussion early in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, backup Bernie Kosar stepped in (as he did earlier in the season) and kept the momentum going. Dallas would again meet the Bills in the Super Bowl and again would walk away with another title.

EDGE: AIKMAN

**1994: NFC Divisional Playoff Game**  
**#2 Cowboys def. #4 Packers, 35-9**

**NFC Championship Game**  
**#1 49ers def. #2 Cowboys, 38-28**

Dallas would again smash Green Bay in the divisional round. While Aikman clicked on all cylinders, Favre mightily struggled. In the offseason, San Francisco made some key free agent acquisitions bringing in former Cowboys linebacker Ken Norton Jr. and the top cornerback in the game, Deion Sanders to help overthrow the Cowboys. For the third straight year, the 49ers and Cowboys were set to battle with a Super Bowl berth on the line. Aikman was coming into the title game with a perfect 7-0 playoff record as a starter, while Young had the "Can't win the big game" label looming over him. With those big moves, the 1994 49ers proved to be one of the most prolific, all-around teams in NFL History and they showed it, as they finally conquered the Cowboys, and then destroyed the Chargers 49-26 in the Super Bowl. By throwing a Super Bowl record six TD passes (still stands today), Young walked away with the game's MVP and at last "got the monkey off his back."

EDGE: YOUNG



**1995: NFC Divisional Playoff Game**  
**#3 Packers def. #2 49ers, 27-17**

**NFC Championship Game**  
**#1 Cowboys def. #3 Packers, 38-27**

Green Bay jumped on the defending champion 49ers early and often, as Favre (299 passing yards, 2 TD passes, 0 INTs) got the better of Young (328 passing yards, 0 TD passes, 2 INTS) in their first playoff matchup. The NFC title game turned out to be an exciting offensive shootout between the Packers and Cowboys, with Dallas sending the Pack home for the third consecutive year and on their way back into the Big Game. Favre and Green Bay proved they were equipped enough to be champs in the future although the time wasn't now. Dallas would go on to capture their 3<sup>rd</sup> Super Bowl title in 4 years and with that championship, they cemented themselves as a football dynasty. Aikman at the time would become only the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarterback in history along with Joe Montana and Terry Bradshaw to win three Super Bowl rings in their career.

**ANOTHER EDGE: AIKMAN**

**1996: NFC Divisional Playoff Game**  
**#1 Packers def. #4 49ers, 35-14**

Dallas' quest at a remarkable feat of winning 4 Super Bowl trophies in 5 years ended in the divisional round to the expansion Carolina Panthers. Dallas' reign atop the league was soon coming to a halt. While the Cowboys dynasty was fading, the Packers were looking to replace Dallas at the top of the NFC. On a rainy, muddy day at Lambeau, Favre and Green Bay did a number on Young's 49ers, who were also slowly waning from Super Bowl contention. The Packers would put "Titletown USA" back on the map by marching to the franchise's first Super Bowl title since 1967.

**EDGE: FAVRE**

**1997: NFC Championship Game**  
**#2 Packers def. #1 49ers, 23-10**

Injuries and off-field incidents unsettled the Cowboys season as they missed the playoffs for the first time since 1990. The 49ers and Packers

finished as the top 2 seeds in the NFC and met for the third straight year in the playoffs. Green Bay would knock out San Francisco and return to the Super Bowl as heavy favorites, but would go down against John Elway and the wild-card Denver Broncos.

EDGE: **FAVRE**

### **1998: NFC Wild Card Game**

**#4 49ers def. #5 Packers, 30-27**

All three teams were still playoff-caliber at this point but no longer Super Bowl contenders. The Cowboys would become upset victims by the young Arizona Cardinals in the wild card round. This was to be the 4<sup>th</sup> postseason in a row the Niners and Packers would slug it out. Favre had a 3-0 playoff record against his rival Young, but Young would get the upper hand this time as he threw the game-winning TD pass with eight seconds remaining in one of the greatest NFL playoff games. The 49ers would later fall to the eventual NFC champion Atlanta Falcons in the divisional round.

EDGE: No one deserves to get the nod this season. I'm leaving this one **UNCLEAR**.

So, let's take a look at the QBs head-to-head playoff record against one another...

**Aikman-** 2-1 vs. Young, 3-0 vs. Favre

5-1 combined record

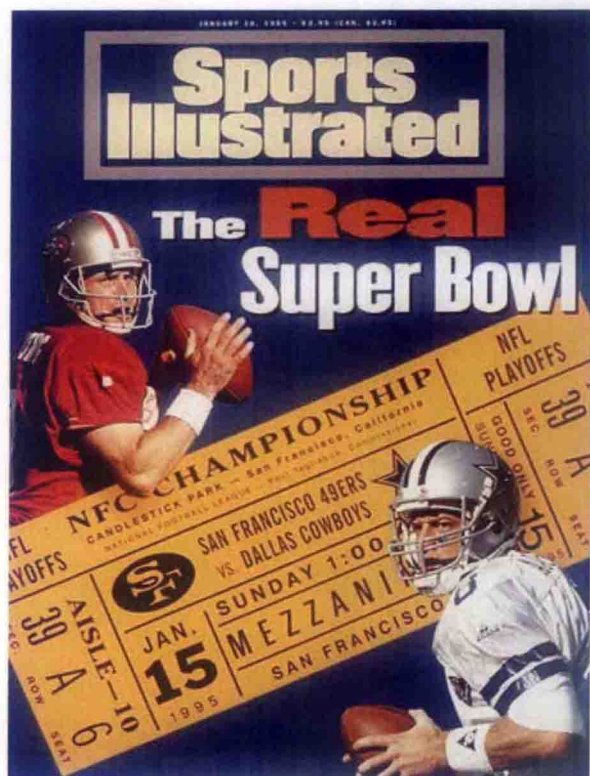
**Young-** 1-2 vs. Aikman, 1-3 vs. Favre

2-5 combined record

**Favre-** 0-3 vs. Aikman, 3-1 vs. Young

3-4 combined record

And that leads us to this...



Preview of the 1994 NFC Championship Game.



Young and Favre sharing a moment.



Young finally capturing the Lombardi Trophy after Super Bowl XXIX.



Aikman and Favre shaking hands after doing battle.



The Old Gun Slinger running away from a Dallas defender during the 1995 NFC Championship Game.



The Cowboys "Big Three" of Aikman, Smith, and Irvin.

**So, Who's Better-** The head-to-head playoff records are telling, but not that convincing. The quarterbacks play was an important factor in these playoff games, given it was not always the tipping point. I always thought Aikman got the raw end of the stick from the media for playing with so much talent. Yeah, he did have a ton of talent surrounding him, but that doesn't always guarantee success. Aikman seized control of the team, showed he was a proven leader, and maybe was the most accurate, decisive quarterback ever to play. Believe me, it wasn't a mistake Aikman led his team to 3 titles in 4 years. He was that good. After saying that, this is where the numbers and individual honors thing hurts Aikman and comes into play for Young and Favre. (By the way, if Dallas asked Aikman to throw more and carry a little more of the load, I believe his statistics could have been larger, yet they leaned strongly on one of the great offensive lines in history and one of the three best running backs ever in Emmitt Smith.) Brett Favre should be known as the "Emperor of NFL Passing Records." He's the all-time leader in career: TD passes (508), interceptions (336), passing yards (71,838), completions (6,300), attempts (10,169), consecutive starts by a quarterback (297), regular season wins by a starting quarterback (186), seasons with at least 30 TD passes (9), seasons with at least 20 TD passes (15), most seasons with at least 3,000 passing yards (18), consecutive MVP awards (3) from 1995-1997 and the list keeps on going. When you think of Favre's legacy, you think of the passing records he holds. To me, Favre's the Nolan Ryan of Football. The stats good or bad, pretty much define their careers and that's just not good enough when you're mentioned by many as the best QB of all-time. Favre did have a strong sense of the big moments during the late game situations, but he lacked the leadership qualities that most great signal callers usually have and *should* have.

Is it me or is Steve Young the most underrated, great quarterback ever? He rarely gets mentioned with Unitas, Brady, Manning, Montana, Elway, and Marino, but he should. His resume reads: Two NFL MVPs (1992,1994), one Super Bowl MVP, had the highest passer rating ever in a season, 112.8 in 1994 (before Peyton Manning broke it in 2004 at 121.8, and then Tom Brady in 2007 at 117.2, then again by Aaron Rodgers at 122.5 in 2011), the third best QB rating in history (96.8), the most career rushing TDs by a quarterback (43), most seasons with a passer rating over 100 (6), one of only 4 QBs to lead the league in touchdown passes 4 times tied with Johnny Unitas, Brett Favre, and Len Dawson, and an impressive and unappreciated six passing titles (tied with Sammy Bough with the most). Young's eight straight seasons of leading San Francisco to 10 wins or more goes unrecognized and his all-time QB ratio of 232 TD passes to 107 INTs get left in the dust when



discussing his career. Not many quarterbacks produced the elusiveness, quickness, and instincts he had as a runner, along with his skillful touch, scary deep ball, and mastery accuracy. So, when we mention who we think are the top six or seven quarterbacks ever, why isn't Young's name brought up in the equation? My answer: Longevity. When you assess his career, he was only great for six seasons. In the realm of things, that's an element that critics can hold against an athlete when discussing where they stand in history.

When it comes down to it, Favre was more consistently great, while Aikman was the better big game player and the best winner, but Young was more of a complete player and could beat teams in more ways. Favre was too reticent, unpredictable, and erratic as a quarterback to trust anything he did on the field, especially in big moments. With the aptitude of excellent teams Young played on, he should have won more than one Super Bowl as a starter (he won two as a backup behind Montana), but as much as you can't dismiss the fact that Aikman quarterbacked a football dynasty, he just wasn't the elite passer Young was. Steve Young had a rare quarterback skill set that set him apart from Favre and Aikman.

### **My Rankings**

- 1. Steve Young**
- 2. Troy Aikman**
- 3. Brett Favre**

## **9. Jack Nicklaus-Arnold Palmer-Gary Player**

The self-proclaimed "Big Three of Golf". These three dominated the game from the late 1950s through the 1970s and made golf as alluring as the other major sports. Golf reached new heights in the early 1960s and the sport's popularity grew on millions of television sets, mainly because of these three legends. While the South African Player was making his presence known on the tour, Palmer recognized as "The King", was drawing new fans with his stimulating style and relaxed personality. He was the first golfer that was perceived as and carried himself as a superstar. The 1960s came and the arrival of the chubby, more talented, powerful Nicklaus would soon challenge Palmer for golf's top dominion. The 1960 U.S. Open was full evidence of how daunting the two-time U.S. Amateur champion would be, finishing 2<sup>nd</sup>; two behind Palmer. The period where Nicklaus, Palmer, and Player

were each at the top of the sport was from 1960 to 1966, where during that stretch they combined to win 15 major championships out of 29 (Palmer and Nicklaus each 6, Player 3) and in seven consecutive years at least one of them won the Masters. Talk about being in full command of the PGA Tour!

Along with the 1960 U.S. Open, the majors produced some celebrated battles between the three...

1961 Masters- Gary Player became the first international player to win at Augusta, winning by one stroke over Arnold Palmer and Charles Coe.

1962 Masters- Arnold Palmer would win his third Masters title by defeating Gary Player and Dow Finsterwald in the tournament's first three-way playoff.

1962 U.S. Open- Jack defeated Arnie in a remarkable 18-hole playoff to take his first major title. Jack ended up shooting a 71 to Arnie's 74 in the final round.

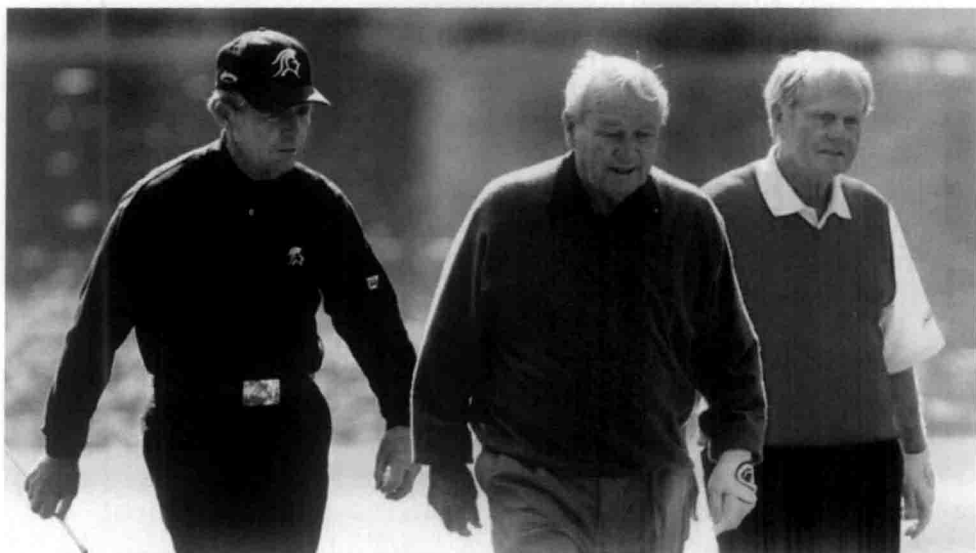
1964 Masters- What would be his fourth green jacket and seventh and final major, Arnold Palmer put on a wonderful show winning by six strokes over his rival Nicklaus and Dave Marr.

1965 Masters- Jack Nicklaus would go on to score a then Masters record 17-under-par 271 to win his second green jacket. To make it more special, he defeated his two biggest rivals Player and Palmer by a resounding nine strokes. The Golden Bear was at the peak of his game.

1967 U.S. Open- Nicklaus would again get the best of Palmer in a highly-contested encounter, winning his seventh career major by four shots.

1968 British Open- Gary Player wins his 2<sup>nd</sup> of three claret jugs by getting past Nicklaus and Bob Charles by two shots.

As you can see, the Big 3 produced some excellent matchups and amazing golf that lifted the PGA Tour to relevancy and mainstream status.



The Old Timers taking a stroll on the course.



Arnie and Jack at the 1962 U.S. Open.

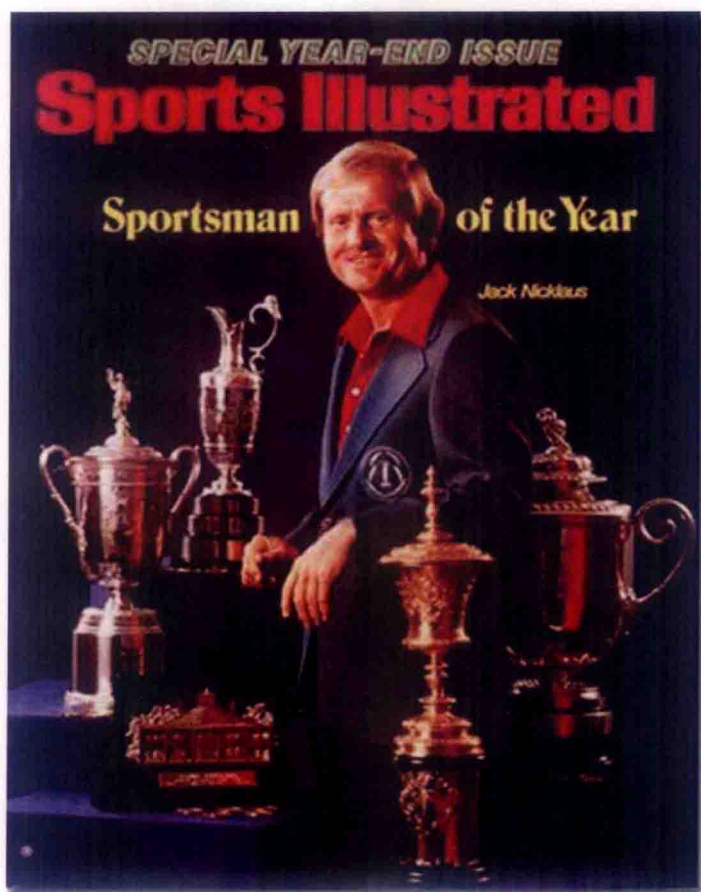


The Big Three of Golf posing together.





Chilling at Augusta National.



The Golden Bear won the 1978 Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Year.