



Photo by: Mark Wilson

ROSE captures U.S. OPEN at Merion

32-year old Justin Rose etched his name alongside the greats with his two-stroke triumph at the 2013 U.S. Open Championship at storied Merion Golf Club in Philadelphia. This is a victory that has been building for years on the foundation of a steely, inner resolve forged by the trials and tribulations that life in the spotlight can throw at you.

It seems like an eternity ago that the South African—born Englishman became a household name with a pitch-in birdie at Royal Birkdale’s difficult 18th hole to record an unlikely 4th place finish in the 1998 Open Championship behind Mark O’Meara.

Rose was then an 18-year old amateur and set

out with stars in his eyes on what was touted as a ‘sure thing’ professional career, only to face the despair and embarrassment of missing his first 21 cuts as a professional during the 2000 season.

Rose could have put the cue in the rack right there but showed his resilience and determination to soldier on, returning to the European

Tour via the qualifying school. The ensuing years are well documented; progressing to the PGA Tour in 2006 before stumbling and rising again to establish what is now acknowledged as a wonderfully successful and accomplished career, with a glittering array of individual and Ryder Cup moments on the highlight reel.

All that was missing from

the world No. 5’s resume heading into the U.S. Open was a major.

Enter Merion and a USGA setup that captivated Rose during his preparations the week before the championship. “What I first loved about Merion is how one of the local caddies described it, the first six holes are drama, the second six holes are comedy, and

the last six holes are tragedy. Like a good play, like a good theatrical play.”

“And that in a sense has been the way I framed up the golf course in my mind. Trying to get off to a solid start, trying to gain a little bit of ground in the middle and then hang on.”

Of significance in his mental preparation was a refusal to accept that Merion would be the pushover predicted by many, even after the heavens opened earlier in the week to soften the defences of one of the shortest courses in Open history.

“I certainly didn’t buy into the 62s and 14 under, but I figured that maybe 4, 5, 6 under par would be the winning total.” he said of the pre-tournament predictions.

After rounds of 71-69-71, Rose started the final round at one-over, two shots behind sentimental favourite Phil Mickelson in search of a first national championship in his 23rd attempt. With the final round also a celebration of his 43rd birthday and on Father’s Day Sunday, the opportunity at hand and the theatre of the moment was palpable as an adoring gallery greeted Mickelson with rapturous applause on the 1st tee.

With ‘81 champion David Graham watching on from under the adjacent awning - his 18 greens and 17- fairway final round a reminder perhaps of how best to approach a final day at Merion - Mickelson promptly emulated Graham’s start from 32 years ago by missing the first fairway.

Unlike Graham however, Mickelson continued to miss them and combined with a cold putter and the difficult setup, brought the field back into play very early in the round. However, two double bogies either side of a birdie in the opening five holes did

little to harm his chances as the rest of the contenders were also struggling to avoid accelerating in reverse.

Steve Stricker, with his own aspirations of a first major and becoming the oldest Open champion at age 46, uncharacteristically drove out of bounds on the second hole then inexplicably followed that by shanking an iron out of bounds on his way to a triple bogey.

Likewise, former world number one Luke Donald, playing with Rose, was clearly rattled after striking a young female volunteer in the head with a wayward tee shot on the 3rd. Although she was not seriously injured, the normally unflappable Englishman’s game quickly unravelled with a string of poor holes.

Charl Schwartzel started the round a stroke behind Mickelson but opened with a birdie to tie the lead. The moment and Merion got to the polished South African thereafter, posting an eight-over stretch in eight holes from the third on his way to a final round 78.

It soon became clear through the middle of the round that the likely winner would come from Mickelson, Rose, Hunter Mahan and 25-year old Australian Jason Day, himself a runner-up in 2011 to Rory McIlroy and a near winner of the Masters Tournament this April.

Day started the round three strokes behind Mickelson but caught him with a one-under front nine and a birdie at the short tenth to gain a share of the lead. Rose also played the front nine in one-under but had the wind taken from his sails after three putting the 11th after a bold approach had covered the flag.

A hole behind, Mickelson had made the turn in three-over and his prospects

were not improved after laying up in the rough on the short 10th. What followed however was vintage Phil, holing his wedge from 76 yards, electrifying Merion and the championship in the process.

Mickelson’s leap in the air after the ball disappeared was reminiscent of his reaction to holing his final putt at the 2004 Masters for his first Green Jacket.

On the 11th green, Rose heard the roars and immediately knew what had transpired. “I knew it had to be an eagle because nobody (spectators) can get very close to the green on 10. A birdie there....would be polite applause. So I knew to have that kind of reaction it wasn’t a birdie, it was an eagle.”

With the threat from Mickelson reinvigorated, Rose responded with some telling blows of his own. “I immediately answered with birdie, birdie of my own on 12 and 13. And I think that point was huge because it just gave me that little bit of leeway playing the last five holes.”

He added “I kind of knew that no one was going to play the last five perfectly, so if you were coming into the last five holes 2 or 3-over par already, you were going to have a hard time closing out the Tournament. You kind of needed that little bit of a cushion. And that’s what the birdies on 12 and 13 gave me.”

Rose entered the final five holes (Part III- ‘The Tragedy’) having played them in six-over par for the first three rounds. It was during this stretch that Graham had separated himself from the field in ‘81 by playing them in two-under. Adding to the difficulty of this stretch in ‘13 was a rain and wind front that hit as the players

approached the last third of the golf course.

Rose bogeyed the long 14th from the greenside bunker to drop back to even par and two exceptional scrambling pars from Mahan and Mickelson on the same hole reduced Rose’s lead to just one. However, both would fall back on the 15th after poor approach shots, most alarmingly from Mickelson who had only a gap wedge to the green.

“13 and 15 were the two bad shots of the day that I’ll look back on where I let it go,” Mickelson lamented after the round, “At 13, I hit a pitching wedge and when I was drawing that shot I had too much club. I needed a gap wedge and it would have been a better fit.”

“Then I did hit the gap wedge on 15, I quit on it, and missed it short left. If I had hit that one aggressively and flown it past the hole, I think it would have given me a birdie chance. So those two wedge shots were the two costly shots, I felt.”

Rose three-putted the 16th from 35 feet above the hole to drop back to one-over but his following three swings would ultimately win him the championship. At the 229-yard 17th, Rose’s 5 iron was striped at the hole and came to rest just off the fringe some 12 feet from the hole for a simple up and down - if there is such a thing at that stage of the championship.

At the punishing 18th, Day’s dogged bid for the title had ended when a 4-footer lipped out for a closing bogey and a three-over total just as Rose strode to the tee with his destiny in his own hands.

Facing the most important drive of his life, he found the centre of the fairway in a ‘Hoganesque’ fashion, leaving him almost the exact yardage to the

green as the previous hole. The poignancy of the moment and the historical similarities with Ben Hogan's famous one-iron approach to the final green in 1950 were not lost on Rose.

"When I walked over the hill and saw my drive sitting perfectly in the middle of the fairway, with the sun coming out, it was kind of almost fitting. And I just felt like at that point it was a good iron shot on to the green, two putts, like Hogan did, and possibly win this championship."

Rose's approach was perfectly struck and never left the flag, releasing to just over the green for what would normally be a relatively straightforward up and down. "I felt like I did myself justice and probably put enough of a good swing where Ben Hogan might have thought it was a decent shot too." Rose said of the shot.

Using a rescue club to putt the ball through the fringe, Rose left himself with the least stressful shot of his final round – a tap-in, followed by a tearful salute to the heavens in memory of his late father Ken, who passed away eleven years ago.

"I've holed a putt to win a major championship hundreds of thousands of times on the putting green at home. Pretty happy it was a twoincher on the last!" he quipped.

Playing behind in the final group, a gallant Mahan's chances finally came to an end with a bogey on the 17th but fittingly, the championship's final act would come down to Mickelson. After not being able to convert an extremely difficult putt down and across the ridge for birdie on the 17th, Mickelson

came to the final hole needing to do what the entire field had failed to do on the weekend – birdie the 18th to force a playoff.

After finding the rough with his tee shot and forcing an iron out and around a tree to the apron fronting the green, Mickelson's pitch for birdie slid past the hole to confirm a first major for Rose, the first for an Englishman since Nick Faldo at the 1996 Masters and the first English U.S. Open champion since Tony Jacklin in 1970.

An emotional Rose celebrated the moment in the clubhouse with wife Kate and caddie Mark Fulcher and reflected on his father's contribution to finally realising his dream of a major championship.

"I texted my mom late last night and I said, 'let's do it for dad' tomorrow. And she just simply texted me back 'that would be fantastic'. And I did get hold of her after my round and we both were in floods of tears speaking to each other."

"She misses him immensely, I miss him immensely. And I thought today was just a fitting time in which I could honour him by

looking up."

For the runners-up Day and Mickelson, their reactions were indicative of the different points in time in their careers. Both were disappointed but for Day in particular, there was cause for optimism after two close shaves at the majors in 2013.

"I've been close so many times now in Majors, especially at a young age, which is nice. And you've got to understand that 'Scotty' (Adam Scott) is in his young 30s and same with 'Rosie', I guess."

"I'm still 25, I turn 26 at the end of the year. I've got plenty of Majors to play in and hopefully I can keep doing the same as I'm doing and hopefully win one soon."

For Mickelson however, the reality of a 6th Open runner-up finish hit home immediately. "For me, it's very heart breaking.

Playing very well here and really loving the golf course, this week was my best opportunity, I felt, heading in,

certainly the final round, the way I was playing and the position I was in."

"But this one's probably the toughest for me, because at 43 and coming so close five times, it would have changed way I look at this tournament altogether and the way I would have looked at my record. Except, I just keep feeling heartbreak."

From the USGA's perspective in every aspect other than financial, this 'boutique' U.S. Open was an overwhelmingly satisfying success and justification of the decision to bring the Open back to Merion after 32 years. The one-over par winning score matched the score from 2012 at Olympic and another worthy champion was identified in Rose.

The field averaged 74.546 strokes for the championship against a par of 70, which certainly validated the comment made by Jack Nicklaus' "Merion has some holes you can abuse but there are holes that will abuse you" from earlier in the year. The top two players in the world - Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy – enjoyed their share of 'abuse' playing together for three rounds and finishing at +13 and +14 respectively.

The final word on Merion deservedly goes to Rose, who will advance to No. 3 in the world after this win: "I don't think anybody expected this golf course to hold up the way it did. But it surprised everybody. And I'm just glad I was kind of the last man standing."



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