



BY  
JAIME DIAZ

# ALL IN

AFTER SOME FRAGILE MOMENTS, JASON DAY  
TURNS INSPIRATION INTO OBSESSION

here's an easy "hi, mate" openness and humility to Jason Day. The 28-year-old Australian calls himself "a boring person," equating golf's other 20-somethings to "the popular kids in school... I'm just the nerd in the back." Day's attempt at a recent press conference to explain his combination of power and touch — "Jordan Spieth and Rory McIlroy had a baby, and I was it" — was slightly, though charmingly, off. It's why he lets his wife, Ellie, do his tweeting. But Day's warmth is the reason his ascension to World No. 1 last September, shortly after winning his first Major championship, at Whistling Straits, has been a popular one in the caddie yards, equipment trailers and tournament offices of professional golf, and especially among the tight group of players and families who, like the Days, regularly travel and try to normalise Tour life in a luxury RV. "Jason has a sweet nature that's pretty laid-back, even when he's got to be intense," says fellow Aussie and friend Geoff Ogilvy. "Most players, especially the really good ones, aren't like that."

Day is unlike his peers in another, seemingly opposite way. From age 10 to 13 in a rough side of Rockhampton, a Gold Coast town north of Brisbane, Day got into a lot of fistfights. Though many took place in schoolyards, they were still the gasping, desperate kind that ended when one party quit or got hurt, although the stress of a quick rematch could loom.

It's not the background of most professional golfers. As Lee Trevino, a brawler in his public golf years in Dallas and El Paso, told Golf Digest's Guy Yocom, "Think twice before throwing the first punch, because you're making a big commitment." It's true that the first time Byron Nelson saw Ben Hogan, the fellow 13-year-old was boxing against another Fort Worth caddie named Joe Boy.

Chi Chi Rodriguez fought for sodas in the streets of San Juan, Ian Woosnam and Fred Funk boxed as kids, and Esteban Toledo was once a talented professional fighter. But these days, from The First Tee's Nine Core Values and beyond, fighting has pretty much been drummed out of golf.

Day fought mostly as a result of the violence in his home. Earlier this year, he revealed on David Feherty's television show that his father, Alwyn, was an alcoholic who physically abused Jason and his mother, Denning. Not long after Alwyn's 6-year-old son showed immediate talent and enthusiasm for hitting shots with a three-wood recovered from a garbage dump, the father began taking Jason to local junior tournaments and applying an extraordinary pressure to perform. At 11, Day says, "If I played bad golf, he'd beat me up." When Jason was being bullied in school, or, as the only Asian kid

in his class (his mother is Filipino), was taunted with racial slurs, he dreaded his father finding out. "He'd tell me, 'If you don't fight that kid tomorrow, I'm going to beat you up when you get home,'" Day says. "So I'd get in a fight."

Alwyn died of stomach cancer when Jason was 12. Not surprisingly, the leftover turmoil and anger within his son, now without a strong authority figure, led to an aimless period of drinking and more fighting. Day says he doesn't remember much about those days. "Maybe I've blocked it out," he says. "I look back on the influence my dad had on my life and career, and I just try to take the best parts of what he had."

Although on "Feherty" he said, "Every now and then I think about him and absolutely hate him." But Day recalls, and sometimes draws on, the sensations of being in those early fights. "Anything can happen, so you have to control your attitude and stay strong," he says. "Another person is trying to hurt you, and you're trying to hurt them, so if you make a mistake, you're in trouble. My dad was the way he was, but he also gave me a motto: never say die. Just to keep pushing and pushing, fighting until the end."

## NEVER GIVE UP

He put it in my head that you're always going to fight, and you're always going to beat them. At the same time, my mother, who is the hardest worker I know, told me that the best thing about me was that I never give up. If I have an extra gear, that's where it comes from."

Although he hasn't been in a fight since he was 13 — "I would suck at it now" — Day knows there is a hardness from those days deep within. He accessed it in winning the WGC-Match Play in 2014 and 2016, and in his insistence during those mano-a-mano battles on making opponents putt short ones that might normally be conceded.

The increased self-awareness that has been part of Day's growth as a player is reflected in a lexicon that clearly sees tournament golf as a psychological battle. He favours terms such as "fight or flight," "instant" versus "delayed" gratification, "be-

**'YOU GO, "I CAN'T  
FOCUS ON RUNNING  
AWAY. I HAVE TO FACE  
THIS STRAIGHT ON.''**

— JASON DAY

ing comfortable with being uncomfortable," avoiding "self-sabotage," and the need to "walk towards the fear" to describe his feelings and thoughts during competition.

At Bay Hill, where he hung in and came from behind to win on the strength of his short game — he did the same thing a week later at the Match Play, particularly in beating McIlroy in a tense semi-final — Day admitted the stress of making up for poor ball-striking presented a test he used to be unable to pass. "It's so uncomfortable, you feel like you want to run away," he said. "Times like that are where you go, 'I can't focus on running away. I have to face this straight on. I've got to fight for this win.'"

Breaking through has been liberating and energizing. Seeing what's possible, he has stepped up efforts in every area. Under trainer Cornell Driessen, the 6-foot, 190-pounder has focused on strengthening his core for greater speed and to guard against more injury to what has been a troublesome lower back. Caddie, coach and father figure Colin Swatton guides Day through the technical and mental challenges, as he has done since Jason was 12. Day has also increased his texting correspondence with childhood hero and friend Tiger Woods, saying "If you're going to pick a brain, it would be his."

And if you're going to pick a power player, it would be Day. Employing driver club-head speed in excess of 120 miles per hour, at Whistling Straits he became the first player to shoot 20 under par in a Major. But Day's biggest improvement over the past 18 months has been with his now-familiar high-tech mallet putter. According to statistician Peter Sanders, before Day's victory at the RBC Canadian Open last July, Day's make rate on putts in the crucial range between four and 10 feet was below the Tour average of 60 percent. But since then and through the Players Championship, that rate has risen to over 70 per cent, gaining Day about 2½ strokes per tournament.

His goals? As many wins as possible, multiple Majors, including the career Grand Slam, and surpassing Greg Norman's 331 weeks at No. 1 (Woods' record of 683 is apparently unassailable). In short, Day is all in. "I've never been so committed to myself," he said before winning the Players for his 10th PGA Tour victory. "I'm motivated to extend the gap between me and No. 2. I'm going to work as hard as I can and see where it goes."

Day's prospects dramatically improved when his mother mortgaged their home and used her husband's life-insurance policy and a loan from her brother to get Jason away from his behaviour in Rockhampton and into the highly regarded Kooralbyn Boarding School — with a first-class golf programme whose alumni included Adam Scott — several hundred miles away. There, Day and Swatton connected, with the troubled adolescent having "a moment of clarity" to suppress the rebellion he was feeling for authority and deferring to the teacher.

Almost immediately, Day demonstrated the obsessive work ethic of a young man hungering for approval and validation. Inspired by Woods' instruction book, *How I Play Golf*, Day began rising at 5am to practise and play before classes.

Under Swatton, Day developed a game reminiscent of Norman's in the stability, compactness and speed of his swing, the height of his ball flight, and his skill with the short game and putter. Day dominated his age groups in Australia, and in 2004 he travelled to San Diego and was a winner in the Callaway Junior World Championships. By 18, he had turned pro, and in 2007 he joined the Nationwide Tour. In his first year, he finished fifth on the money list and qualified for the PGA Tour. He famously said, "I can take Tiger down." (Says Day today: "When you're that young and you're full of confidence, you don't say the greatest things.")

Day appeared to have been rescued. But his past made the road ahead complicated and confusing. "Anytime he was given good feedback, it was so unfamiliar to him, he didn't like it," Swatton says. "He still struggles with complimentary stuff." The kid who had grown up being criticised wasn't sure he was good enough. On the PGA Tour, amid the game's best players and the toughest setups, Day began to question himself and proved mentally fragile.

## LONE VICTORY

From 2008 through 2013, Day won once in 129 PGA Tour starts. His lone victory came in the Byron Nelson, where, with a one-shot lead, he hooked a middle iron into the water on the 72nd hole and made bogey but survived when Blake Adams did the same thing.

At the 2013 Masters, Day arrived at the 16th tee on Sunday with a one-stroke lead but admitted later, "My body just froze." Two consecutive bogeys led to a third-place finish behind Scott. As the winless years went by, Day fought complacency, burnout and frequent injury. Before his first Masters in 2011, in which he tied for second, Day was giving serious thought to quitting the Tour.

"He wasn't having fun, and he was searching," Swatton says. "Countless times on the range and on the golf course, we'd have these conversations, and he'd ask, 'Why do you think I don't win more?' I would always say, 'Jase, you will win more often when you want to win more.' I'm sure he thought, 'Yeah, what the hell does that mean?'" In essence, Day was still in a fight — but this time with himself. Again, he didn't quit.

"I had to go through something like that to experience what it is to fail, and fail hard," he says. "Even though I hated it, I needed it in my career."

"We were both so young, figuring everything out," Ellie told *pgatour.com* last year. "People always thought he was so mature, but he did really immature things back then. He played video games all the time. He was still throwing golf clubs, and I'd see him cussing on the golf course. He had phases where he would almost give up."

Today, Ellie says, "He's a machine." At the end of 2012, a year in which Day's adjustment to the birth of his son, Dash, coincided with his worst career finish on the FedEx Cup points list (daughter Lucy arrived in November of last year), Swatton, Ellie and longtime manager Bud Martin all told Day he wasn't working hard enough.

"Jason's naturally a hard worker, so that pissed him off," Martin says, "but it needed to be said, and he took it the right way — as a challenge."

Day began using the principles of Focus-Band, which measures brain activity and cognitive function. A routine that begins when Day arrives at his ball and features standing on the target line with fluttering eyes shows Day how to use the "right brain" hemisphere that can access "the zone" and what that feels like — and how to replicate it. When Day encountered verigo in the second round of the 2015 US Open at Chambers Bay, falling on his final hole, he shot rounds of 68-74 on the week-end despite the lingering effects to finish T-9. Day took it as a positive, saying the adversity "helped me to see how far I could really push myself."

In the next Major, the Open Championship at St. Andrews, Day had a 20-foot birdie putt on the 72nd hole to get into a play off but left it short. On the plane to Toronto for the RBC Canadian Open, Day realised that he had played with great consistency — his only three bogeys coming during the windblown second round — and possessed a new serenity. "It felt like it changed me and the way I look at myself," he says. When he got off the plane and into the limo, Day told Martin, "I'm going to win this week."

The day before the tournament, Day sat down with filmmaker Kevin Foley (brother of coach Sean Foley) to talk about his life. "He was still raw from St. Andrews, and his eyes looked right through me and burned into the camera," Foley says of the film, "Never Say Die," which was nominated for an Emmy. "There was this intensity, like a light had gone on, and he couldn't wait to play again."

On Sunday, Day birdied the 16th and 17th holes, and on the 72nd, faced a 20-foot left-to-right downhill much like his last birdie putt at St. Andrews, for the win. Before hitting it, he told Swatton, "I ain't leaving this short." Before the putt went in, Day let out a throaty yell of celebration: "It was a good way to turn around really quick and know that I can do it and show people that I can do it and stomp my foot on the ground and say, 'No, that's enough. I can get it done.'"

Three weeks later, in the PGA, Day took a two-stroke lead into the final round, the third consecutive Major he led through 54 holes. On the par-five 11th hole, a spectator yelled "Choke!" causing Day to read-dress the ball. He then "melted" a drive of almost 400 yards, drawing a thumbs-up from Spieth, outdriven by more than 75 yards. Day says he was most proud after his 67 for a three-stroke victory when Spieth congratulated him and said, "There was nothing I could do." A month later, after winning the BMW Championship by six strokes, Day was No. 1. What happened?

## BREAKTHROUGH

The main breakthrough was developing the calmness to close. Day won only once the first seven times he led PGA Tour events after three rounds, but after winning the Players, he'd done it five consecutive times.

Unlike most players, Day can be candid about the effects of pressure. Asked last year at the Tour Championship whether he would think about the FedEx Cup's \$10-million bonus, he said, "Yeah, of course it would pop into my brain. It did in 2011, and I choked." Day recently recalled

his first such failure as a pro, at a 2007 Nationwide Tour event he led after three rounds: "I shot 80. It was a pretty good 80. I hooked my ball off the first tee, hit a little girl. I was kind of shaken up after that, but yeah, I learned a good lesson obviously on how to handle pressure that day — also not to break up with your girlfriend the night before. That definitely doesn't help."

Says Swatton: "Until last year, Jason never truly knew why he was playing. Maybe initially it was for his dad, and maybe for me, and his wife and kids. He had extrinsic goals based on money, to the point that he bought things to unconsciously create pressure to perform. Every time we talked about how good Tiger was, I'd say to Jase, 'Why does he do it? Why does he love it?' And the reason I did is that I wanted him to find his intrinsic motivator. Because no one can find it for him."

"I believe he has finally realised in a deeply held way, I really, truly want to be the best player in the world," Swatton says. "I see it in his new ability to win multiple times. It means he loves winning. And that means Jason loves the practising and every aspect of preparation, because he knows it will help him win. Now it feels

**'UNTIL LAST YEAR,  
JASON TRULY NEVER  
KNEW WHY HE WAS  
PLAYING.'**

— COLIN SWATTON

like the journey is just beginning again."

Says Ogilvy: "It's noticeable in his focus that Jason is really set on getting as good as he can. It lets him activate one of his best gifts, which is being very good at getting better. He's kind of Hogan-like in that respect. He likes to get all the information, take what's right for him, and then ingrains it with really hard work. It's why everything about his technique is so sound and efficient and textbook, all the way through the bag."

Norman knew how to stay on top, and he hopes, that like he did, Day will concentrate on more variety in his iron play. "It comes down to the work equation, which Jason understands," Norman says. "I would urge him to err on the side of caution with the load. He puts on his lower back. There isn't a power player on this planet who hasn't had back problems over the years."

Expect Day to keep consulting Woods in what could be perceived by both as a passing of the torch. Even if Woods' texted words seem unremarkable — "just be yourself and stay in your world" is an example, according to Day — the fact that they are coming from the player Day reveres most makes them gold.

"For some reason, when he sends the same stuff to me, I can finally concentrate," Day said after winning at Bay Hill. "It just means so much more, you know?" Another Yoda moment with Woods, before the Players, might have been simple, but it struck Day as more profound. "I asked Tiger, 'Did you ever struggle with being the best?' And he goes 'No.' Because he tried to enjoy the process. And he tried to get better. Didn't matter how good he already was. Every time he need it up, he just tried to learn from it, and he got better. And that's it."

Maybe it is. For Jason Day, it's the good fight. **Ⓞ**