

Magnificent Fightback Earns Spieth

Third Major

By Paul Prendergast

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Jordan Spieth

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You've got to hand it to The Open Championship and links golf, their ability to identify worthy 'Champion Golfers of the Year' is second to none.

Memories of the superlative performance by Henrik Stenson to vanquish Phil Mickelson last year are still as vivid as if they happened yesterday. It would be a long time, we thought, before we'd see something as remarkable to match that.

And then along came Jordan Spieth. Playing arguably the greatest final five holes seen in the modern era of Major championship golf, Spieth seized the 146th Open Championship from a valiant Matt Kuchar by three strokes with a stunning form reversal from his errant

play over the first 13 holes on the final round.

"This is a dream come true for me," Spieth said, cradling the Claret Jug, his third Major championship trophy at just 23. "Absolutely, a dream come true."

Of the outstanding finishes we've witnessed, Charl Schwartzel's birdies over the final four holes earned him The Masters green jacket in 2011 and, faced with a 'perform or perish' scenario back in 1992, Nick Faldo played 'the best four holes of my life' to peg back John Cook to win his third Open at Muirfield.

Spieth gave us something of the same with his performance in 2017 and it was arguably superior to others based on the pretty dismal, to be frank, quality of golf he had displayed over the first three quarters of the round.

Only his patented fighting spirit kept him alive and earned more praise from the galleries than the quality of his shot making. "This one, we had to work even harder for, mentally and physically. I will never forget this. This is special," Spieth added.

You don't say?

Jordan Spieth kisses the Claret Jug following his victory at the 146th Open Championship at Royal Birkdale.

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“ Matt Kuchar

To be so close, to taste a victory and not be able to get it, it's hard. But I'll look forward to the challenge of trying again.



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Li Hao-Tong of China, playing in only his second Major after debuting at the U.S. Open in June, carded a final round 63 to share fourth with Rory McIlroy and Rafa Cabrera Bello.

of incredible folly as Spieth and rules officials ran back and forth up and down the dunes, before investigating a drop option well back in line on the practice fairway, via a group of parked equipment trucks.

The bizarre situation had to be seen to be believed, as all the while his patient playing partner Kuchar waited in the fairway after hitting his second shot to the green.

After much ado, Spieth eventually hit a 3-iron blindly over the giant dune to a position just short of the green in three,

before pitching over a bunker and holing a putt from several strides away to salvage a remarkable bogey.

“That putt on 13 was just massive. Going two down but possibly into a tie for second thinking, man, I'm five-over, that was crossing my mind.

“When that putt went in, I was really, really excited. It was a momentum shift.”

Now a shot back of Kuchar, who was bidding for his first Major in a long and illustrious career, what Spieth did over the next hour or so will be regarded as the stuff of legends for years to come.

THE OPEN
146TH ROYAL BIRKDALE



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After draining a putt for eagle on the 15th hole, Spieth pointed to the ball and shouted “Go get that!” to his delighted caddie Michael Greller.

A three-shot lead starting the final day was immediately whittled away after pulling his opening tee shot left, (Spieth would hit only two fairways all day), and so the imprecise continued, with the now ‘typical Jordan’ scrambling abilities on red alert to save the Texan time and again.

Not two months ago, Spieth block sliced two balls out of bounds at the Texas Open to record a nine on a par-5 hole, looking far from the player who had wowed us over the early years of his career and in 2015 in particular, where he captured the first two Majors contested that year.

What would occur on the 13th on Sunday was spectacularly reminiscent, Spieth launching his tee shot miles right to an unplayable position on the steep incline of a dune.

With a two-club length drop on the cliff out of the question, we were witnesses to 30 minutes



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Spieth hits his third shot on the 18th green after keeping the crowds enthralled, providing a spectacular finish to the 146th Open Championship.

A safe approach to 25 feet at the 16th set up what is starting to become the inevitable when Spieth gets in this mood, another putt finding the centre of the cup at the perfect speed for another birdie and a two-stroke lead with two to play.



Branden Grace acknowledges the crowd on the 18th green after shooting a 62, the lowest round in Major history during the third round of the 146th Open Championship.

well, to put up a battle and a fight," Kuchar said. "You work so hard to get to this position and to have a chance to make history and to win a championship. And you don't get that many opportunities, it's a hard one to sit back and take. "Jordan is a great champion and certainly played that way in the finishing stretch today. It was impressive stuff when a guy does something like that, you can only sit back and tip your cap and say 'well done.' "It was certainly a show that he put on." By the numbers, Spieth shot a final round one-under 69 for a 12-under-par total, three clear of Kuchar who recorded his best result in a Major, with China's Li Hao-Tong alone in third place a further three strokes back at six-under. The highly impressive Li was playing

Spain's Rafa Cabrera Bello carded a final round 68 to finish in a tie for fourth with Li and McIlroy.

After nearly holing a 6-iron at the par-3 14th, Spieth tapped in to regain a share of the lead with Kuchar and looked like a man possessed, reaching the 15th in two blows and holing from over 40 feet for eagle, while Kuchar kept pace with a birdie after an excellent greenside bunker shot.

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Both players missed the par-5 17th fairway on opposite sides and gauged their balls from the rough to within pitching distance. Kuchar's approach left him twice the length of Spieth's on the same line and when he bravely holed the birdie putt, the pressure was on Spieth to convert to maintain his lead.

Once again, however, Spieth found the dead centre of the hole and had the relative luxury of being able to play the difficult final hole with caution with an iron from the tee.

Finding the green and two-putting from long range sealed the deal for Spieth and sets up the salivating prospect of a chance to achieve the career Grand Slam at the PGA Championship at Quail Hollow, August 10-13.

Should he pull off that feat, he would join Tiger Woods as the last man to win all four Majors at the age of 24, which Spieth turned on July 27th.

Poor Matty Kuchar played spirited golf and could hold his head high after making two birdies of his own over that same five-hole stretch. He simply ran into a superstar doing what he does best.

"It's crushing and it hurts but there's an excitement and a thrill to have played

just his second Major after debuting at the U.S. Open at Erin Hills in June. His final round 63 tied the previous all-time Major Championship low round. However, that mark had been bettered 24 hours earlier by South Africa's Branden Grace with his eight-under 62 in Saturday's third round.

The Open was effectively played in two halves in terms of scoring conditions, with players bashed up by difficult conditions over the opening two rounds before the weather and scoring improved markedly over the weekend.

Spieth's gut check final five holes was preceded by a wonderful 65-69 start in the worst of it on Thursday and Friday, during which time most of the players were coming off second best to the course and conditions.

However, Jordan Spieth is far from being in the category of 'most golfers',

even at this level. Birkdale being just the latest example of when the pressure is at its greatest and the challenge appears insurmountable, he seems to be able to pull something freakish out of the bag to 'force' the issue.

Only a few weeks earlier, he holed a bunker shot in a playoff to win the Travelers Championship over Daniel Berger. Not the first time he's done that either and the list of other miraculous escapes and perfectly executed shots under pressure are becoming too frequent to list.

Judging by how he rebounded following the stress and time spent contemplating all of his perilous options on the 13th hole, the drama seemed to galvanise Spieth for the run to home more than ruin him. He was like a reptile basking in the sun, gathering energy for his next strike where lesser men may have folded.

It's a staggering quality for one so young in years and you shake your head in amazement that the same man who staggered through the first 13 holes could shine through in the manner he did. You shake your head that this is the same guy who launched two drives straight out of bounds in Texas on his way to a big missed cut not so long ago.

The golf may not have been of the same quality of the Stenson Vs Mickelson battle in 2016, but this Open Championship was no less absorbing till the very end.

The Open and links golf has a habit of identifying these champions. With an honour roll that already includes the names of Palmer, Thomson, Trevino and Watson, Royal Birkdale has just identified another in the remarkable Jordan Spieth. ●



Spieth worked some magic over the last five holes to escape Royal Birkdale with the Claret Jug, and capture his third Major.



Rory McIlroy produced a strong finish over the weekend, firing rounds of 69-67 to tie for fourth.



Amateur Alfie Plant of England, holding the Silver Medal awarded to highest placed amateur, celebrates with his family and friends on the 18th green.

Final Leaderboard		
Total	Name	Scores
268	Jordan Spieth	65-69-65-69
271	Matt Kuchar	65-71-66-69
274	Li Hao-Tong	69-73-69-63
275	Rory McIlroy	71-68-69-67
275	Rafa Cabrera Bello	67-73-67-68
276	Matthew Southgate	72-72-67-65
276	Mark Leishman	69-76-66-65
276	Alex Noren	68-72-69-67
276	Branden Grace	70-74-62-70
276	Brooks Koepka	65-72-68-71