

'You must remember this'

Mickelson

breaks his major duck at Augusta in '04



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When Tiger Woods arrived on the scene in late 1996, Mickelson was there to fill the bill as his primary adversary but had to stand on the sidelines and watch as Woods chalked up eight majors while he himself was piling up top-tens, seventeen in all amid a fistful of near misses in 46 major starts, including three-straight thirds at Augusta from 2001-03.

He watched on in 2003 when four first-time major champions were crowned, two (Ben Curtis and Shaun Micheel)

capturing their tour wins in the process and one (Curtis) winning in his first major start.

He could have been forgiven for thinking his cards had been marked and would retire as 'the best player never to win a major'. Off the golf course, 2003 for Mickelson was also a struggle following the near tragedy of losing his wife Amy and son Evan during childbirth in March that year. His golf that year suffered as his thoughts and focus were as you'd expect, drawn elsewhere.

The 2004 Masters Tournament therefore, was special in many ways for Mickelson and for the game. Not since Jack Nicklaus' storied 'come from behind' victory at age 46 in 1986 had Masters patrons and viewers witnessed

a more exciting final day at Augusta.

One of the other powers in the game at that time, Ernie Els, had dazzled the galleries on Sunday with two eagles on his way to a final-round 67 which would elevate him to the clubhouse lead.

Excitement levels around the course were maintained at fever pitch with not one, but two holes-in-one to Pdraig Harrington and Kirk Triplett at the 16th and an eagle two from the fairway at the tough 11th from K.J. Choi.

Mickelson, playing in the final group with overnight leader Chris DiMarco, had started the day poorly but was rallying and trailed by three strokes midway through Amen Corner. At the devilish par-three 12th, the dramatic scene of many a Masters turning point, Mickelson was determined not to let another opportunity pass him by and played an aggressive 8-iron to the back-right pin location, leaving himself just outside 12-feet for birdie.

"I took a pretty aggressive line at that pin. I knew I was three back when I was facing that putt. If I could make that putt on No. 12, all I'd have to do was birdie No. 13, and I would be within a shot with five to go."

"And so, when that putt on No. 12 went in, that's when I started to feel like I could make this happen."

At the 14th, he nearly holed his second shot from 150 yards

and at 16, holed a curling right to left 15-footer to tie for the lead for the first time.

Still tied at the 18th hole, Mickelson's approach was rifled straight at the flag and released to 18-feet behind the flag. He was unlucky for the ball not to have climbed the tier behind the hole just a fraction more or it would have reversed back down the slope to within just a few feet of the hole.

The Green Jacket and that long-awaited first major was once again within arm's reach and for once, good fortune would smile on the 33-year old.

Moments earlier, playing partner DiMarco had almost the identical putt and Mickelson took the opportunity to go to school before making the fateful stroke that would change his life forever.

"Because it was such a fast putt, I had a great look at his entire putt, every inch of break," he said. "Chris's ball was hanging on that left lip, and when it got to the hole, it just fell off."

"And my putt was almost on the identical line. Instead of falling off, it caught that lip and circled around and went it."

Els didn't need to be told of his fate as he waited on the putting green, the deafening roar from the patrons as the putt fell swept over him in an instant as it reverberated right down Magnolia Lane to Washington Road.

Mickelson leaped with two arms raised in the air before



Phil Mickelson reacts to his Winning Putt during the 2004 Masters tournament.
Photo by: Augusta National/Getty Images.

immediately turning to bear hug long-time caddie Jim 'Bones' Mackay, followed by his assembled family behind the green with his most emotional embrace saved for wife Amy.

The final-hole birdie, one of five in his last seven holes that Easter Sunday, placed Mickelson alongside 'The King' Arnold Palmer as one of only six to win The Masters with a birdie on the 72nd hole.

Mickelson was and is unquestionably the American golfer with the game and popularity most akin to Palmer's, in terms of his swashbuckling style and the ability to capture the hearts of adoring galleries. It was poignant therefore, that Mickelson should claim his first green jacket in 2004 in the year Palmer saluted The Masters for the final time as a competitor.

The following ten years have seen Mickelson capture two more Green Jackets in

2006 and 2010 with equivalent flamboyance and high emotion, the 2005 PGA Championship and last summer, The Open Championship at Muirfield to bring his career tally to five, rubber stamping him as a 'great' in the history of the game.

Along the way however, he has not lost the capacity to entertain, to engage, to thrill, to disappoint and to frustrate, as he learned how to win. His near misses, many of them calamitous in the style of Palmer and the mercurial Severiano Ballesteros, have

contributed as much to the growth of the Mickelson legend as any of his triumphs.

A fourth Masters win in 2014 would tie Mickelson with Palmer and a career grand slam is now in sights if he can somehow turn around a record six runner-up finishes to win a U.S. Open title before he is finished.

At age 43, the final chapters of a marvelous career are a long way from being inked but if they could possibly be any more exciting than where it all began at Augusta National in 2004, ten years ago, we're in for a hell of a ride.