

Around Nick Faldo



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Winner of six major championships, Nick Faldo is the best golfer that Britain has ever produced. Although he has not always been a favourite of the press and formerly maintained a chilly demeanor towards fellow professionals, his great victories are fondly remembered by the British golfing public. Through a programme of publicity events, the launching of the Faldo Series in Asia and the recent publication of his autobiography, Faldo has opened more of himself to the golfing public. We knew he is a ferocious competitor and dedicated technician but, in an interview with James Spence, Faldo confronts many of his mistakes.

Through the cultivation of youth through the Faldo Series, he is transferring the product of 30 years of professional experience to his young charges. He is not certain that all of it is being understood or absorbed but he is pretty sure that the Series provides everything required to turn precocious talents into illustrious careers at the top of the game. His experience extends well beyond that offered by other noted *sifus*. He has walked famous fairways on Sunday afternoons and raised the cups that lay beyond the 18th of them. The most memorable of these two walks took place in two places that could not be more different: the Lothians and Georgia.

Faldo was a successful golfer before the trough that accompanied his famous swing rebuild and the three lean years that followed lasting until 1986. The doyen of golf writers, Peter Dobereiner, described the demon of ambition that was gripping Faldo thus: "In 1983 he won five tournaments and was ranked European No.1, progress that most players would have regarded as highly satisfactory. Not Faldo. In several Open championships he played himself into contention but his game did not stand up to the crunch of the last nine holes. He determined that he must achieve consistency, no matter what it might take. It took two years out of his golfing life with nary a sniff of victory. It took a massive drop in his income. It took an agony of frustration, grinding hard work, and the pain of Leadbetter's incisors clamped to his nose. It took the embarrassment of the bewildered criticism of his golfing colleagues and many others who understood even less about demonology."

It is no exaggeration to say that any dedicated British golfer over the age of 30 will remember where they were during his breakthrough major win in the '87 Open at Muirfield and also during his overcoming of a hapless Greg Norman during the '96 Masters. Faldo describes both days in the interview below as being "strange" though their strangeness was of a different order. At Muirfield, Faldo assembled 18 consecutive pars in a thick *haar* that had laid over the course, a target that Azinger, playing behind him, just failed to match. Somewhere during the watching of that round it became obvious to us all that if Faldo was going to win, he was going to win by the slightest margin of one shot and that in doing so he was not going to score better than a par on any given hole. From Faldo's perspective (described by him below) he felt he

was vested with a sense of great opportunity and that each shot mattered. At that time Faldo was only the third British winner of the home championship since 1951 and most of us would have to ask our fathers about the first of those - Tony Jacklin's victory in 1969.

It is Norman's collapse from a six shot margin rather than Faldo's golf in the final round of the '96 Masters that is remembered though Faldo's 2-iron to the green of the par 5 13th deserves to be remembered as one of the best pressure shots ever. Here the elongation of the nerves was caused by the mental implosion of the man to be vanquished.

Norman's ability to position himself for the win is only rivaled by Woods and Nicklaus in the modern game, but his frailty when in position is a sad spot occupied by himself alone. Technically it has been analysed as a breakdown in the hip movement during the downswing, causing shots to flare out to the right. It also been pointed out that Norman lacked the safe shot, the bread-and-butter play, so committed was he to a full-bore, high trajectory shot path. The commentators from ESPN tolled the bell after the 12th by which stage Faldo had taken the lead: "If Greg Norman blows the 1996 Masters, it will be the biggest collapse in golf history" Faldo recounts the commentator as saying in *Life Swings*. The seeds for this most excruciating of life swing's were sown much earlier. Faldo felt Norman's nervousness emanating from his constant regripping on the 2nd tee after a bogey at the first. Many shrewd observers felt it was all over for Norman by the turn when he was still leading the tournament. After the 10th hole, Nick Price left the clubhouse commenting "I can't stand to watch this happen to Greg". Johnny Miller, in an appraisal that positioned Faldo as one the modern game's 12 greats, wrote that "Like a big python he slowly squeezed you to death. As Greg Norman and many others found out, there was little point in trying to struggle. If you lost your composure just a little bit and tried to fight him off, he just killed you faster".

In the interview that follows, Nick Faldo discusses these two afternoons, the process of transferring knowledge to his young charges, why he feels he may have over-practiced during his career, and his regrets on throwing out his natty sweaters with the diamond patterns.



JS: Surprised that Ben Evans [the Faldo Series International 2005 winner] scored 65 [on the Eden Course at Hong Kong Golf Club] ?

Faldo: No, not with these guys. They are talented. I think that's quite an achievement. They arrived from Britain and Europe on Monday, and they've got to cope with jet-lag, different grasses, but that's all part of

the experience. That just shows you that they are quality golfers.

JS: What's the relevance of bringing Nick Faldo Series to Asia?

Faldo: This is our inaugural event and goal is to showcase what we've been doing in Britain. We've been running this event for nine years in Britain, we've been expanding over there over the years. We started with only 250 entrants nine years ago and played with 100 competitors. Now we have over 3000 entrants with 550 competitors so we ballot out, in some areas as low as 0.3 handicap is balloted out. The standard of golf is really good. The courses we play are very good as well. They play Loch Lomond, Carnoustie, Blairgowrie, they get to play a lot of the championship courses. That's going really well. The reason we came to Asia is that we thought America is fine but they have their own programmes in America, and so we thought we'd come to Asia, it's a great opportunity for us to have a new base, to come out and play. I really enjoy Asia, and the lifestyle. So that's one of the reasons we are here. We spoke fourteen months ago with the Hong Kong Golf Association, and they thought it was a good idea. So we put the whole thing together and they have come aboard to host it this year and next year. I am moving Tom Phillips [Faldo Series Director] out to Hong Kong to make it all happen. This is a great opportunity to try and do the same as we have done in Britain, in a bigger scale around Asia, to get each country involved and playing their own qualifying events. Then we can all come together for a grand final, and then we can then start having matches between Europe and Asia. And hopefully it will expand in Asia and I can help them as I have been doing with my program in Britain by bringing on board the instruction side, the physical side, the physiotherapy side, the mental sport psychology side, even dietary, chiropractics. Bring in all these different areas and hope to make them great golfers.

JS: You were more a less a pioneer in paying attention to those facets of a golfer's development. Which are the areas you wished you knew more about when you were starting out 18 or 20?

Faldo: Most of the things I did, if not everything, was an experiment, I was self-taught. I would hear things, especially on the mental side, of how you control your breathing and how you learn visualisation, what the process is, how you can control your tempo, your physiology and all these sort of things. Now I can talk about these sort of things to a sport psychologist and they can tell you, to put it into words. But before, you would be just working on feelings and what happens. So that's a great shortcut for kids now. They can now pick up very good books on sports psychology and really get to the bottom line of it rather than wondering what the hell is "present time" and how the hell you can get into present time and all that stuff.

JS: The Power of Now?

Faldo: Yes, the Power of Now. That's one area. And the technical side, I practiced thousands of hours so I can say concentrate on a certain things and pay more attention to this, this and this and don't go wandering off when it goes wrong. Go back to your basics and just keep grinding it out again. It's usually something very simple. You think you've played this game, but you still have to double-check your grip, you still have to double-check your posture, you have to double-check your alignment. Those simple standards have survived the test of time. You don't have to go into looking for all those fancy bits. Quite often the faults lie in the very basic stuff. And now we understand so much more: how the body changes, the nutritional side, how what you eat today will affect you tomorrow, the sort of things that will affect your performance. And the physical side, how to train. With biomechanics they can build a physically good, perfect golfer. In my era it was very much "Oh, don't touch weights, otherwise you are going to screw-up your touch". And so you can see how, like any sport, golfers are going to get better because they've got access to all this information.



JS: You have written that there is no point in practicing without purpose. When you look back, do you feel there were some stages when you might have hit too many balls?

Faldo: Sure, I would agree with that. I would say I've beat an awful lot of balls without the right focus or in the right area or what have you. I hit so many balls, and when you think about it, I wasn't doing any physical work, any physiotherapy. If you are trying to change your golf swing, and your body is balanced in a certain way, through the way you have swung, and you've used certain muscle groups, and suddenly you are trying to do something different and it's totally different muscle groups. You make a slight change in your swing and it feels slightly different. You could be trying a slightly different hip action and then suddenly, after 20 balls, your head hurts. And this is the sort of thing we have a much better understanding of now. If you have to work your body differently, maybe you need to go back to train yourself physically first and make changes like that so you can get the whole muscle structure working better and then come back to golf. There's all these sort of things that can really help to shortcut. We are using 30 years of experience to cram into new minds.

JS: And with some of the better players here, if they were to ask you when to turn professional, would you get involved in that decision?

Faldo: Yes, we do. In all those areas. The big question with a lot of them is "should I go to an American college ? ". You are trying to please parents as well as playing golf. Mum and dad obviously want a backup, they want an education, a safety net if suddenly all goes wrong with golf. We try to help with all those sort of things. With some kids they are just so bursting to go and play, where you say, yeah, make the decision and turn professional. It may be right down to advising them things like "If you like that sort of clubs, stick with that sort of clubs. Don't turn pro and then go and change your equipment." You know we offer that advice to some of them and they don't take it on broad and then they get caught. I've been there, I've made all the mistakes, I got over those mistakes, so you learn from it.

JS: One person from golf's history you've been most compared with is your idol Ben Hogan. And yet Ben Hogan was very reluctant to pass on any secrets to either to golfers or golf writers. What makes you different in that respect?

Faldo: I am just very happy to share, I enjoy it. There was a philosopher who said "You don't know anything until you teach it" or something along those lines. I enjoy that, I think why not pass on as much as you can. Sometimes we do sort of a Question & Answer, and I think I've actually given them all my

secrets and I suddenly realised I've just given them a formula of how to play this game. And I think a lot of it just goes over their heads and they don't quite appreciate. I hope they use it, I hope the smart ones will take it on board, because I have actually given them everything I know about this game, what I believe helped me to get there. We shall see who takes it on board and says "Yeah, Faldo has said something there, we actually did it".

JS: Your autobiography is called *Life Swings*. How old do you think you were when you realised that life involves great cycles of ups and downs?

Faldo: I think my first one was 1979, I had a great year in '78 and then all of a sudden '79 went down. And then I had great year in '83 and then there was my [swing] rebuild and, wallop, went back down again. And then I had great years in '90 and '91, and then down. I recently watched a program on the National Geographic channel about cutting holes in the ice and they said everything is on 11 year cycles. And I thought it kind of makes sense in a way. Some say seven, some say eleven or whatever. I thought that's very interesting, that they thought that the whole world revolves around 11 year cycles and you can see how some of that does map through you life.

JS: All British golfers over 35 years old today remember where they were when you won your first Open at Muirfield. They also remember when you won the US Masters in 1996, how would you compare those two experiences ?

Faldo: I guess they were both really strange; strange is the right word. You were out there playing, and you sensed that this was a great opportunity at Muirfield. I remember saying to myself before the event, look, you are 30 years old, this is the time to win a major and that Sunday afternoon playing in that pea soup of a fog and with every hole, every shot and every hole, I could just sense the importance of this. What was taking me to win a British Open and the sense of just hanging on and thinking one great shot is going to win this and one bad shot could cost me. So you are under that kind of intense focus. And '96 was very similar. It was just one shot up to tie, catch up with Greg [Norman]. And things turned around so quickly at that back nine, suddenly the pressure was just multiplying. Every shot, every hole. And again, that was a very strange experience. The crowd didn't know how to react to Greg. You know you've got one guy's going down and one guy going up. Another strange day.

JS: Johnny Miller recently wrote a book titled *I Call the Shots*, which placed you as one of the twelve greats of the generation that he overlapped with, but he reckons you would win more if you had not try to hit your driver with so much control, that you would have won more if you had let it rip more. How would you answer that observation ?

Faldo: I feel the way I practiced with Lead [David Leadbetter], I developed a swing really for irons. And so with my irons, my mid-irons in particular, in that era I was one of the best. I kind of "held-off" the release, maintaining this angle so much and that made the iron shots so good because I had this great descending blow, and I hit with a little control fade. And that didn't really work as well with the driver. It was detrimental to the driver. I needed to release it and I've never been able to do that, never perfected that, so yes, my driver has never a major strong point. It was something that we never really addressed. I was quite happy that I was a positional player with the driver. The most important thing to me was to hit the short grass, that was number one to me, never had the ability to rip the darn thing. I kind of agree with that and it may have cost me.

JS: You wrote recently that when you played the Hong Kong Open at Hong Kong Golf Club here last year, you were playing predominantly a draw shot and you said when the pressure came on you were searching for a fade.

Faldo: Yes, exactly. You have to play what you are comfortable with. And I know that the draw swing is really good for me, it sort of unraveling some of my mistakes. I've compounded a few mistakes over the last couple of years in the swing, the swing started to become too contrived. It wasn't free enough so we've been working on a draw swing to get the freedom back and that was going really well. And then all of a sudden you are faced with a shot, I hit a couple of pulls and then Aaaaaaaaah! I was caught between do I trust this or do I trust the other ? I would always deem my fade shot as my bread and butter. So I kind of switched and that went well, I actually played well on the Sunday but didn't hole as many puts. The bottom line of this game or anything is you can't compromise yourself, you have to just go with what you

are 100% happy with. This is the great thing about this game, even at this late stage of being out there in your 29th season, you still learn something about how you can play this game.

JS: You are famous for setting goals. What goals have you set for yourself for 2005?

Faldo: Well, the one thing I really believe in, the big one, would be St. Andrews [host course for the 2005 Open Championship]. I am really good at playing a links course. I need to get back in the winner's circle, I haven't been there for quite a while now. I've done a lot of work physically over the last six months or so and had a few aching muscles and things and once I realised it wasn't serious so just get on with it. I lost quite a lot of weight, I am feeling good on that. I working on my swing and I am rekindling all my mental thoughts, and the way I used to do things, so I like to think I can come out and really compete. If it played like it played last time [The Open of 2000], very dry and fiery, the long hitter will have an advantage. But you play the good old links with a good breeze blowing, then it's down to the guy who can get the ball around and make some putts, so there is definitely a good chance there for me.

JS: One question about putting, in your book, you said you did quite well left-hand-low for a while. I think you said you won US\$2 million dollars putting that way. If you were to start again, would you start, à la Furyk, left hand low?

Faldo: With the technology, you can go onto a putting machine and you can experiment with all sorts of different grips and you will be able to find the one that keeps the shaft at the perfect angle and create the perfect release and the perfect roll. And you experiment with the machine, you get a read out that says that's the one, well then you keep going with that. Which ever one was working for you at the beginning, that's going to stay with you. That's the great thing about science now, we can go onto the putting green with these machines and you can change your stroke in six putts. But before, it used to take hours and days to see what it looks like, what it feels like. But now you get a read-out, if you try a slightly different grip, different pressure, different hands, or whatever, and it would say, that's the better one and you think, great I'll do that, off I go.

JS: Based on the predictability ?

Faldo: What you're trying to get is a percentage of consistency or a certain style, or a change in your grip produces the perfect strike and the perfect roll. The goal is to go from one position where everything is moving in sync basically. So you just find what works and stick with it.

JS: You've received some very good comments about your commentating debut [for ABC in the States]. How many tournaments are you going to cover?

Faldo: I'll do twelve tournaments, eight of those are just the weekend, the other four are all four days and I enjoy it, I think as I get more comfortable and more confident, I want to start opening up and try to be even more a bit of everything. My big goal is to get more people to move a bit closer to the TV screen. "Hey folks, have a look at this, what the hell do you think he's up to ?" or "Have you spotted this ?" I can look into a player's face and see if he likes it or and he doesn't like it instantly. And everybody puts a lot of attention on the last six holes, but I think a lot of things happen, and I can spot things happening a lot earlier, by the end of round two or round three, whether this guy is comfortable or whether this guy is uncomfortable. Something will happen, an unforced error, some guys will say "Oh, he just missed this shot", but there is a bit more reason to it. I think that's where I can latch on to. I think I just want to let it rattle away, trying to be informative, trying to be funny if it's funny. But number one goal, don't force anything, don't force a style, just sit there and hope you make good comments.

JS: About your golf course design business, what do you think you are doing differently in your designs now from when you started ?

Faldo: I think I am more confident. Each project is different, I think, that's the important thing to me. I don't have a Faldo signature. I don't really want to have that label, because that would be boring for me if I go in and it's the same style. It's important to go into each project and something will inspire you and you think I want the bunker here like this. And you go to some places and obviously the bunkers need to be massive, big and bold, big slopes, space and you've got to fill that space. And you go to another

course and you think this is totally minimal, you might be in the trees, and you think you just need an odd one bunker here or there, a different style, different shape. I don't like fighting nature. I am fortunate in that I've got good eyes, good visualisation. I can look down on a pile of mud and see the finished product, even if you have to tip it upside down and make it look totally different. And obviously strategy is very important, I know what everybody likes and dislikes and I try to work that in as much as I can. I don't want to fight it. Some guys design, and it looks fantastic, they are artists. They are brilliant guys, but the strategy may be wrong. The fairway's sloping this way, but you are actually trying to make the guy do this and that might be a bit much. Or they might miss it and they might have missed a great opportunity, now I think I got a good eye, a good designing eye and I got the strategy, so I try to blend all that together.

JS: You got rid off all your cashmere sweaters with the nice diamond patterns. Now that they have come back in fashion, do you regret getting rid of them?

Faldo: Yes, big mistake. Other professionals like actors archive everything, everything they've got, even down to driving licenses, the clothes they walked through in every movie. Sure I only kept a few and I am pleased that I still got my cashmere sweater that I won the first British Open with, I got the one from Augusta, I've still got my Ryder's Cup sweaters, Ryder Cup shirts. All of a sudden they've become very valuable now, and obviously what I should have done is kept them all. At the time, you think, well, who am I? I kept my shoes I won the major with, the sets of clubs, all the golf bags I won the majors and the Ryder's Cups. I kept a fair bit of memorabilia, but the smart thing would have been to have kept everything.

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