

# Taking Aim

*Paul Prendergast talks to seven-time PGA Tour winner, astute course design critic and father of three Geoff Ogilvy about the state of his game, his off-course architecture business, the renovation of St Andrews and the long putter debate.*

**G**eff Ogilvy is a man on a mission. The 2006 US Open champion is without a win in over two years and has, at the time of press, yet to receive an invitation to the Masters Tournament in April. Ranked outside the top 50 in the world (the magic number that would get him a berth at Augusta) for the first time since before that memorable afternoon at Winged Foot where he outlasted both Phil Mickelson and Colin Montgomerie, Ogilvy and his young family have moved back to Arizona for the good of his game.

The tall Australian says he isn't unduly worried about his recent form – he only missed two cuts in 2012 – but in leaving California for Scottsdale and Whisper Rock Golf Club, a favoured haunt for many PGA Tour pros, the outspoken Ogilvy, who started his own course design business with the respected architect Michael Clayton in 2010, is looking to scale the same kind heights that earned him not just a Major but also three World Golf Championship (WGC) titles.

**Statistically, it's difficult to assess why 2012 was not as successful for you in comparison to past years. Have you been able to pinpoint anything in particular?**

I played well enough physically to do quite well. I only missed a couple of cuts, I played well at The Open [tied for 9th] and featured at the PGA Championship [tied 11th], but I was always just two or three shots away. It was always like that. I just think that maybe I've been practicing too much at home and not playing enough holes. Every day I walked off, I thought I'd probably played better than the score I had that day. Not a lot, but it's a pretty fine line between finishing 10th, 15th, 20th and winning tournaments.

It doesn't really show up in the stats but when you're playing your best, even when you hit a bad shot, you manage to hit it to where it's an easy par. You might hit it 15 feet right of the pin as opposed to pulling it into a bunker and not getting it up and down. That's not going to show up in the stats.

You don't fix that with more time on the range, you fix that playing more holes. Whether that's at home with friends or tournament holes, I probably haven't been doing enough of that. All I've been doing the past few weeks is play rounds of golf so hopefully it works. We'll see.

**If the stats tell us anything, it's that there's nothing glaringly wrong.** Professional golfers are always moaning about some part of their game – not holing enough putts, not doing this, not doing that.

**The Australian's immediate goal is to get back inside the world's top 50-ranked players in order to secure his berth at The Masters**



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I actually haven't been moaning at all, I've actually been pretty happy with how it's all going but I just haven't had the scores. I guess that's just one of the cycles you go through in professional golf.

I made more money than I spent last year, and as a professional golfer, that's kind of the point of the exercise in one way. So I was obviously doing it better than a lot of other guys but maybe not quite as well as I have done [in the past].

**You played 20 events in 2012 and the only time you played less [19] was in an injury marred 2010. Does playing more holes also mean playing more on Tour?**

I probably do need to play more rounds of golf. I started having kids six years ago, just after I won the US Open – [Ogilvy's wife] Juli was pregnant at Winged Foot. After that, I probably started slightly adjusting my practice.

Before, I used to go to the club, have breakfast, practice, play a round when a game turned up,

practice a bit afterwards and then go home. That was my day, like a normal 9-5 job, that's what I did.

As soon as you start having kids, you try to manage your time and do the father thing. So now I've got three or four hours in the day. I'll go up to the course and hit balls and have my putts but I guess I didn't appreciate the value of spending time around good golfers like we have at Whisper Rock and playing lots of holes. To me that's more important than anything on the range. It's a subtle shift and gradually, as you get more stuff going on at home, I think I probably went to the range or the putting green before I went for a round of golf because I felt I could get more done in a shorter period of time.

Playing more rounds of golf, playing little money games with the Whisper Rock crowd, where there's so many professionals to play games with. If I've got two hours now, I'll go play nine holes as opposed to spending that time on the range.

**Putting your architectural hat on for a moment, your firm, Ogilvy Clayton, appears to be going from strength to strength in Australia and overseas. How do you balance this burgeoning interest with being in the US for most of the year?**

I can't go to as many golf courses and do the walking around which is the fun part, being out there and doing it. I can't do that in Australia as much at this point. I'm in all the conversations

about everything but the stuff that's overseas I might be more involved in.

I really, really like it. I'm very lucky to be associated with the people at Ogilvy Clayton, who are just incredible, very talented. I'm just along for the ride with the talent really, it's amazing. I'm learning a lot and am really enjoying it.

It's an interesting period in the industry. In the golf-developed countries like Australia and the United States, they probably have about the right amount of courses that they can sustain. I don't think there's any 'boom' period to come in these countries. I can't see hundreds of courses needing to be built in the US, for example.

There's a whole new frontier of full restorations and 're-dos', putting in new holes or new courses on old ones, that's probably the next frontier in Australia and America. Mike Clayton and the crew have done some great stuff on the restorations in Australia and are very, very good at that. So there will be two fronts to the industry for us. I've always loved the golf courses. To me, it's the most un-talked about reason why golf is so loved.

**There's probably one redesign that's currently underway that you probably wish wasn't done – the Old Course at St Andrews ...**

It's disappointing in that the whole point of it is to make us shoot a slightly higher score every five years [at The Open], and it's embarrassing – disgusting – that they're doing it for that reason. I mean .. it's hard to have the words to describe the arrogance of doing something like that, it's incredible.

It's like, 'The Mona Lisa is fading a little so let's put some colour into her face, people will enjoy it more.' Or 'The Sistine Chapel is a bit small now for the number of people who want to go through it, let's make it bigger.' That's probably a better analogy really because that's what it is.

The reason the sport is what it is, is because of St Andrews. It didn't evolve to the point where it's at because of people doing what they're doing right now. It evolved, it didn't get designed. It came because of nature, all the balls finishing in one place so there were lots of divots and that spot became a bunker. It's the first place that anyone should ever study when they think about golf course architecture.

**And the last place anyone should ever touch ...**

And the last place they should touch! I think the thing that really affected most people that got emotional about it was the way they went about it. Making a sneaky little announcement the same weekend everyone was talking about the long putter ban. The bulldozers were out the next day. Surely the Old Course deserves a round table of the smartest people in golf with the best



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intentions and to discuss it for two years before you do anything?

I'm sure they'll do it seamlessly and do a nice job. I've played St Andrews 25 times and the Road Hole bunker has been different every time I've been there, so it's not like changes aren't being made there all the time, changes that a lot of people don't even know about. But, they're doing a lot of fundamental changes ... it's amazing.

**They've done plenty of bunker work for maintenance reasons over time but changing contours that have evolved and adding to the 11th green to provide extra pin placements are pretty fundamental changes ...**

It's been fine for 400 years, in the form it's in it's been fine for a hundred years. It's fine!

I mean, if they get crazy wind and you can't put a pin up the back left on 11 then, oh well. Or, you just have that green running two feet slower than the others. We're the best golfers in the world, surely we can work out that the green is slower. We're not that precious.

**Peter Thomson told me changing the Old Course was "preposterous" and that he had no knowledge of the plan until it was announced. This was despite being a town resident, course architect and a pre-eminent figure in the game, especially when it comes to links golf.**

It felt like they'd [the R&A] been sneaking around. They knew there would be a backlash so they made sure they had the bulldozers out there ready before anyone could stop it. That's what it felt like and I think that's what annoyed everyone the most.

I think if the process was right and if the right people in the game sat down and went, 'You know what? Those bunkers on the second could move five yards', or whatever it is, maybe it would sit better with people. The way it happened was pretty frustrating.

They could have done that at any point in the next year but they chose to announce it at the same time as the long putter thing, when the whole world was



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focused on that. They snuck it in, out come the bulldozers and it’s like, ‘What are they doing?’

Surely they know they’re doing something wrong if they have to sneak it in under a bigger announcement? You’re not that confident about what you’re doing are you, surely? It was the process rather than the reality. The reality is not very nice but the process was horrible.

**I’m certain you have firm views on some of the other issues that arose in the game just prior to the winter break – the anchoring ban, for instance. What’s your take?**

I’m not passionate either way. The one thing is if the powers at be or golfers in general think that short putters are important then they had to make that call. At some point, every kid was going to pick a long putter up, every pro is going to use one. Within 20 years, like wooden clubs and steel spikes, the short putter would be extinct.

To me though, I don’t think it’s cheating. It doesn’t worry me who uses it because I’ve always

had the choice to use it if I wanted to. The long putter hasn’t changed the way the game is played. For me, hybrids and the big drivers have changed it the most. The golf ball goes further and that’s another argument, but hybrids have made a bigger impact.

In 1986, Greg Norman could hit it 240 yards right up in the air and stop it on the green. The next best guy couldn’t do that. Nicklaus had that advantage and Weiskopf and Watson, even Tiger in the first few years, and Davis Love. The best of the best had a massive advantage outside 200 yards, but now everyone can hit it 240 yards and stop it next to the hole.

To me, that’s a massive change. I’m not saying it’s good or bad, I’m just saying it’s a way bigger change to how golf is played than the long putter. You still need to roll the ball along the ground. You can look at all the stats and say that maybe some people putt better, but with hybrids and the big drivers, everyone drives it great now.

I never played in the era with wooden clubs and balata balls but from what I understand, only the best could drive it properly. They had such an advantage. Maybe the big clubs and hybrids have made the game better but I’m saying, that’s a much bigger change than the long putter.

They changed a rule that doesn’t really impact that much, but, they changed the groove rule a few years ago. Maybe they’re putting the feelers out on rule changes to see what the tolerance levels are. Maybe they’re looking at some of the bigger issues, like the golf ball and big drivers, I don’t know. You’d like to think the powers that

be are smart people and are sitting around thinking about the betterment of golf and how to preserve this great game.

**How impressed have you been with the way the USGA has setup the US Open, a tournament you have won, in recent years – and do you think their approach could be a catalyst for change in the way regular Tour venues are prepared?**

There was obviously a period at US tournaments, with the exception of The Masters, where the longer and narrower the course and the longer the rough, the better. The more you get punished for a bad shot, the better the tournament’s going to be. There was definitely that attitude, but it’s changed a little bit because I think they understand that short grass can be just as scary as long grass, or even more scary, and way more interesting.

They’re starting to do some interesting stuff, maybe have a short par-4 in there, and starting to see that golf doesn’t have to be about making it as hard as you can. It’s about making it interesting.

The amazing thing for me is that the template has been there for years. The Masters for me, with the exception of a few years when they tried to make it too hard, has been the most entertaining tournament of the year for 50 years. There’ve been some great days at US Opens and Open Championships but purely as a spectacle, The Masters sets the bar every year for entertainment and for finding the best player.

It ticks every box for professional golf yet they’ve almost been going out of their way to set up golf courses the exact opposite of The Masters. Augusta has lots of short grass; you can basically hit it anywhere but you need to find the best angles to approach the greens, which are going to punish you subtly and not obviously. But [elsewhere else] the model is almost the exact opposite to that which is amazing to me.

But with [Chief Executive] Mike Davis at the USGA, there’s definitely been some progress at US Opens over the past four to five years. They’ve been moving some tees up on par 4s and 5s and not necessarily just covering the course in rough. They now have some short grass.

The quality of the golf course and the quality of the setup almost directly dictates how good your tournament is to play and watch. It’s an underappreciated art but there seems to be a bunch of guys who get to do the setups that are going in the right direction, I think.

**If the players themselves were allowed to setup the courses, which one would you like to get your hands on in that situation?**

I’d probably be accused of setting it up too easy. It depends on the course and if you’re allowed to get the greens as firm as you want. I think golf is more interesting when great shots get rewarded

and I think recovery shots are one of the biggest parts of golf. If you cover your course in rough and make it too narrow, you’re basically bringing everyone back to the same place. Everyone can hit a 50 yard hack out of thick rough, the worst player in the field and the best player in the field that week. So I don’t understand why that’s good.

You have short grass down the left side of the fairway on the ninth at Augusta and you can hit a 30 yard hook under the trees onto the green. The best player in the world is going to hit that shot, as Tiger has shown us a number of times, while the worst player in the field is going to hit it way right and make a six, and everything in between. To me, that’s more interesting but not every course is as fun to setup as Augusta.

I’d really like to set Oakmont up. I think it’s an amazing course, probably one of the best golf courses in the world. It’s so hard when we play it in the US Open but it could be so fun too.

**The US Open will be played this year at Merion, which for someone like you with such an interest in golf course architecture must be something of a treat. Have you seen the East Course there before and are you concerned how the USGA will go about setting the course up in order to protect par?**

Actually I haven’t. I’ve played Pine Valley down the road but not there, so I’m pretty excited about it actually. I’m a little bit scared at how they might set it up because it’s really lacking in length for how we play now, so the word is they might have to go crazy narrow in a few spots.

They’re so adamant that they don’t want us to go really low in a US Open but the great players have always won the US Open so, maybe there is something to be said for the setups. We’ll see. I’m really looking forward to it. Everyone who’s ever been there loves the place so I’m really excited.

**Changing tack, your immediate goal must be to get into the Masters. The equation is pretty simple, isn’t it – win an event or be in the top 50 by the end of March?**

Pretty much. I was 51st at the end of the year and I’m pretty sure I’ll drop a couple of spots before I start the year [at the time of press Ogilvy is ranked 58th]. So I’m playing four or five tournaments in a row on the west coast and I’ll play till I get in basically.

They have another world ranking cut off at the end of March and I’ll get in if I’m in the top 50, which is not a massive stretch obviously because it’s only a couple of spots. If I win a golf tournament, I can re-evaluate my schedule but the main goal for the year is to get to Augusta.

**You haven’t missed the Masters in eight years so has this been a jolt to the system for you?**

It has been a little bit. I could have played more in the last three months of last year but I really needed a break, and every time I’ve played extra tournaments when I felt like I needed a break, I’ve paid for it later on. So I took a bit of a risk and I just missed. It was basically a case where one shot better at any tournament last year and I would have made it. It was like a 200th of a point, it was ridiculous how close it was.

Not getting the [invitation] letter in the first week of February – it’s the first time I haven’t had it in a while, so it’s a little disappointing but hopefully I can get it soon.

#### THE OGILVY FILE

**Date of birth:** 11 June 1977

**Place of birth:** Adelaide, Australia

**Turned pro:** 1998

**Major wins:** 1 – US Open (2006)

**Other victories:** 11 – including three World Golf Championship titles

**Team appearances:** 3-time member of the Presidents Cup International Team (2007, 2009 and 2011)