

# Bubba Watson

... the Seve of our time

By Paul Prendergast

COMPARING players from one era to another is often fraught with danger and, in many ways, is a pointless exercise from a pure golf standpoint.

Today's golfer plays what's before him and against those who turn up week by week, just like the player of yesteryear, but that's about where the similarities end.

The style of game and the industry of golf has changed considerably, driven by factors the pioneers of the game could not have imagined – science, technology, nutrition and the unfathomable amounts of money on offer.

All, and particularly a golf ball that flies further and curves less, provide what traditionalists might describe as a less creative approach to the game in the modern era.

Hit it high and far, pitch it on and let the putting contest begin could be the mantra of the modern game for the most part.

Back when the balata ball, wooden clubs, steel shafts and 1 irons were considered cutting edge, being able to play with every club in your bag was a prerequisite to greatness and being regarded by your peers as a 'shotmaker' was a badge of honour.

In these eras, the shotmakers flourished: Lee Trevino, Tom Watson and, of course, the mercurial genius of the late Severiano Ballesteros.

Shotmakers like Ballesteros, but particularly Seve, could do it all and were not afraid of the consequences of failure.

Ballesteros' legend was etched in our collective consciousness when playing from a 'carpark' on his way to victory in the 1979 Open Championship at Royal Lytham & St Annes but, in fact, his ability to extricate himself from far more difficult positions during his career are now part of the game's rich folklore.

Ballesteros could move the ball left, right, high, low, hit soft bunker shots with long irons, play shots from his knees.

He was blessed with marvellous hands, unsullied by formal instruction, and an even more marvellous imagination for the game.

It was once written Ballesteros played the game with a 'frightening intensity', with real passion, which we saw countless times over his career and perhaps most inspirationally in the Ryder Cup arena.

In recent weeks in Australia, astute local audiences and international viewers received more than a glimpse of a modern day Ballesteros ... Bubba Watson.

Watson arrived for his latest visit to Australia with his reputation as a huge hitter now embellished by a narrow playoff loss to Martin Kaymer in the 2010 PGA Championship, breaking into the 2010 US Ryder Cup team and two victories on the PGA Tour in 2011.

What we saw first-hand in his game was the same imaginative approach to the game as Ballesteros, if not the same frightening intensity in his demeanour.

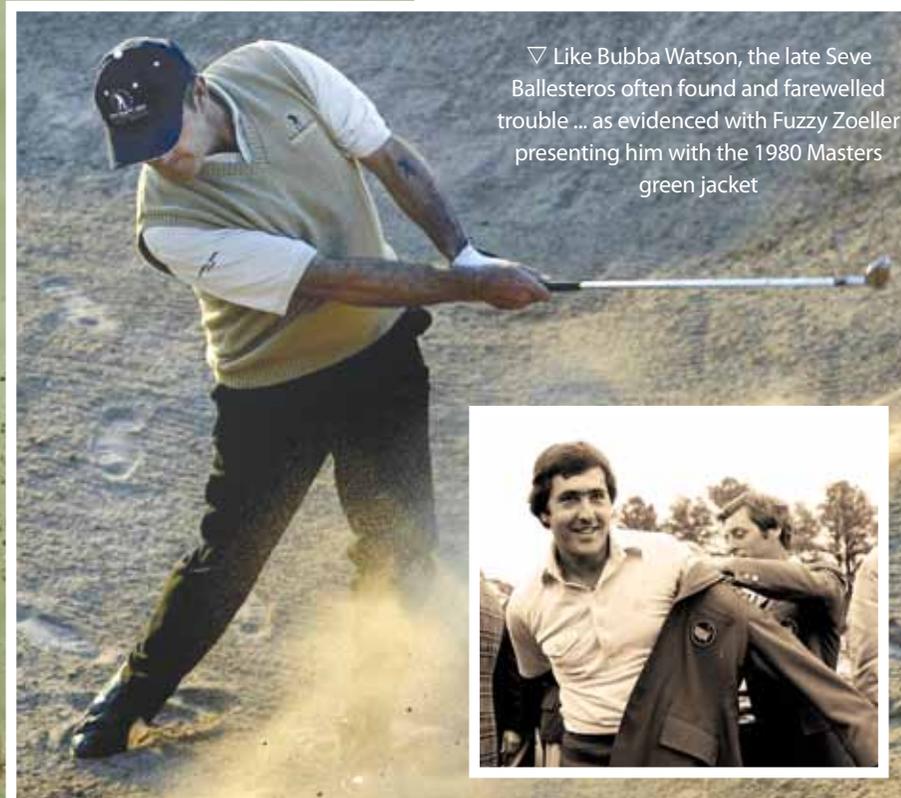
In Watson we see the same disdain for the prospect of failure, but a willingness and ability to move the ball at will in any direction to attack a hole.

With any kind of putting, he could and should have won the Australian Open at The Lakes Golf Club in Sydney.

Time and again in breezy conditions, he brilliantly manoeuvred the ball through the air, along the ground and mostly to within 3m of



There's something odd about Bubba Watson's shoulder positioning but, hey, if it ain't broke ...



▽ Like Bubba Watson, the late Seve Ballesteros often found and farewelled trouble ... as evidenced with Fuzzy Zoeller presenting him with the 1980 Masters green jacket



tucked pins, only to leave putts frustratingly short.

Like Ballesteros, Watson was self taught and learned to play the game his way.

Unlike Ballesteros's swing, which at his peak was a flowing, graceful motion until he went all out on the attack, Watson's by comparison is far more contrived in appearance yet extremely powerful.

His backswing seems to be the most repeatable part of his swing: a huge John Daly-like over swing and shoulder turn, with his right heel well off the ground at the top of the swing, storing tremendous power.

From there on though, sometimes it's not clear if even Bubba knows what might happen next ... which is where the greatest thrill in watching him is derived.

Watson plays by 'feel' and uses his hands to a huge degree in every swing, cutting steeply across the ball when required to magnify the shape of his shots and often cutting off the swing sharply as if his arms are being lassoed in a bull whip.

It is a style that, if copied, could ruin the teaching

profession across the world, save for the fact the athletic ability required to contort into 'Bubba positions' is completely beyond most people.

The idiosyncratic approach to the game is exciting to watch and much like the hype generated by the great Ballesteros a generation before him.

At the Presidents Cup at Royal Melbourne, Watson (3-2 in his matches) appeared to be in his element.

He was a sensation with the galleries each day as they marvelled at the variety of shot shapes he worked on at the range, the prodigious distances he hit the ball and his affable banter with them, even during pivotal points in his matches.

Of the 24 players on show, there was no doubting the favourite of the throngs which gathered at the practice range before play.

Bubba was the one they wanted to see and they let him know it, much to his delight.

They called for him to unleash the driver long before he did, allowing the showman in Watson the chance to tease them over and over before finally drawing the pink shafted big stick from his

bag ... to deafening cheers and then shocked awe as ball after ball screamed into the stratosphere.

Teammates Tiger Woods and Dustin Johnson, trying to concentrate on their work, just shook their heads and smiled.

A week later, the 'Bubba Show' moved to Hyatt Regency Coolum for the Australian PGA Championship where more astonishing golf over the first three days had victory in his sights, only for an errant final round to cruel his chances.

At no stage on Sunday did an exhausted Watson relent from his course strategy, trying to shape the driver off the first hole only to find water and doing so again for the same fate on the final hole of play.

At 33 years of age, he is unlikely to match the achievements of the great Ballesteros who had won all of his five Majors and more than 80 worldwide victories by the same age, but his influence on the game will be significant if the Australian Summer of Golf has been any indication of his crowd-pulling power.

Watch out in 2012 if he gets his putter working!