

# GOOD TIMES FOR BADDS

AARON BADDELEY HAS A NEW GAME AND A NEW CONFIDENCE FOLLOWING HIS RECENT SHOWING ON THE PGA TOUR. HE TALKS TO PAUL PRENDERGAST FROM ARIZONA.

Aaron Baddeley sounded relaxed and content with life as he chatted on the phone from his home in Arizona, three days on from his best result of the 2016/17 PGA Tour wraparound season at the Valero Texas Open.

At least, I thought he was at home until I heard the sound of him indicating to change lanes. Badds was multitasking, talking and driving – something he must be well versed in as dad to four young children.

“Are we there yet?” would be a familiar backseat question for this 36-year-old and, as I suspected, Baddeley was in the process of performing taxi duties, ferrying kids from point A to B.



“It’s a juggling act, but you know exactly what time you need to leave home to get to one place and then to pick another one up from somewhere else,” he said. And life for the Baddeleys won’t become simpler any time soon, with wife Richelle expecting the couple’s fifth child any day now.

“The car knows how to get to the maternity ward on auto pilot,” Baddeley mused.

Hard to believe that, a half lifetime ago, a 19-year-old Baddeley won the 1999 Australian Open title at Royal Sydney Golf Club as an amateur – the first non-pro to do so since Bruce Devlin in 1960 – capturing the hearts and attention of Australian golf fans in the process.

We well remember the clean-cut young man with the precocious putting stroke, nervelessly holding his better-known rivals at bay to take out the Stonehaven Cup with one of his best mates on the bag, Dion Kipping.

It all looked so carefree and simple and when Baddeley backed it up with a successful defence at Kingston Heath, the world pondered whether we were witnessing the rise of a young tyro to challenge the new sensation, Tiger Woods.

The years have ticked by and Baddeley would concede his career hasn’t quite lived up to his own and others’ lofty expectations, although it’s a career most would gladly replicate.

You don’t win four PGA Tour titles, bank nearly \$20 million in earnings and maintain your status on the biggest stage for the better part of 17 years by laying sod over the ball, but Baddeley’s ups and downs within that time have been well documented.

His fourth PGA Tour title at last year’s Barbasol Championship in Alabama served both to assure his immediate future on tour and, perhaps more poignantly, reignite confidence in his ability to aspire once again to game’s highest level.

“Having the win last year has allowed me to plan my schedule well. Last year, I couldn’t really do that because I didn’t know if I’d be in an event until the last minute,” he said.

“Having that win was key, as it allows me to put a plan in place and work out when I needed to work really hard in a block of time to get my game to where it needs to be.



Aaron Baddeley celebrates winning the 1999 Australian Open at the Royal Sydney Golf Course.

“It also gives my wife and I the chance to better plan for things like when we might go away for a holiday and have a good time.”

With his immediate future assured, Baddeley returned home to Australia last November and narrowly missed claiming a third Australian Open title back at Royal Sydney. Better known for his short game and putting prowess, Baddeley belied his relatively poor ball-striking statistics on tour by showcasing the amount of work he had been doing with an eye-catching display from tee to green.

Those who witnessed his warm-up before the final round, with major champions Geoff Ogilvy and Jordan Spieth to his left and right, could not have been more impressed by the purity of his striking with every club in the bag.

This form has continued on throughout 2017 and despite some missed cuts he has remained enthused by the sustained improvement in his game, culminating in his high finish in Texas.

“I was pleased, it was good. It’s been on the cards for a while,” Baddeley said of his week in San Antonio.

“My game has never been as simple as it is right now. There’s no more searching, there’s just refinement of little things you need to focus on to pull off certain shots when you’re nervous or in certain conditions.

“Last week for example, it was a tough course, it was windy and I think I finished first in strokes gained in approach to the greens. I believe it’s the first time I’ve ever done that.

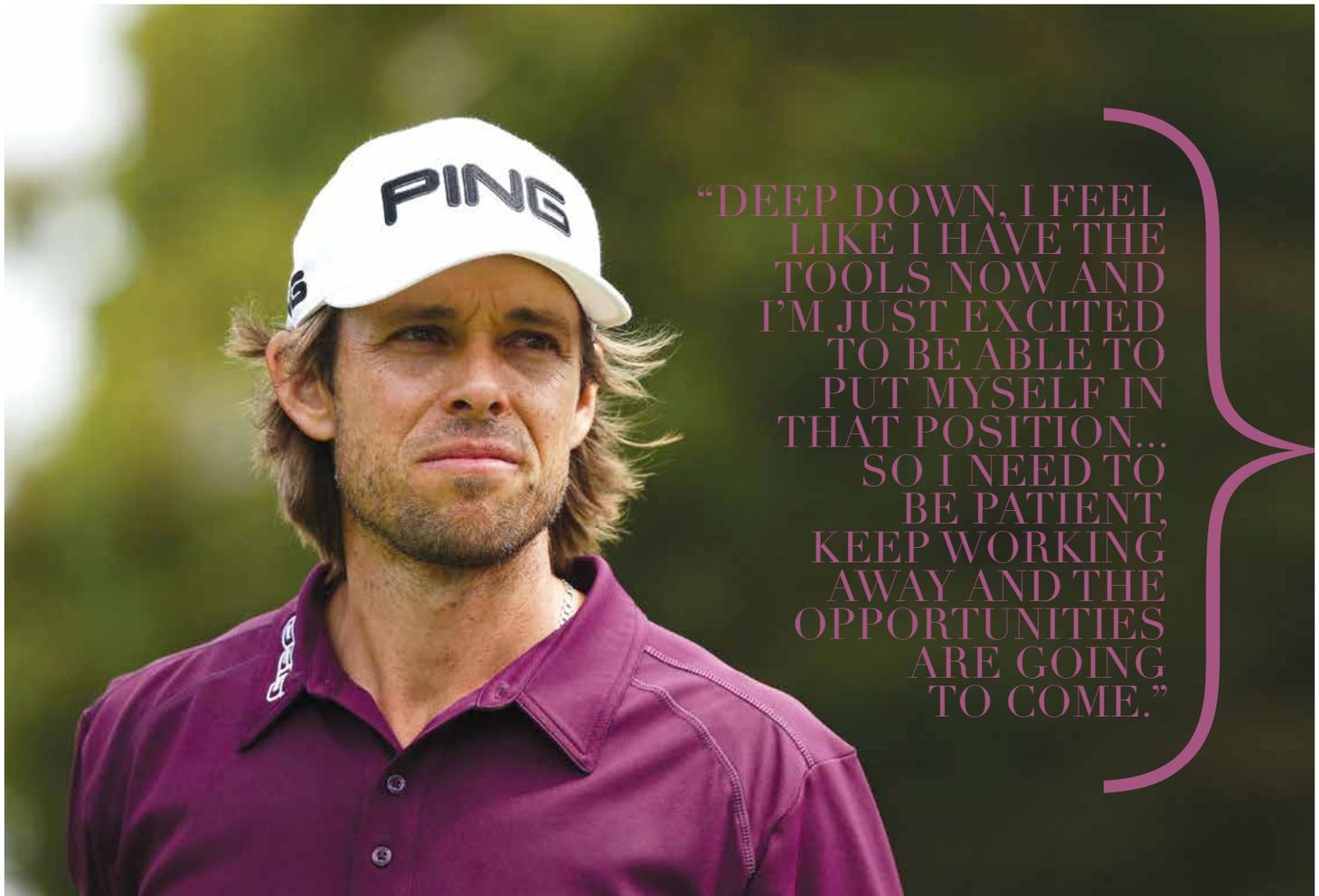
“I finished up there in strokes gained off the tee in Houston, too, so it’s good to see from fruit from the labour and the things you need to do to play great.”

Baddeley’s efforts have not been confined to the physical and technical elements of his game but have extended to a complete overhaul of his preparation, along with a new appreciation of the benefits of rest.

“I’ve been working with Brad Malone this year and have been very detailed with that, keeping notes of everything I do so that we’re able to review and prepare properly,” he said.

“Even down to where I might miss a cut, like at Hilton Head this year. I missed the cut there and instead of practising for two days over the weekend, I took time off and came home to Phoenix and spent four days with the family over Easter.





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“I went down to San Antonio refreshed, knowing my game was right there ready to play. Just things like that, when normally I’d be out there stressing and grinding. Now, I’m able to relax and come back to the game refreshed and play better.”

Baddeley’s world ranking of 117th after the Texas Open is his best position in over five years. It’s a statistic the Victorian is acutely aware of: “It means it can take just one good week or a win and all of a sudden you’re back up around that 50 mark and in the Majors and the World Golf Championships.”

Attempting to qualify for the US Open at Erin Hills, however, is not something pencilled in bold on his ‘To Do’ list; there’s the small matter of Richelle giving birth at around the same time.

While he’s not counting out Erin Hills if he can qualify – “We’re playing it by ear” – The Open Championship at Royal Birkdale in July is an event Baddeley has been building his year around after securing an exemption to the championship via his finish at the Australian Open.

The prospect of a second Presidents Cup appearance for the International team in New Jersey later this year is also a strong motivator and has him licking his lips in anticipation.

“For sure, that’s definitely on the radar. I’d love to be a member of that team. I really like Liberty National, too; we played The Barclays there a few years ago when Scotty [Adam Scott] won. It would be awesome to be at that. It’s pretty special. I haven’t looked at the standings, but I figure if you play well, things take care of themselves.”

Given that Badd had by this stage still not reached his

destination, I pushed on to ask for his reaction to watching some of his more immediate peers in the game – Sergio Garcia and Justin Rose – going head to head in an epic duel at the Masters, when Garcia secured an emotional first Major championship at his 74th attempt.

It’s interesting to recall that players like Garcia, Rose, even Adam Scott, are all around the same age as Baddeley and entered the professional ranks around the same time.

“To watch Sergio and Justin come down the stretch – both really good blokes, too – you weren’t pulling for one or the other, but it was really good to see Sergio win there.

“Sergio has had his ups and downs and it was interesting to hear one of his interviews where he said he’s going to have about 80 opportunities to win a Major. He won in his 74th start.

“Now, more than ever, I feel like it [seeing friends and peers succeeding] spurs me on more than it ever has. I now feel like I have the tools to be able to win at the highest level.

“I’m good friends with Bubba, too, so if he’s playing great and winning tournaments, it spurs you on. I play practice rounds with him and when guys like Adam, Jason, Leish, Pamps and Chalmers are doing well, we all text each other and support each other.

“Deep down, I feel like I have the tools now and I’m just excited to be able to put myself in that position. I’m just right there, so I need to be patient, keep working away and the opportunities are going to come.” □