

MIND GAME

Jordan Spieth has the abundant talent and, more importantly, the acute mental toughness to join the ranks of the best golfers of all time

As his ball sliced far to the right of the 13th fairway at Royal Birkdale, near Liverpool, England, eventually landing on an overgrown hillside, Jordan Spieth looked on helplessly, if not hopelessly. It was the final round of the 2017 Open Championship, which Spieth had started with a three-shot margin over fellow American Matt Kuchar. But the lead was a distant memory now; Spieth's inconsistent play had allowed Kuchar to narrow the gap leading up to the 13th. To make matters worse, Spieth couldn't find a playable second shot from the spot his drive had come to rest. It looked like an epic collapse on one of golf's biggest stages, and from one of the sport's brightest young talents.

Spieth might have thought he was experiencing a bad case of déjà vu. Just over a year earlier he'd suffered one of the more painful defeats in recent golf history. His struggles on the 12th hole in the final round of the 2016 Masters, which cost him his lead and a second green jacket, were historic in their own right. After hitting a terrible shot into the water, Spieth had a simple approach to try and salvage the hole. But, in a moment recognizable to every frustrated weekend golfer, he completely mishit the ball, which ended up in the water again. It's one thing to merely hit a bad shot, but pro golfers don't usually shank one completely. In a sport defined by psychological strength and emotional steadiness, Spieth had produced his worst possible shot at the worst possible time.

A little more than a year later Spieth was looking at another massive disappointment. Instead, he rallied for one of the most brilliant recoveries the Open Championship has ever seen. After a tense 20 minutes, he moved the ball from an unplayable lie even farther from the 13th fairway onto a vehicle- and equipment-filled driving range. He then hit a blind shot toward





MARK LEIBOWITZ/TRUNK ARCHIVE

the green that allowed him to salvage a bogey, gifting Kuchar the lead, but also providing himself with the opportunity to complete one of the great closing runs in golf history: a five-under final five holes, including a near hole-in-one on the par-3 14th and a 48-foot eagle putt on the 15th.

It would have been a once-in-a-lifetime stretch for good professional golfers. But Spieth has a real chance of being one of the best of all time. He has the rare combination of precocious talent, an impressive work ethic, and, perhaps most importantly, mental toughness—the kind he showed at Royal Birkdale—needed to be a legend.

A Dallas native, Spieth entered golf's consciousness in late 2012, when the University of Texas sophomore turned pro. He was already known to close followers of the sport, having earned first-team All-American honors while leading the Longhorns to a national championship in his freshman season. Spieth comes from an athletic family (his father played college baseball, his mother and brother college basketball), and that athleticism is evident in his swing, which is both aggressive and silky smooth. During his first season as a pro, he became the youngest player to win a tour event in 82 years, the youngest player to participate on the United States Presidents Cup team, and was named PGA Tour Rookie of the Year.

By the time he won his first major, the 2015 Masters, he was already heralded as the future of the sport in the post-Tiger Woods era. But the post-Tiger era is vastly different than the decade-plus that Woods dominated—because unlike Tiger, who had occasional competition from challengers like Phil Mickelson, Vijay Singh, and Ernie Els, Spieth has arrived at a time when the sport has more elite, and young, talent than ever.

In any given week, this new generation of players—including Rory McIlroy, Dustin Johnson, Rickie Fowler, and Jason Day—work to deny Spieth more silverware. Spieth himself is only 24 years old. “Having gone through the last few years, it puts even more in perspective how incredible what Tiger did was and what he did for our sport,” Spieth explains. “I have mad respect for him, having been in the position to at least see a little into that world.”

With Tiger's potential return to form in 2018, Spieth is excited at the possibility of facing off against the legend again, but he also knows his biggest competition is from his peers. “The game is in a really good place right now,” Spieth says. “Tiger is going to be coming back...which is really good for our sport. But then we mix that with the amount of young guys that are on tour, and young guys that have won major championships—meaning they've seen success at the highest level and therefore are not afraid of it. You're going to get a lot of high-quality golf.”

As he heads into the first major of the 2018 season, the Masters at Augusta National Golf

Club, Spieth is realistic about his goals in the face of such stiff competition. “For this year, the idea is to try and win a major. I would love to win at Augusta again, as I've gotten close the last couple of years and [my win in 2015] was my favorite tournament I ever played in.”

Spieth also has his sights set on the PGA Championship, which is the one major championship he still needs in order to capture the extremely rare grand slam: winning all four majors in a career, something only five golfers have done. “If you asked me, starting this year, what's the one tournament you could win if you get to choose, it would be a tough call between Augusta and the PGA. That just shows you what I think of Augusta, because the PGA would bring me to that career grand slam that's so elusive in our sport.”

Spieth understands golf's physical and psychological toll, and how to overcome it, as well as anyone. “It's a mental grind. I think of how important it is to stay sharp mentally and how much you actually have to work on it. I think of how much you really have to do meditation, training your mind, and recuperating. Not letting it burn you out. What's crazy about golf, as an individual sport, is how each week the balls in your hands and you get the last shot. You're going to lose 90 to 95 percent of the time even if you're one of the best players to ever play the game.”

Signed by Under Armour, Spieth became one of only a few athletes to get their own UA signature shoe—joining the likes of Stephen Curry and Bryce Harper—and he participated in the design of his recent, second release, the UA Spieth 2. The process wasn't simply about having his name on a shoe; it was about performance and trying to get an edge on a talented and crowded pool of competitors. “In golf, our swing is ground-based; it's all based on how you move horizontally and vertically from the ground. To be able to impact the development of the shoes with Under Armour's team could potentially help me on the golf course when most people don't really even think about [their shoes' impact]. That's advantageous.” His other partners—including AT&T, Coca-Cola, and Titleist—have all invested big in the prodigious talent, and he has earned more than \$35 million in tournament winnings alone in his young career.

No doubt, as Spieth stood on the 13th fairway at the 2017 Open Championship, his livelihood wasn't at risk. But in a sport where no one is guaranteed continued success, and opportunities to win majors might never present themselves again, Spieth turned what could have been a career-altering error into a career-defining moment. With the whole golf world watching, Spieth showed the confidence and swagger he needs to stay at the top of golf's next generation. Not a bad place to be. —Keith Gordon