

QUICK LEARNER

BY JAIME DIAZ

HOW JORDAN SPIETH ALMOST WON THE MASTERS AT 20, AND HOW HE TIED THE SCORING RECORD TO WIN BIG AT 21. WHAT'S NEXT?

o Jordan Spieth, the Masters is the ultimate tournament, the one he played in his imagination during solitary twilight putting sessions as a boy in Texas.

» His victory last year at 21 was almost perfect: wire-to-wire, tying Tiger Woods' tournament record, three generations of family embracing him in victory, the game's new hero. It was the springboard to threatening the calendar Grand Slam, rising to No. 1 in the world, capping his season by winning the Tour Championship and the FedEx Cup, and starting a new year by winning the Hyundai Tournament of Champions by eight shots. » The lasting glow of all that blurs the uneasy struggle Spieth endured after failing to hold a two-stroke Sunday lead at Augusta the year before, followed by another lost lead less than a month later in the final round of the Players Championship. The outcomes at Sawgrass and Augusta, where he finished three shots behind final-round pairing partner Bubba Watson, planted doubt about the young winner's vaunted ability to close, throwing him off stride for the rest of the season.

"Yeah, it was eating me up from the inside for a while," Spieth acknowledged in an interview in late February. "Especially after the Players. I had assumed once I got into position there I could quickly learn from the Augusta experience, and I was wrong. You have to be in that position multiple times to learn the patience it takes, that when the breaks don't go your way, you can still pull it off."

"I spent nights in bed thinking about those two events, how great it would have been, what they would have done for me, and if I was going to get another chance like that," Spieth says. "You obviously assume so, but to have a chance to win the Masters and a Players Championship, you might have only a handful of those in a career, if you're lucky. And that's what I would really think about — did I really let a couple slip away when I should have been able to take advantage of them? And at the time it was very, very tough."

Like any golfer, Spieth had faced setbacks before, but he always recovered quickly. The pattern was set at age 11, after Spieth lost by a stroke on the Young Guns Junior Golf Tour in Dallas when he double-bogeyed the last hole and his opponent birdied it. That hurt, but in his next tournament on that Tour, two weeks later, Spieth won.

He soon began winning everything, including two US Junior Championships, the first in 2009 at 15. After leaving the University of Texas early to turn pro, he missed the second stage of Q School in November 2012 and seemed destined for at least a year on the Web.com Tour. But within four months, Spieth combined sponsors' exemptions with strong performances to essentially lock up a US PGA Tour playing card at 19, and he soon became the youngest Tour winner in 82 years.

"Jordan has always had this ability to transcend who he was previously, to take that step up and quickly feel comfortable on a grander stage," says Cameron McCormick, who became Spieth's first golf coach when Jordan was 12 and remains in that role today.

But at Augusta in 2014, the wound was bigger, more public, more emotional. The golf world largely emphasized Spieth's remarkable runner-up finish in his first Masters, but the driven 20-year-old's attempts to stay positive couldn't hide his disappointment.

"Obviously I've worked my whole life to lead Augusta on Sunday, and although I feel like it's very early in my career, and I'll have more chances, it's a stinger," he said in the aftermath. "I had it in my hands, and I could have gone forward with it, and just didn't quite make the putts."

Three days later at Hilton Head, Spieth was still downcast: "I feel like everywhere else won, and I finished second."

The words conveyed the demands that Spieth holds himself to in competition: "You have to conquer yourself, your emotions. You have to win the mental battle with yourself."

He loves Augusta for being the height of that challenge, as he explained in a confessional both rapturous and ravenous at the end of 2014.

"The Masters itself was the greatest individual tournament I've ever played...the one that I dreamt about winning as a kid," he said. "I played it a few times in the evening when there was not a soul on the golf course. To tee it up then, and then to see it in the final group on Sunday, where you can't see any of the grass, just a sea of people, and kind of soak that experience in, too... never been able to explain what that was like to my family, friends,

to anyone. Just badly want to be back there in that setting. Ben Crenshaw said, 'You really see a man's true emotion competing at Augusta more than anywhere else.' I felt that was the case. That's why it's the best tournament I can learn from in my life. The good and the bad."

The passage is a prime example of Spieth the talker, the explainer and, perhaps, the pleaser. In his press conferences, his often-detailed answers walk the thin line that keep him out of controversy but also reveal his thought process to a degree that's almost unprecedented among his peers.

By the standard of Tour players, and especially great ones, he over-shares. McCormick, naturally vigilant of competitive psyches, has learned to accept the candour as constructive.

"Jordan never dodges," says the instructor. "He's amazingly reflective, both during a round and after a round, and he likes to tell the whole story, such that it's authentic to his experience. It's his way of shedding light on a moment he wants to study, and he does it in a way that allows him to protect his armor."

The process complements what McCormick believes is Spieth's secret gift: "Jordan has an extraordinary amount of self-awareness, and I've always encouraged him to trust it. Early on in our relationship, he would seek reinforcement and feedback when we'd play, asking me for the answer to how to fix something, and I'd say, 'Jordan, it's not about me telling you what to correct. It's about how well you can transfer what you've got right now into performing well.' I would have the information that he was seeking, but I would withhold it until after a round. I didn't want to be the coach who stands there with a life preserver and throws it to you the first time you start to flail your arms. I was telling him, 'You know how to swim. You have to learn how to tell yourself to kick your feet, paddle your hands, and get yourself back to shore.' In the context of competition, you have to be self-sufficient and do it yourself."

"Once he fully understood that —



in part from accessing the petri dish of sports competition provided by his athletic parents and his friends — he embraced it and became a master adapter in the moment," McCormick says.

"He consistently makes the right adjustment — in his swing, in his strategy, in his assessment of the course environment. When we go over his rounds, he'll explain to me the considerations, the rationale and the process for those adjustments. His self-awareness facilitates this agile adaptation. He's not bound by the idea that 'this is what I'm supposed to be doing, so I must keep colouring between the lines.' He'll audible out, colour outside the lines, to a level for what he needs for ball control, and which nets out as an improvement in performance. Which is beautiful. He's not afraid to change, because he can always see a pinnacle that is greater than what he's standing on."

THE LOSS AT THE PLAYERS

That view became blurred after the Masters and the Players in 2014. "It's not fun being that close and having opportunities and being in the lead on Sunday and not pulling it off," Spieth said after finishing three strokes behind Martin Kaymer, his 74 making him the only player among the top-10 finishers who did not break par.

Adds McCormick: "The Players Championship was a more bitter pill to swallow than the Masters. That made the rest of the year a bit more of an uphill climb than it should have been."

For the rest of the season, Spieth had only two more top-10s. His performances in the remaining Majors were disappointing: T-17 in the US Open at Pinehurst, T-36 in the Open Championship at Hoylake, a missed cut in the US PGA at Valhalla. "The holes look smaller," he conceded.



2014 MASTERS: Spieth's two-stroke lead after seven holes on Sunday against Bubba Watson turned into a two-stroke deficit after nine.

But Spieth's process hadn't stopped, and a breakthrough occurred after the Ryder Cup at Gleneagles.

Spieth and Patrick Reed were the US team's best pair, undefeated in three matches. Spieth felt the intense pressure and adrenaline of the matches reawakened something inside.

But when he lost the crucial opening final-day singles match against Graeme McDowell after being 3-up on the front nine, Spieth was shaken: "I feel like I let my team down. They put me out there first, out there with a full amount of trust to get the job done." But this time he was able to absorb it more effectively.

"I certainly took that singles loss hard, because it kind of compounded the two earlier in the year where I didn't finish," Spieth said in February.

"At the same time, I do relate the success in 2015 to the Ryder Cup, because every round felt like a Major championship, the emotions that run through you. With Patrick, it felt like we'd

won the tournament in each of those matches. But in the singles, it was the same feeling as losing a Major championship, because I was in the same position, and I just kind of let that match slip away. In the final tally it might not have made a difference, but who knows? Going out first, it could have ended up changing the entire thing. But after Gleneagles there was a break for about six weeks where I didn't have to answer to anyone about it, and I was able to look back and say, 'OK, what happened in these?' My game was still there. But what made it a little harder to deal with than it should have been? Just trying to simplify it to that. Not really looking at my statistics, but mentally. And it was just a level of patience that I needed to have. And the only way to actually validate it at that point was to win."

Two months later, after missing a play-off by a stroke in Japan, Spieth travelled to the Australian Open. His closing 63 in blustery conditions for a six-stroke victory drew tweeted praise from then-No. 1 Rory McIlroy — You could give me another 100 rounds today at The Australian and I wouldn't sniff 63 — and will go down as one of the most important rounds of Spieth's life. The next week, he won the Hero World Challenge at Isleworth by 10 shots.

When he returned to defend in Australia at the end of his magical 2015, Spieth reflected.

"I felt like it was a very special round that was going to do something for me," he said of his 63.

"I didn't think it would launch to the type of year that we've had, because each piece needed to come together to get a bit more comfortable in the bigger situations, but I learned how to really close here with my head."

"NATURAL-BORN FINISHER"

The ability to close is clearly crucial to Spieth's self-image as a player and probably keeps him from appreciating what is apparent to others.

"Spieth is a natural-born finisher," says Johnny Miller. "They come along very rarely. So many guys today seem to win by accident, but Spieth doesn't. His game is ruled by that most important word: intent. Like Tiger, I believe he truly plays every tournament intending to win."

But the part of Spieth's arsenal he talks about the most is maximising his play when he doesn't have what he calls his "best stuff." His riff before last year's Tour Championship, which he went on to win by four, is particularly instructive.

"So, maybe it's golf IQ or it's whatever, there's a lot of guys that have it," he said. "I believe it's one of my strengths. You're going to make putts, you're going to miss putts, you're going to have off days, on days. I believe it comes

down to when the lights are on, and you don't have your best stuff, can you create your own days?"

To McCormick, "creating on days" is built on accepting limitations in physical play, which are variable, and maximising mental skills, which can be more constant. Of course, there's no question about Spieth's putting prowess. "He's a master on the green," says Ian Baker-Finch, who was described similarly in his prime. "He's the exact

can correct."

In March, Spieth won the Valspar Championship in a play-off that included Reed, and then was second at San Antonio and Houston. When Team Spieth got to the Masters, the emphasis was on maintenance.

"He did less rather than more," McCormick says. "Our thought was that the ball is doing what we want it to. He was not fighting anything at all."

Spieth opened with 64 that looked to



opposite of mechanical. On each putt, he allows his mind and body to react to what he sees, and then he trusts what feels right. It gives him this quiet flow that all the great putters have."

"Each time he trains and practises, he's uncompromisingly looking for something he can improve on," McCormick says, "but when he plays a competitive round of golf, he accepts the skills he's got to go after it. He's not going to try to sort of engineer something in the course of play that he might not necessarily have. He's aware of what he has. He can say, 'I know I can get it around with whatever 'X' I have for that day.' And that confidence and ability becomes something that is such a strength and a huge competitive advantage."

But Spieth's differentiation from his peers — perhaps more than any previous No. 1 — has been achieved through intangibles. Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods were acknowledged to have superior mental make-ups, but much of the emphasis was on their overwhelming physical prowess.

Because Spieth's abilities in terms of clubhead speed and distance are relatively modest — though his ball-striking stats are deceptively good — he has raised awareness of the importance of the head over the hands.

"Traditionally, golf observers overvalue the body of the car and undervalue what's under the hood," McCormick says. "Jordan's engine — the way his mind governs his play — is superb. He's also got a lot of grit and fight in him. It's a skill set that is so well-rounded that he's never left without the necessary tools to make up for a physical deficiency."

Says Nicklaus: "When he might be struggling, he does it like that's what he's prepared to do, like it's a natural part of what he does. He thinks his way around the golf course so well, he makes struggling look easy. He does that most important thing: taking the game you've got with you that day, and doing the very best you can with it."

The package was on full display at the beginning of 2015. "We were floating on a strong downstream current in the calm part of the river, avoiding the rocks, heading for the ocean — which was Augusta," McCormick says.

"The only issue was a slight tendency to push drives to the right, but it was resolved. His swing thought was, Here is the vector I'm in, and I want to keep this vector, and if I deviate, then I know what to look for and I

be headed for a record 62 until he bogeyed the par-5 15th. He was in full control of the tournament until a double-bogey on the 17th on Saturday, where he hit driver on the downwind hole instead of three-wood.

"I was very frustrated with that decision," Spieth says, "given I don't want decision-making to ever cost me in an event like this."

After a badly pushed approach to the 18th, Spieth's four-stroke lead — and possibly his psyche — suddenly looked shaky.

He responded with arguably the shot of the year, a high-risk flop from a nestled downhill lie to the tightest of pins. He clipped it perfectly, somehow stopping the ball within 10 feet, then ran in the putt for an uplifting par.

"That just took some guts," conceded Spieth, who called the shot a "one in five...having been in this scenario or having been in contention enough, having been on Tour for a few years, I felt comfortable enough playing that full flop. If you caught me a year and a half ago, I probably never would have played that shot in that scenario."

Showing again how much the previous year's loss burned, he referred, unprompted, to the "bad taste in my mouth" and how he was "trying to get some revenge on the year."

The next day, he did. As a result, Spieth comes to this year's Masters with a whole other mind-set.

"Now, in my mind, other than where I grew up playing, Augusta National Golf Club is the place where I have the most history in golf," he says.

"As far as experience goes, there are only a few in the field with the same or more. Being in contention twice on Sunday on the back nine, having the lead — it's rare. So I look at it as somewhat of a home-course advantage. Which is the coolest thing for me to say about that place."

Spieth said he is looking for patterns among the Masters' multiple winners, with a particular focus on the only three men — Nicklaus, Woods and Nick Faldo — to have won back-to-back.

"That's what I want to do," says the defending champion.

"I don't want to give that Jacket back. I look at it and think, What could I have done this year to embrace it even more, not just let it sit around in a trophy case? And I want to keep it, because I feel I'll enjoy it even more than I did the first time." ☺

Photos by Walter Iose Jr., Donald Miralle, J.D. Cuban