

READER'S FORWARDS

NIQUE THE MAN ONCE KNOWN AS THE HUMAN HIGHLIGHT FILM WAS ONE OF THE NBA'S HIGH FLIERS AND ONE OF ITS MARQUEE PLAYERS IN THE 1980S AND '90S. NOW MORE GROUNDED, EVEN GOLFSTYLES SENIOR WRITER PATRICK JONES COULD CATCH UP WITH HIM - ON THE COURSE

it is a peculiar sight watching Dominique Wilkins play a sport where you can't get a good look at the bottom of his shoes. Nique (as he likes to be called) spent 16 years levitating high above NBA hardwoods - a dozen of those while performing gravity-defying feats in an Atlanta Hawks uniform. He logged more time airborne than a career Delta stewardess. Wilkins leapt into his sport's Hall of Fame in 2006 on the strength of his winged heels and a career 24.8 points scoring average. He was a nine-time All-Star and a two-time NBA Slam Dunk Champion.

Nique also loves to play golf. It was an intriguing diversion he took up while

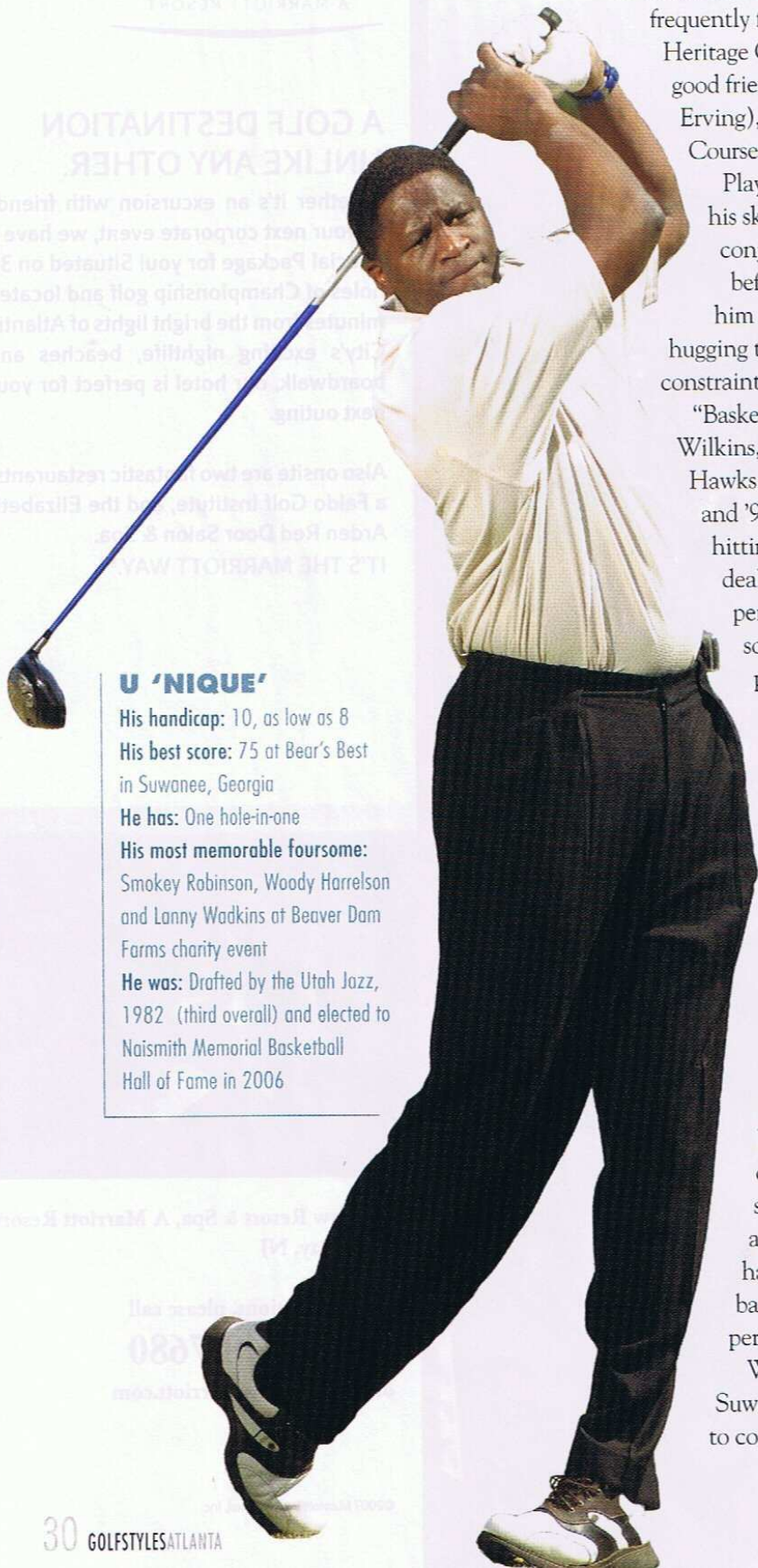




A GOLF DESTINATION
UNLIKE ANY OTHER.

U 'NIQUE'

His handicap: 10, as low as 8
His best score: 75 at Bear's Best in Suwanee, Georgia
He has: One hole-in-one
His most memorable foursome: Smokey Robinson, Woody Harrelson and Lanny Wadkins at Beaver Dam Farms charity event
He was: Drafted by the Utah Jazz, 1982 (third overall) and elected to Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2006



playing professional basketball. But since his retirement from the NBA in 1999, it has grown into a passionate pursuit. Wilkins, 47, is a solid golfer. He has managed to shave his handicap as low as an 8. Nique can be frequently found playing at his home course, The Heritage Golf Club in Tucker (recently purchased by his good friend and former NBA superstar Julius "Dr. J" Erving), or on the 36 holes at Stone Mountain Golf Course, which is near his home.

Playing pro hoops, Wilkins had total command of his skills. His gifted athleticism allowed him to conjure aerobic maneuvers rarely glimpsed before to score baskets. Golf, however, has kept him grounded. His soft spikes have his feet firmly hugging the fairways just like everyone else. And that constraint is part of the game's appeal to Wilkins.

"Basketball was something that I perfected," says Wilkins, who now works in the front office for the Hawks, a franchise he defined for much of the 1980s and '90s. "It was something that I was good at, so hitting pressure shots (on the court) was not a big deal to me. Golf has given me the opportunity to perfect something, or, at least try to perfect something, that I was initially uncomfortable playing. It takes a lot of time and practice. Golf is a very challenging game, and I enjoy that."

"The only similarity (between golf and basketball) is focus, just like you need in any other sports or competition," says Wilkins. "Being focused and being patient are the biggest things. Golf is a much harder game (than basketball). It is all technique and feel."

When Nique was an 11th grader, Howard Garfinkel, co-founder of the Five-Star Basketball Camp, nicknamed him the "Human Highlight Film" because of his scintillating moves on the court. Three decades hence, when Nique was asked if that label could be automatically transferred to define his skills on the golf course as well, he replied, with a light laugh, "Mmmm. No. Unh, unh. I have had some highlights, though. I think I drive the ball pretty well. I think I am in the fairways 70 percent of the time, which is pretty good."

Wilkins shot a career-best 75 at Bear's Best in Suwanee. His lengthy swing arc, he says, allows him to consistently power his drives in the 300-yard

range. As a 6-foot-8 forward, he rocked the rims in NBA arenas thousands of times, but golf, thus far, has granted him just a single slam dunk – an ace that came on the short par 3 No. 4 on his home course at The Heritage.

While his golf game likely won't rival his basketball legacy, Wilkins has come a long way since a painful introduction to the game 15 years or so ago at the Jack Nicklaus-designed Country Club of the South.

Fortunately for Nique, and for his Hawks coaches and teammates at the time, the physical hurt was put on someone else's hide, not his.

"I remember a cameraman was standing almost in front of me (on the first tee)," says Wilkins. "I told him he didn't want to stand there because I was not very good at this. I told him again that 'I don't know if you really and truly want to stand there.' He stood there anyway and I hit him with the ball. And I hit him pretty good. That was my first experience playing golf."

It was enough to pique Nique's interest. He continued to practice and play the game during the NBA's off-season.

"Golf is one of those sports that kind of creeps up on you," says Wilkins. "All your friends play it, so you go through a phase where you try it and see how you like it. That is what I did. Living in Atlanta, there is a golf course on every corner. How can you not get into (golf)? I wasn't very good at it at first, but I got better at it and got more interested in it. I developed a strong love for it. Now I think I am pretty decent."

Wilkins says he plays "every chance I get," which means at least several times a week. Not surprisingly, he is in demand as a celebrity player in numerous charitable tournaments around the state.

Nique mixes his golf game with his duties as vice president of basketball for the Hawks, a position he accepted in 2004. He is responsible for advising the board of managers and senior management team on all basketball-related issues, working as a strong voice in the community, and serving as a member of the

executive committee and the Hawks' Free Agent Acquisition Committee.

"It's a great position," says Wilkins. "I wear a lot of different hats and am involved in a lot of different things on the management side of things. It's a great position to be in. I am back with an organization that I love. To me it's like coming home and being part of the family."

Wilkins was the third pick overall in the 1982 draft out of the University of Georgia. He was selected by the Utah Jazz but his rights were traded to the Hawks. Wilkins put up huge offensive numbers in Atlanta that still dazzle. He averaged more than

30 points per game in two seasons, led the Hawks to four straight 50-win seasons and remains the team's all-time leading scorer with 23,292 points.

Nique is also very proud of another family that he joined in September 2006. He was one of three players, including Charles Barkley and Joe Dumars, enshrined in the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass.

"It means everything in the world," says Wilkins of his induction. "It validates who you are as a person and as a player to get in. You somewhat become

immortalized once you reach that plateau. It is a great feeling. You join the elite of the elite."

He has also been inducted into the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame and the Atlanta Sports Hall of Fame for his basketball exploits.

But it is golf that has captured his fancy since retiring from the NBA. It is the recreation that provides him with the right amount of athletic challenge, while also offering some solitude after so many years in the media's spotlight.

"You know what's great about golf?" says Nique. "Any problem you may have, you can go out to any golf course and no one bothers you. You have your phone off. You have beautiful greens. And you just play. It's the best relaxing time that I have."

Even if the Human Highlight Film has to play it with his soles still on the ground. ■

NIQUE-NESS

He was born January 12, 1960
in Paris, France

He attended University of Georgia

He admires NBA contemporaries Michael Jordan, Clyde "The Glide" Drexler and Bill Laimbeer, fellow NBA Hall of Famers who can really play (golf).

He plays Callaway X-16 irons;
TaylorMade R7 driver; Scotty Cameron putter; his basketball is Spaulding
He calls home The Heritage Golf Club
in Tucker, Ga.

He likes to play East Lake, The Heritage, Stone Mountain, Atlanta Nationa, Bears' Best, Eagles Landing