

Humble Bubba

joins the greats at Augusta



Bubba Watson's approach to the game of golf may look 'off the wall' with a fine line existing between the absolute sublime and the ridiculous. A homespun golf swing, all out aggression, wearing his heart on his sleeve and with a garish pink driver to boot have helped establish the public persona of Watson, a unique entity in the game and as much natural talent as anyone in the game.

Juggling his new responsibilities as a Masters champion following his 2012 triumph, just days after becoming a parent for the first time, provided new challenges for the emotional Watson to contend with. Trying to be all things to an expectant golfing public and press while trying to be the best father and husband he could took a toll and at times, that was reflected in his demeanour on the golf course and in the public eye.

Credit to the man, Watson's respect for the game and its heritage never wavered and through hard work, self analysis and a greater balance in life, he has re-invented himself to climb the mountain again – winning the 2014 Masters in a display of golf that was more clinical than the cavalier we've come to expect.

"I just kept...hard work, even though it doesn't look like I practice that much."

Watson said, the tears never far away.

"Hard work. My wife's dedication. We worked out schedules how I can practice, at a high level, if it's just 30 minutes, just an hour, then come back and be a dad and a husband."

Scoffing at any suggestion this comeback win validates his status as an elite player, Watson was more realistic in assessing his achievement.

"No. I got lucky enough to have two green jackets but I'm just trying to win my tour card every year and if people say that I'm a good player, that's great. But I'm not. I'm not trying to play golf for everybody to tell me how great I am or I'm one of the greats of the game."

Scoff he may but he would have to conceded even privately that he played 'great' this week and especially so on Sunday, winning his second Masters at age 35 to join Horton

Smith, Jimmy Demaret and Arnold Palmer as two-time champions in six starts or less.

Watson's three-under-par 69 playing in the final group gave him a 72-hole score of eight-under 280, three strokes better than playing partner Jordan Spieth who had shared the overnight lead with him heading into Sunday.

Over the first seven holes of the final round, 20-year old Spieth was looking near untouchable in his bid to become the youngest Masters winner and only the second to win on debut, with early birdies tempered only by a bogey on five. When Watson hit close, Spieth either hit it closer or came up with something dramatic, like holing a bunker shot on four, to maintain the edge over his older opponent.

The mind raced back to 2011 when a 21-year old Rory McIlroy lead the field into the back nine only

to implode in spectacular fashion to shoot 80. How would 2014's young gun fare on the back nine, as the childhood dream of being in this moment becomes a glaring reality?

We could only contemplate this as, unfortunately, Spieth began to unravel before the back nine even started. An untidy pitch and three-putt bogey at the eighth and was followed by the commitment of the cardinal sin of coming up short with his approach on nine for a second consecutive dropped shot.

Two bogies to Spieth were countered by two birdies from Watson, a four-stroke swing and the turning point in the respective mindsets of both players.

Spieth had a minor win with a scrambling par to Watson's bogey at the 10th but compounded his earlier errors by finding the bank on 12 and spinning back into Rae's Creek on his way to

another bogey. From there on, Spieth had his work cut out to regroup mentally and on the scoreboard and the outcome of the tournament sat fairly and squarely in Watson's hands and specifically, with the driver in hand.

When Watson is 'on' with his driver, the rest of the field must feel like they're wading knee deep in mud trying to keep up. It was especially true on this Sunday at Augusta National, which Watson conceded fits his eye perfectly.

February's ice storms may have destroyed Ike's Tree and thinned out many others in its wake but they were Watson's ally this week. The champion noted there was more room 'at the top of some trees' than previously which helped him feel more comfortable with the tee shots on holes 7, 11 and 18, where he has notoriously struggled.

Perhaps only a player of Watson's flamboyance and ball striking prowess could identify an advantage to be had in having less foliage in the upper reaches of mature pines.

Nowhere else than Augusta National do the corridors of trees framing each hole, coupled with the undulation and shape of the fairways, suit Watson more from the tee. Tempering his normal aggression, Watson took apart the golf course by hitting his 'slice' driver with regularity, sliding the ball between the trees and taking advantage of the right-to-left cant and tilt of holes 2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13 and 14 in particular.

A golf course long regarded as favouring the right-handed drawer of the ball has now yielded its sixth left-handed winner (incl. Phil Mickelson in '04, '06 & '10

and Mike Weir in '03) in the past twelve Masters.

Although his 2012 win is fondly remembered for the miracle playoff escape from deep in the trees at the 10th, it should be remembered Watson drove the ball superbly in that final round and he repeated the dose in 2014, providing opportunities to hit shorter irons to greens that were noticeably more fearsome than in recent years.

Practice rounds on Monday were cancelled due to inclement weather yet the greens still had an ominous brown tinge to them from as early as Wednesday and the absence of the traditional birdie, eagle barrage we so enjoy on the back nine at Augusta on Sunday is a testament as to how firm and fast they had become.

The cacophonous cheers and a seismic atmosphere reverberating through the pines was absent for the first time in years as players battled more to survive than to prosper. Watson took a two-stroke lead into the back nine and was able to advance his winning margin, despite 'only' shooting even par on the inward nine.

Historically, shooting even on the back nine Sunday at Augusta is a guaranteed recipe for 'Better luck next year'.

In these conditions, Watson led the field for the week in driving distance, was 13th in greens in regulation and 12th in putts per green in regulation.

The only time the driver threatened to derail him during the final round was when he cut off more of the par-five 13th hole than he was anticipating. He was a relieved man when the cheers of the crowd indicated his ball has found

fairway over 360 yards away, leaving a mere 56 degree wedge to the green.

How do you compete with that?

"His drive on 13, I'll never forget," Spieth said. "I thought it was out of bounds 70 yards left, and it was perfect. He knew that, too."

"It (losing) stings right now," he continued, "The only thing I'm thinking about is when I'm getting back next year. I'll have more chances, but it's a stinger. I had it in my hands and could have gone forward with it."

"Whether my face showed it on the back nine, I was really having a good time," he added. "I'm not as good at holding my emotions."

Outside of Watson, the round of the day belonged to Dutchman Joost Luiten (67) with Stewart Cink (68) also posting a low number among the early starters.

56-year old two-time Masters champion Bernhard Langer and Rory McIlroy shot 69s to tie for 8th place at even par while 50-year old Miguel Angel Jimenez was around in 70 to claim 4th on his own, a week ahead of his Champions Tour debut.

Langer, Jimenez and Fred Couples may have flown the veteran's flag with pride this week but the most unassuming performance of the week must surely go to Sweden's Jonas Blixt, who was trying to 'Do an Adam' by becoming the first player from his country to win the Masters – or any major.

Blixt was making his Masters debut and just his third start in a major but has already shown his class by finishing tied 4th at the PGA last year. His four sub-par rounds, only the second debutant in history to achieve the feat behind 1979

champion Fuzzy Zoeller, allowed him to tie Spieth for second at five-under and he simply refused to go away on the final day.

"Anytime you shoot under-par at Augusta National on a Sunday, you should be pretty happy," said Blixt, "Bubba Watson played better. I got beat and he deserves to win."

No argument there. Watson admitted he 'kind of lucked into' the first win but this one he earned and got to savour with wife Angie and son Caleb on hand this time to celebrate with him behind the 18th green.

Between his 2012 win and the return to the winner's circle in Los Angeles earlier this year, Watson never really fell too far, never lower than 30th in the world rankings, but his appearance at the pointy end of leaderboards were few and far between. Missing the Presidents Cup team last year definitely hurt too after being a staple of the past few American Cup teams.

Now, he's back in a green jacket, has risen back to World No. 4, is a certainty for the Ryder Cup and has another run at cashing in on his talent as many thought would be his destiny two years ago.

"A guy named Bubba from a small town; born in Pensacola, raised in Baghdad (Fla), now has two green jackets," Watson said. "Why me?"

"I play golf because I love it. I love the game. The game has brought me everything that I've ever owned in my life."



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