

THE ZEALOT

BY JAIME DIAZ

BRYSON DECHAMBEAU IS ON A MISSION, & GOLF IS ONLY A PART OF IT

certain golfers seem destined to enter the game's history as genuine characters. Of course, top performers often only appear to be so, because even normal traits placed under a magnifying glass can start to look like eccentricities. But the truest criteria for character status are personality, an appealing narrative and a distinctive natural style. To make the cut, it must all add up to being interestingly different.

At 22, Bryson DeChambeau already checks all the latter boxes as he turns professional after a spectacular late burst as an amateur.

In less than a year, the relatively unknown kid from Clovis in California's dusty Central Valley has become the golf insiders' favourite topic of curiosity.

There's no doubt he's interestingly different. As a former physics major at SMU, where he skipped his senior year after the school's golf team was ruled ineligible for postseason play, DeChambeau has a game built on the principles of two arcane science-based golf tomes: *The Golfing Machine*, by Homer Kelley, and *Vector Putting*, by H.A. Templeton.

Kelley's 1969 book was the basis for DeChambeau's decision five years ago to create a set of irons that are all the same length.

On the course, he sports a distinctive cap evocative of Ben Hogan — though as a knit by Kangol it harkens to Payne Stewart and Calvin Peete, the slimmer lines modulating a head and features that resemble Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski.

The jock theme is reinforced by DeChambeau's 6-1, 200-pound physique, but the science-geek persona gains traction with his pastimes like table tennis, shuffleboard and slacklining — walking along thin straps of tubular webbing stretched between trees like a tightrope — all of which he says improve his "proprioception." (Quick translation: coordination.)

Of course, DeChambeau can play. Last year he became only the fifth player, joining Jack Nicklaus, Phil Mickelson, Tiger Woods and Ryan Moore, to win the NCAA and US Amateur championships in the same year.

In the seven pro events DeChambeau played in his amateur apprenticeship leading up to the Masters, he made six cuts, including a T-2 at last year's Australian Masters. His ambitious goal is to capitalise on the seven sponsor exemptions he can count on this season to earn his US PGA Tour card, as Jordan Spieth did in 2013.

DeChambeau knows he has a presence, and he has a mission.

His most stated goal is to influence the game's multitudes and bring more people to golf. He has been inspired

by two meetings with Arnold Palmer, whose example of giving back on a large scale he expects to emulate. Because at this point in his life, DeChambeau is pretty sure he can do anything.

Consider his explanation for being able to write his full name backward with his left hand, which could be taken as the DeChambeau Manifesto.

"It's not talent, it's just practice," he says in a voice that sounds like it belongs to an older person. "If I wanted to learn Arabic or Russian, I could. Or tie my shoes in a new way, I could. Why? Dedication. I'm not really smart, but I'm dedicated. I can be good at anything if I love it and dedicate myself. And I love history. I love science. I love music. I love golf. I love learning. I love life. I love trying to be the best at anything and everything."

Yes, DeChambeau can come on strong, in a way that could easily come off as grandstanding to his peers. But it's telling that he's well-liked by the young amateurs he has long competed against and has been well-received by pros.

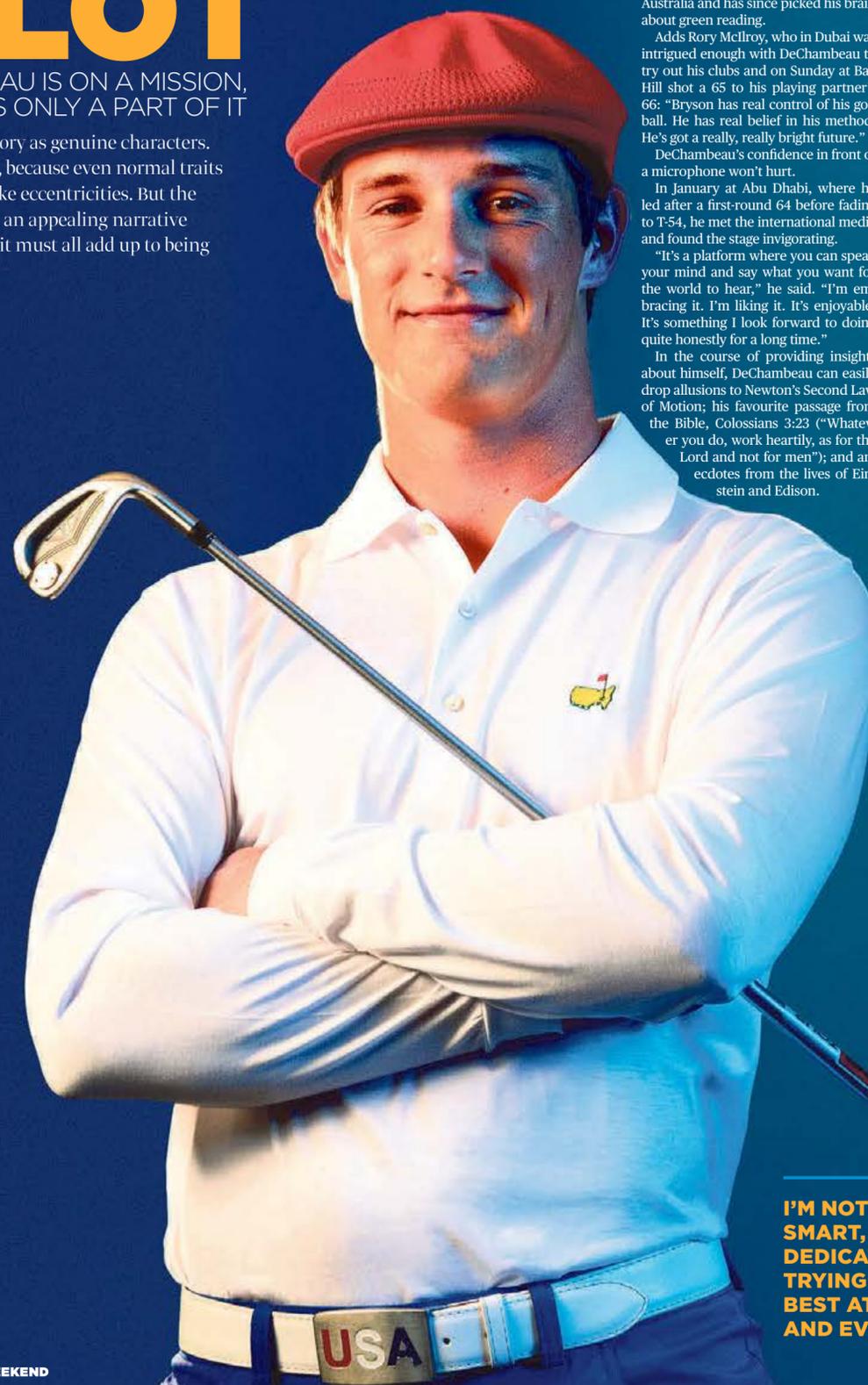
"Bryson is an amazing person who is on a very well-thought-out path that is totally his own," says Maverick McNealy, the 20-year-old All-American from Stanford whose first name suggests he's in tune with the disrupter tradition of his father, Sun Microsystems co-founder Scott McNealy.

Maverick says DeChambeau "takes flak sometimes because a lot of people don't understand or deal well with people who are different. But mostly he's earned respect".

With veteran Tour players, DeChambeau is deferential and polite, an extension of being taught at an early age by his father, Jon, a former mini-Tour and club pro, to treat playing partners and officials with consideration and appreciation.

The many who have snuck glances at him on the practice range have noticed that DeChambeau puts in Vijay Singh-like hours, only at a faster pace.

But the real connection comes from admiration for a committed player who realised at a younger age than they did a crucial truth: Regardless of whether a player is orthodox or unorthodox in style, that player must find and trust his



I'M NOT REALLY SMART, BUT I'M DEDICATED...I LOVE TRYING TO BE THE BEST AT ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING.

individual way.

"He's a very mature guy, and he's engrossed in believing what he's doing is right, and I love that," says Adam Scott, who was paired with DeChambeau in Australia and has since picked his brain about green reading.

Adds Rory McIlroy, who in Dubai was intrigued enough with DeChambeau to try out his clubs and on Sunday at Bay Hill shot a 65 to his playing partner's 66: "Bryson has real control of his golf ball. He has real belief in his method. He's got a really, really bright future."

DeChambeau's confidence in front of a microphone won't hurt.

In January at Abu Dhabi, where he led after a first-round 64 before fading to T-54, he met the international media and found the stage invigorating.

"It's a platform where you can speak your mind and say what you want for the world to hear," he said. "I'm embracing it. I'm liking it. It's enjoyable. It's something I look forward to doing quite honestly for a long time."

In the course of providing insights about himself, DeChambeau can easily drop allusions to Newton's Second Law of Motion; his favourite passage from the Bible, Colossians 3:23 ("Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men"); and anecdotes from the lives of Einstein and Edison.

And, of course, he can make obscure citations from *The Golfing Machine*, like directing those interested in the Zero Shift swing to Chapter 10, Component 7, Variation A.

DeChambeau first read the book when his coach, Mike Schy, the director of a teaching centre at Dragonfly Golf Club in Madera, California, tossed it to the then-15-year-old to quell a torrent of questions about technique.

Although Kelley's work has a cult following, it's often associated with contributing to the high-profile flameouts of Bobby Clampett and Mac O'Grady.

There's a growing sentiment that the modern Tour player has become so reliant on science-based technology and biomechanics that it's inhibiting natural ability. Meanwhile, the self-taught Bubba Watson and the slightly quirky Spieth have moved the pendulum back towards valuing and trusting individual style.

But now DeChambeau, with the certitude of a 22-year-old but not without nuance, maintains there is harmony between the two approaches.

"The book has been misunderstood," he says. "Because it's based on science, people assume it's going to dictate that you swing one way, when actually the principles allow for all sorts of individual differences. It's just going to look different with every body type. That's the key that drew me to it: It's about the individual. I want people to understand that golf is not just a one-way street, that you can do it a bunch of different ways."

In his wheelhouse as an aspiring apostle, DeChambeau crafts a few more extemporaneous paragraphs before neatly wrapping up: "What the book does is provide a baseline of technique that helps your body automatically go back to something that's reliable for the task at hand. Look at Moe Norman. Why was he able to hit it dead straight every time? It wasn't that he was thinking about everything. More like he was thinking about nothing — his mind was on automatic. He found his baseline, then let himself be an artist, not a machine. That's the ultimate triumph in golf."

Following the principles of the book is what compelled DeChambeau at 17 to create a single-length set that allows him to repeat the same posture and swing plane with the three-iron through the lob wedge.

The clubs, which are 37½ inches long, the length of a standard six-iron, are set at a 72-degree lie angle that is 10 degrees more upright than standard. To achieve a consistent swingweight, all the heads weigh 278 grams.

In his *Golfing Machine*-built swing, DeChambeau uses oversize grips that he holds mostly in his palms, with very little wrist cock. That minimises face rotation — encouraging accuracy — but produces very little lag in the downswing, discourag-

ing power.

He applies plenty of force with the width of his swing and the full and fast rotation of his body through the ball. The most notable characteristic of DeChambeau's action is that probably more than any player, his club traces the same path on the backswing and the downswing, which is the embodiment of the Zero Shift swing. With the driver, three-wood and hybrid, DeChambeau uses conventional-length clubs.

Still, his swing doesn't look much different, an accuracy-oriented action — not unlike that of the similarly built Steve Stricker — designed to hit fairways and greens.

"It's a good swing for hitting it straight, but probably not one that's going to produce dominant-type golf," says Johnny Miller. "With hardly any hand action, you lose some power. Being naturally big and strong helps Bryson make it work."

DeChambeau does have exceptional power in reserve. His normal driver swing, which he calls his "fairway finder," is about 113 miles per hour (the US PGA Tour average through late March was 112.99), and he produces drives in the 290-yard range (the Tour averages 290.1).

But when he decides to go for extra distance, DeChambeau will employ his "crank" drive, widening his stance and using more wrist cock to create club-head speed of over 125 mph, producing drives of 340 yards and more.

"Bryson understands his power sources," Schy says.

As DeChambeau proved in winning the US Amateur at Olympia Fields, he's a good putter who says the green-reading formula he mastered from *Vector Putting* gives him an edge.

His acknowledged weakness is wedge play. Neither he nor his teacher thinks having those clubs two inches longer than standard costs him dexterity, or that his no-wrist-cock method is too wooden.

"It's simple," Schy says. "He barely practised his wedges growing up. He was so determined to be a good ball-striker — which he became — he focused on full shots. It's just about more practice."

Says DeChambeau: "I want to get better wedging it, and I will be."

A DEMANDING TEAMMATE AND STUDENT

Bending the game to his will is a strength and a weakness. Bryson grew up a math-oriented A student who until his early teens excelled in soccer, basketball and volleyball.

But he soured on team sports, his father says, "because he couldn't handle the other players on the team not working as hard as he worked". Once DeChambeau made golf his focus, he became a demanding student.

"Bryson wanted everything proven to him before he would accept it, and the depth of his questions and his stubbornness in not accepting my answers made me realise I wasn't the guy to teach him," Jon says.

"That's when I took him to Mike, who I've known since we were junior golfers. He's a phenomenal listener

who can handle inquisitive kids. He'll take a kid's idea and translate it into a productive direction."

DeChambeau loved hanging around all the instructional gizmos in Schy's facility, and, especially after committing to *The Golfing Machine* as his guide, he developed a preference for practice over playing that remains.

"Bryson was totally about making his swing work for the future," Schy says. "He understood that as a young player like no one I've seen."

DeChambeau could be a dispassionate "great experimenter" in the tent, but on the course he had to deal with emotions. Though he had regional success as a junior and finished second at the Callaway Junior World event, his intense desire often got in the way. At SMU, DeChambeau did not excel in his first two seasons. His Christian faith sometimes added to the frustration.

"There were times," says his mother, Jan, "that Bryson would call home after a tournament he didn't do well in and wonder, 'Why is God doing this to me? I practise harder than everyone else.'"

As a sophomore in 2014, he was ready to quit the game.

"I was severely depressed," DeChambeau says. "I was shooting 75s and 76s and becoming just a terrible, awful person to be around."

Schy came to Dallas and threw him another book, *The Handbook of Athletic Perfection*, by Wes Neal, a faith-based treatise. DeChambeau read it and had a realisation.

"I saw that I had made my golf score the centre of my life," he says. "That was my problem."

Soon after, DeChambeau played in the Western Amateur at Beverly Country Club in Chicago. He noticed that for the first time, he wasn't too nervous to eat breakfast, wasn't jittery on the first tee and didn't curse after a bad shot.

When an opponent sank a long birdie putt on the 18th hole to eliminate him, 1-up, Bryson offered congratulations and shook hands with all the officials. Feeling anger coming on from the loss, he called Schy.

"When Mike answered I just got this overwhelming sensation of well-being," he says.

"I got so emotional, all I could get out was, 'Mike, I get it.' I finally understood it's not about winning, it's how you behave in every situation. Bad shot, good shot, that's an opportunity to show my grace and character. I realised that if I do my best in every moment, that would include preparing for a golf shot totally. The paradox is that by making the golf incidental, my golf would be its best. That's when my life took a different course."

The next year, DeChambeau won his rare double.

"Those two victories were the biggest I'd ever had by so much, but combined, they didn't compare to the feeling I had at Beverly Country Club," he says. "People think Christianity is this kind of medication that makes things easier, when in fact it's the toughest route you could ever go down. Because it holds you to a high, high standard — which is doing your best at every moment."

Because DeChambeau seems destined to face many special moments, expect an even more interesting character to emerge. G

photo by Walker Loess Jr.