



BY  
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Tiger Faldo has the large hands and work ethic of a piano lifter

and yet the occasional touch of an embroiderer. How else do you win three Masters on marble-floor greens? Right now, of course, in early November he's not in Augusta but at the Laguna Bintan Golf Club, on the practice green. It's after lunch and he's ruining my digestion. Basically he's demonstrating to me, and a group of video-taking golfers how inept we are at playing golf. Politely, of course.

Faldo places the ball in the thick rough, the pin is close, he swings, the ball comes out vertically, lands like a butterfly settling for a nap and rolls to gimme-putting distance. It's a fabulous flop shot. He's showing off. No one is complaining.

Faldo is here as ambassador for the Laguna Golf Brand and as a lifetime envoy for golf. He's no doubt being paid for this clinic, yet he is an evangelist for his sport. When he talks about technique and positioning, you can hear his affection for the game's com-

plex beauty.

Faldo is a regular presence in South-east Asia yet familiarity should not dim our awe for he has more Majors (six) than Phil Mickelson and Severiano Ballesteros. Still he upsets me for people like him offer a reality check on amateur skill. We think we're not bad and then he goes and hits one-handed shots we don't even dare imagine. He plays golf, we only presume to.

Watching professionals up close, or playing with them, is a painful education. Roughly 25 years ago I briefly hit with Leander Paes, the Indian tennis player, and I could barely return his second serve which kicked like a mule whose tail had been pulled. And he was a short guy.

Another time, after a 10m air rifle Olympic champion fired pellets into a .5mm bullseye with the nonchalance of a man picking his teeth, he offered me his rifle. I lifted it and shook like a kid at his first exam. If William Tell's son had a watermelon on his head, I

might have nicked it.

Faldo up close is equally bothersome because his knowledge reveals our ignorance and his standard demands our humility. He won his last Major in 1996 and yet genius never completely abandons the athlete. Diego Maradona can probably still walk around with a ball balanced on his head and Faldo can still chip a ball 40 feet and down a sharp slope to four feet. Old skill on song.

Faldo is proof of the obvious: sweat equals magic. Great fluency is only built from great labour. "The harder I work, the luckier I get" is an old quote but it doesn't work with most amateurs: we want the second without the first. We think 14 putts on the practice green, after a beer and nasi goreng, is hard training. We understand routine but don't follow it faithfully; we read up about putting and then ask our caddies about slopes, grain, lies, breaks.

As he instructed us on putting, Faldo produced a string,

a spirit level and pointed his finger. Mumbo jumbo? No, just thoroughness and technique and an investigation into the science behind the art. Of all sports, more than tennis and its swing, and cricket and its batting angles and arcs, golf is the most madly technical.

You sense Faldo, the engineer, likes this as he talks about address, chipping, swaying, using different clubs for the same shot, or using the same club with different swings. Amateurs listened like disciples. How much they will put into practice we're never quite certain.

Spencer Robinson, smiling fellow columnist, learned about "practising from different lies to see how the ball reacts". The editor of this section, S. Murali, who measures shots in miles not yards, said he took away "how important the weight on the left foot is". Benny Teo, the amiable managing editor of Golf Vacations and Golf Women, said he understood better the need to "be stable".

And me? Naah, I don't need help from Faldo because I am a bit like Tom Watson. Well, only the part of Watson which said: "My golf swing is a bit like ironing a shirt. You get one side smoothed out, turn it over and there is a big wrinkle on the other side. Then you iron that one out, turn it over and there is yet another wrinkle."

Faldo can't help my broken game, but I learnt from him just the same. For he was as much explaining a game as he was taking us on a journey through greatness by letting us peek into the game's intricacies, its feel, its science, its repetition.

As he left, one thought struck me: on the course we can look like cavemen who use clubs, while in his hands the same irons become instruments to be played. But even golf gods fortunately hit human notes. Now and then during the clinic, Faldo would duff a shot. For some reason it always brought a smile to my face.

Photo by Jeremy Long