

# AIMING [UP]

MARC LEISHMAN HEADS INTO THE 2015 SEASON PRIMED FOR HIS BIGGEST YEAR YET ON THE PGA TOUR. HERE HE TALKS ABOUT TAKING HIS GAME TO THE NEXT LEVEL, CONTENDING IN MAJORS ... AND DOING IT HIS WAY.

WORDS: PAUL PRENDERGAST PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

It's one of the enduring images from Adam Scott's breakthrough win at the Masters in 2013.

As Scott was going ballistic after sinking what he thought was the winning putt on the 72nd hole, in the background his Aussie playing partner Marc Leishman was quietly fist pumping in delight for his colleague, Presidents Cup teammate and compatriot – knowing full well the significance of the moment for Scott and Australia.

Angel Cabrera almost crashed the party with his own birdie on the last to set up a play-off, which Scott would go on to prevail in, but for all intents and purposes for both Scott and Leishman, that putt was the historic moment all Australian players had dreamt of.

An hour earlier, Leishman's chances of pulling on Australia's first Green Jacket were literally sunk when his approach to the 15th found the greenside pond. But there he was, as deflated and disappointed as he must have been, pumped for his mate.

The gesture alone says a lot about the character of Marc Leishman, as Scott would affirm much later when he became aware of the image.

"We were two Australians trying to win the Masters," Scott said. "One of us did it and my favourite image of all is the one where I'm celebrating the putt on the 72nd hole and in the background, there's Marc pumping his fist.

"That is just incredible to me. That's the best photograph of the whole week because it showed what kind of a bloke Marc is. I think it showed what Australia is about. For him to be pumping his fists at that point was pretty remarkable.

"Out of all the pics taken that week, that's the one."

This past Australian summer, Leishman ('Strapper' to his mates) was notable for his absence from all but one of the four big events but for all the right reasons – choosing to remain in the US to attend the wedding of his caddie and long-time Warrnambool mate Matt Kelly.



In the wake of Scott's win at Augusta, a record six Australians won on the PGA Tour in 2014 – two of them, Steven Bowditch and Matt Jones, for the first time. Leishman unfortunately was not one of them but despite that, the mateship shines through.

"It was awesome to see. We all feed off each other when guys are doing well," Leishman said during his summer break back in Warrnambool, near the Great Ocean Road, south-west of Melbourne.

"A lot of us Australian boys play practice rounds together so you see how guys are playing and you see you're playing just as well as them. It's great to see your friends winning and it gives you motivation to want to win as well."

It's a point easily overlooked by most golf fans that Leishman, despite not adding to his sole win in America at the 2012 Travelers Championship in Hartford and playing second fiddle to his mates in that regard, enjoyed his most consistent of six full years on the PGA Tour last year.

Leishman's haul: in excess of US\$2.5 million in earnings, a career-high six top-tens, a tie for fifth at the Open Championship at Hoylake after shooting 65 on the final day and more recently, back-to-back top-tens at consecutive World Golf Championships events.

"I think so, definitely my most consistent and I played well in the bigger events which was good. I was really happy with my year although a little disappointing that I didn't get that win, but it's hard to win when you're playing against the best players in the world every week."

Leishman finished the calendar year the No.46 player in the world, guaranteeing him exemptions into almost all the majors and WGC events in 2015. Before he pondered his schedule and beginning any preparation for it, however, Leishman was craving time back at home over the summer to recharge the batteries.

His last competitive round of the year was a five-under 65 at, of all places, the Wynnum Pro-Am in Brisbane, the day after the Australian

PGA Championship concluded on the Gold Coast. The 65 wasn't good enough to win but afterwards the clubs were parked and the thongs fixed firmly on his feet for some serious downtime with his family.

"I've just been taking it easy pretty much. We've been taking the kids (young sons Harvey and Oliver) down the playground and to the beach and stuff, so it's been a good break so far."

Leishman turned professional in 2005 and turned 31 towards the end of last year, entering a stage that traditionally has been regarded as the 'prime' of a player's career. While Leishman works as hard as anyone throughout the year, he learned very quickly how best to balance his life to maximise his opportunities when he shows up for an event. While many players like to play and practise regularly when they're away from the Tour, Leishman's time off is just that: 'off'.

Nor does he live in one of the stereotypical PGA Tour 'enclaves' like a Scottsdale, Orlando, Palm Beach or Dallas, where he might be tempted to play and practice alongside dozens of other professionals. Leishman met wife Audrey in her home state of Virginia during a Nationwide (now Web.Com) Tour event and the couple settled in Virginia Beach, close to Audrey's family and network of friends.

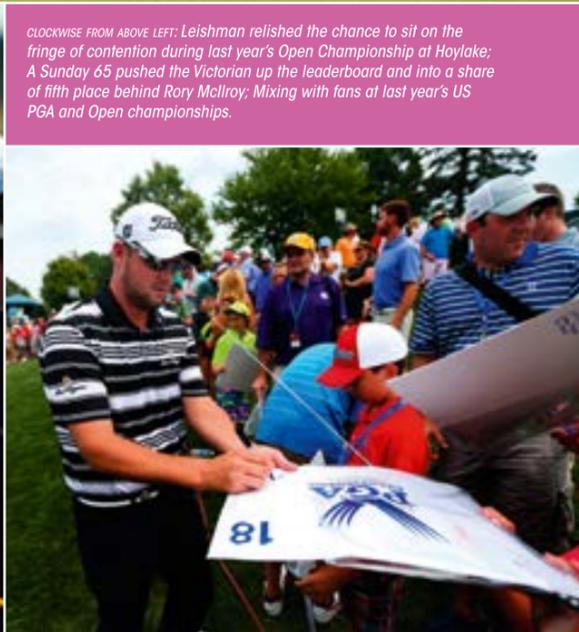
"Virginia Beach is a touristy area in summer, a lot of oceanfront areas, high-rises and restaurants," Leishman said. "We live about five kilometres inland, not right on the beach, and it's a really family-friendly area. Everything we want is there and it's pretty easy to travel in and out of so it's a good spot."

"There aren't a lot of golfers there, which isn't a bad thing for me either, because I generally don't play a lot of golf on my weeks off. I prefer to do other things and get away from it."

"Some of the weeks when I've played my best have come when I haven't touched a club for a while. When I won on the Nationwide in 2008, I hadn't touched a club for 18 days beforehand. Hartford was the

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Leishman relished the chance to sit on the fringe of contention during last year's Open Championship at Hoylake; A Sunday 65 pushed the Victorian up the leaderboard and into a share of fifth place behind Rory McIlroy; Mixing with fans at last year's US PGA and Open Championships.

same. I think I had two weeks off before and I don't think the clubs came out of the travel cover.

"Not that I do that all the time but a lot of the time if I have a week off, the clubs won't come out of the cover. I think I'm better off playing fresh than burned out and over-golfed."

Leishman will also look to advance his career without taking any inspiration from many of the current crop of players who could easily be confused for being athletes in other sports. For example, the top three players in the game at the moment: Rory McIlroy, Henrik Stenson and Scott, are, physically speaking, people you wouldn't fancy running into in a dark alley at any time. All three are pretty 'cut' from some serious work in the gym but following their regimen in search of lower scores is not something Leishman sees as absolutely necessary for him, or overly enjoyable for that matter.

"I'm not a gym junkie by any means ... at all. I don't spend anywhere near enough time in the gym as I should but I do quite a bit of stretching and try to stay somewhat in shape.

"There's more than one way to skin a cat, that's for sure. I might tinker a little bit here and there but I'll never look like Rory McIlroy or Jason Day. I know that and I'm alright with that. That's too much work.

I enjoy my food and my beer a bit too much to do that!"

What Leishman is conscious of in his work with long-time coach, Melbourne-based Denis McDade, is eradicating the 'big misses', which might not show up so readily in the sea of statistical information the PGA Tour collect, and to be more consistent with his putting.

"I'm not a big stats man but I'll look at them. I think a lot of it is more where your misses are and how bad they are. If you're hitting two balls in the water every round and hitting everything else good, you're not going to do so well but if your misses are just off the edge of the green, you're better off. That's what we're working on: making my misses better, not disastrous."

At the recent Australian PGA Championship on the Gold Coast where Leishman tied for 11th in front of a healthy following of Warrnambool 'expats' in the gallery, he also mentioned his propensity to be 'streaky' with the putter.

"It's good when everything is going in, but ... we've been doing quite a bit of work on my putting. The big key to winning tournaments is holing putts so hopefully I can have a good year with the putter and give myself a few chances to win."

He showed just how low he can go during the second round of the

Sony Open – his first event of 2015 – when he signed for an eight-under 62, which included a bogey at the opening hole.

Courtesy of his top-50 world ranking at the end of 2014, Leishman is relishing the opportunity to set up his schedule around the majors and WGC events where he is guaranteed a start. Maintaining his place in the top-50 over the early months of the year will also lock down a spot in the US Open, but Leishman is already looking forward with some excitement to the courses where this year's majors will be staged. On paper, most would appear to suit the big Australian's game to a tee.

"Augusta sets up pretty well for me. I played the British Open the last time it was at St Andrews and played OK. Whistling Straits, I played well when the PGA was there last and then Chambers Bay looks 'linksy' and should be a pretty fun course.

"The courses set up pretty well for me, especially growing up down here in Warrnambool. I enjoy playing the wind shots, have the wind knock the ball around and having to use a lot of imagination. That's the type of golf I like."

It's a testament to the adaptability of Leishman's game and perhaps a forerunner to an exciting chapter looming in his career that the Victorian's best performances in 2014 weren't on golf courses that are as expansive and wide as the 2015 major venues will be.

Proof that he possesses a game for all seasons, Leishman's best results came against strong fields at some of the tougher, more claustrophobic layouts on Tour, including Torrey Pines, Firestone, Congressional and, of course, at a major setup at the Open Championship at Hoylake.

"It's not just one type of course I like playing on. Generally the tough courses I like but having said that, I won at Hartford, which has one of the lowest winning scores on Tour every year. I feel like I can adapt reasonably well to different courses.

"Like I said before, it all depends on the weeks that you hole the putts. It doesn't matter how much you like the golf course, if you don't hole the putts, you're not going to contend.

"Playing well in the last round of a major (at Hoylake) when you're

somewhere near the lead was pleasing but especially when the course is set up hard. To play well under those conditions is pleasing. You've got to hole the putts and hit good shots and it's just nice to play well under that pressure.

"I feel like the more often I can do that, the next time I'm in position in a major I can draw on the experiences I've had and be better for it. The more times you do it, the easier it gets. [Contending is] way better than hitting a million balls on the range, no comparison."

The experience gained playing with Scott on that fateful Sunday at Augusta in 2013 was one Leishman filed in the memory bank and he said he was able to draw on throughout the final round at Hoylake. Leishman carved out an eight-birdie, one-bogey 65 that, incidentally, jumped him into a tie for fifth place with Scott.

"The more experience you can have, the better it is. I don't think you can have a 'bad' experience, they're the times that you learn from the most.

"A 'bad' experience was the Masters last year (Leishman shot 70-79 to miss the cut by one stroke). I was playing really well through one-and-a-bit rounds and then didn't play how I wanted to on Friday. I think I learned a lot from that.

"It's not necessarily when you've played really well that you learn the most, you learn more from your 'failures' than winning tournaments. At the time, obviously it sucks, but you've just got to realise that things don't always go to plan and you have to take the positives out of everything."

Scott will continue on his quest to fulfil his own personal career goals and the expectations of many, but you can bet your bottom dollar he will be fist pumping in delight if his mate Marc Leishman can turn his recent momentum into victories and, particularly, major championship success in the year or years to come.

Nobody is owed anything in this game but 'what goes around, comes around' is surely apt in Marc Leishman's case; and a whole heap of mates – new and old like Scott – will be at the ready to toast the affable bloke from Warrnambool's success. ●

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