RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

# Touching Greatness

Dermot Gilleece

# About the Book

***Tales of golfing stars and memorable moments from Ireland's best-loved golf correspondent.***

In almost thirty years as Ireland's leading golf journalist, Dermot Gilleece has met, interviewed and dined with numerous heroes of the game.

Join Dermot on the course as he looks back over many wonderful years of golf with the greats – from Jack Nicklaus's first game on Irish soil, to sympathetic accounts of the declining skills of iconic golfers such as Seve Ballesteros. Packed with stories and insights about legends from Gene Sarazen, Tom Watson and Tiger Woods to, of course, 'Himself', Christy O'Connor Snr, *Touching Greatness* offers highlights from Dermot's much-loved column in the *Irish Times*, as well as more recent observations on the game. There are unmissable insights into illustrious characters from the amateur game, women's golf, Irish involvement in major team competitions like the Ryder Cup, and the history of Irish golfers in the Open, including the recent double from Padraig Harrington.

At turns moving and funny, and always beautifully written, Dermot's tales bring you right onto the fairway as you soak up the very best stories from inside the world of competitive golf.

# Contents

**4. A Dip into History**
Ireland’s golfing diaspora
A century in the Open
In praise of a natural
Bullets fly in Connemara
Is your fescue bent?
A Nobel Laureate fails to master putting

**5. Team Golf, the Irish Way**
Phone calls from Faldo
Aces over Niagara
Himself and The Brad in Mexico City
Bridging a gap at Kiawah
A record slips away at Waterville
Dunhill delight on the double
Conquering Clark
Confronted by the Fifth Amendment

**6. Golden Girls and Golden Memories**
A first taste of the Curtis Cup
Picturing the shot
A very good year
The only women golfers I know
Aloha, Ms Madill!
Memories of Broadstone
A remarkable meeting by the Boyne Estuary
Playing in disguise
The apparel oft proclaims
My golfing heroine

**7. Amateurs Tell Different Tales**
A letter from the Hawk
Tales from the West
Emulating Faldo, as a nine-handicapper!

# TOUCHING GREATNESS

## MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS WITH GOLFING LEGENDS

DERMOT GILLEECE

TRANSWORLD IRELAND

To Kathy, Tara and Mark


The author’s struggle at Augusta National in 1994.

# Foreword

I've been reading Dermot Gilleece since shortly after I picked up a golf club, about forty years ago, but it's only since I became a writer myself that I have been jealous of the rotten bastard. They say that the smaller the ball, the higher the quality of writing, and Dermot is living (I assume he's still living, although he won't return my emails) proof.

Like most of the great Irish prose writers, he has an oddly slanted view of events, which he translates into elegantly simple language, urging the eye to move on, sometimes too quickly, forcing the reader to go back to check if something could possibly have been described so beautifully. And it was. As I think I mentioned, I hate him. Of course … not really.

His series, 'The Making of the Game', was the first thing to which I would turn in the sports section of *The Irish Times*. To this day, I believe there is no finer writing on the game's colourful history, and all from this quietly spoken, almost invisible man, who, when I was playing for a living, was always around, even when it didn't seem to matter.

Unlike the vast majority of golf writers (in fact, make that sports writers), Dermot stayed out of the bar and actually walked the golf course, often with the parents or friends of those he was stalking. There was subterfuge in his behaviour, hidden intelligence disguised as innocent enquiry, and many were the times I read something about myself that even I didn't know! For instance, I learned that I got my imagination from my father, who apparently was

making up stuff about me long before I did it myself. In fact, in a way, Dermot Gilleece is partly responsible for the success I had as a player, for I ended up believing a lot of my own press. Placebo effect my arse – if it works, it works!

As a child growing up in County Down, Dermot was the window through which I viewed my heroes, Irishmen like John O'Leary, David Jones, Eamonn Darcy, Des Smyth, Christy Junior, Hugh Boyle, Jimmy Kinsella, Eddie Polland, Fred Daly and, of course, the Lord God Almighty of Irish golf, Himself. There was Nicklaus and Palmer, and Trevino and Weiskopf, too, of course, but for me, they were the untouchables.

I would read of heroic Irish feats, disaster and idiocy, of John-O's win at the Irish Open at Portmarnock in 1982, and dream of playing there myself. The one thing that never entered my dreams was that one day Dermot might write about me. It never crossed my mind for, go on with you now, it was too good to be true!

*David Feherty, broadcaster and hopelessly inferior journalist*
*Dallas, Texas 2008*

# Introduction

In the late fifties, when I was a trainee journalist in the now sadly defunct Irish Press Group, part of my job involved running messages for senior members of the staff. These included regular trips to the local bookmaker on Burgh Quay, placing bets for the group's main racing expert, Maurice Ring.

Though Ring enjoyed only moderate success, I was still fascinated by the notion of using one's expertise to make handy money. So I ventured to ask him why it was that he didn't quit working and take up punting full time. Peering up at me over a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, he paused for a moment before saying gravely, 'Young man, you must remember that horses are only human.' And I knew exactly what he meant.

Suddenly, horseracing lost much of its appeal as I contemplated my future as a sports reporter. In truth, though, there wouldn't be a sport of choice, not at that stage, anyway. About a year after the enlightenment from 'The Ringer', I was dispatched to cover my first golf tournament. In fact, it was the first game of golf I had ever seen, which approach was entirely in keeping with my employer's policy of firing youngsters in at the deep end. So it was that on a Monday morning in 1960, I covered the play-off for the Irish Hospitals Tournament at Woodbrook for the *Evening Press*. It involved Christy O'Connor Snr and Ken Bousfield, and O'Connor won with a course record 63 to the Englishman's 71.

As it happened, this was to be only a brief flirtation with the royal and ancient game. My main activity with the *Irish Press*, and from 1965 with the *Daily Mail*, centred on the reporting of soccer, rugby and GAA, as their Republic of Ireland representative. Still, leading amateur events, the Carrolls International and later the Irish Open offered the chance of a return to golf. As in June 1972, when I reported that British golfers Neil Coles, Brian Huggett, Bernard Hunt, Ronnie Shade and Peter Oosterhuis were opting out of the Woodbrook event because of an alleged IRA threat.

Then in 1974 there was the opportunity of reporting on the legendary Sam Snead in the Kerrygold Classic at Waterville and relaying the advice of Ryder Cup skipper Eric Brown to young hopefuls on tour. ‘Stay at home for a few years and perfect your game before taking on the big boys,’ he counselled at the Carrolls Celebration tournament in June of that year.

After leaving the *Daily Mail* in 1979, my involvement in golf blossomed once more when I joined Independent Newspapers for what proved to be only a sixteen-month spell. Though the term had yet to become ubiquitous, I was head-hunted by *The Irish Times* sports editor, Gerry Noone, and became the paper’s golf correspondent in March 1981. Between then and 2001, when I took on the role of golf editor, I had the opportunity to meet all the game’s leading players, while maintaining a close attachment to the amateur game, both men’s and women’s.

At *The Irish Times* I witnessed a dramatic change in the coverage of golf in these islands, from a time when the amateur was king, to the emergence of Tiger Woods as the most dominant figure in the history of the game. An illustration of this change was that in 1981, my first year in D’Olier Street, I was sent to Cypress Point in California to cover the Walker Cup, in which Irish teenagers Ronan Rafferty and Philip Walton were competing. Yet not a thought was given to the possibility of sending me to

Walton Heath in London, where America fielded their greatest ever team in the Ryder Cup.

Even in 1985 I was sent to the Men's Amateur Home Internationals at Formby, Lancashire, rather than down the road to The Belfry in Birmingham, for what proved to be an historic European victory in the Ryder Cup. By the end of the decade, however, the growing popularity of tournament golf on television was being clearly reflected in our national newspapers. Meanwhile, I was having great fun putting together a weekly column called 'Golfing Log', which incorporated stories, short and not so short, which I had picked up on my golfing travels. A number of those stories have been worked into the various chapters of this book.

The dominant element of the ensuing chapters, however, centres on interviews with the great players whom I was fortunate to meet and on others who made a significant impact on me simply through the force of their personalities. In writing about Jack Nicklaus, for instance, I have concentrated on his career after 1986, when he captured the last of 18 major championships and was then faced with the crushing reality of declining skills. This process was even more painful for Seve Ballesteros, while other great players, such as Greg Norman and Tom Watson, seemed to be able to ease themselves more gently into their autumn years.

My love of golf history led me to explore Ireland's proud involvement in the Open Championship, from Michael Moran's breakthrough as third-placed finisher in 1913 to Padraig Harrington's glorious triumph at Carnoustie in July 2007 and at Royal Birkdale in 2008. The magnet of the past also drew me to a similar treatment of the Irish women's scene, in particular the glory days of May Hezlet and Rhona Adair, the so-called Golden Girls. Then there was the Irish golfing disapora, which enriched new frontiers of the game, especially in the US.

Through my good fortune in moving from *The Irish Times* to a golf correspondent's role with the *Sunday Independent* in 2002, my involvement with players at the highest level was maintained, almost seamlessly. So it was that more recent interview pieces were added to my files, some of them entirely new, while others lent embellishment to existing pieces. Then came the crowning glory of Harrington's victory in the PGA Championship at Oakland Hills, his third victory in six Majors. The process of putting it all together made me realize how truly blessed I have been in my access to so much golfing greatness.

*The Irish Times* have my gratitude for the opportunities given to me by Gerry Noone, initially, and then his successor as sports editor, Malachy Logan. I am also deeply indebted to Adhamhnan O'Sullivan for believing there was a role for me in the *Sunday Independent*, to his successor as sports editor, John Greene, and to Paul Kimmage, who was a true friend when I needed one. But a career in golf journalism wouldn't have been possible in the first place but for the wise and generous counselling of Terry K and Donal O'B, both of whom have gone from us to divot-free fairways in the great beyond.

# CHAPTER 1

## *A Different Celtic Tiger*

> ‘What golf needs is a black man with a great deal of personal magnetism and a whale of a game …’
>
> CHARLIE SIFFORD,1992

THEY HAD BEEN promised an awe-inspiring spectacle, a place of breathtaking beauty, but on that memorable Friday in July 1999 all they could see from their helicopter was the ghostly outline of a promontory, shrouded in a stubborn mist that showed no signs of lifting.

Down below, the atmosphere around The clubhouse was alive with a mixture of expectation and concern. One of the young caddies fondled the familiar tiger head cover like it was a treasured toy from his not-too-distant childhood. The clubs had travelled by road and Cian Daly was told that their celebrated owner would be along in about an hour.

Inside, John O’Connor, president of The Old Head of Kinsale, darted from one room to another, the familiar look of serious contemplation a little more intense than usual. In sharp contrast, golf-course architect, Ron Kirby, sat quietly reading a newspaper, lifting his head on occasions to chat animatedly about the game that dominated his life.

The clubhouse clock was approaching noon when confirmation came that, in a manner of speaking, the tiger had landed. At a stroke, feelings of high anxiety were replaced by smiles of relief. The elite six of Tiger Woods, David Duval, Mark O'Meara, Payne Stewart, Lee Janzen and Stuart Appleby had made the 30-minute chopper trip from Waterville, where they were based for much of their Irish stay, and were now negotiating the remaining few miles of the journey by road.

All involved at The Old Head were determined their visit would be suitably rewarding and sixteen-year-old Cian, described by caddie-master Noel Hurley as 'a gem of a kid', was certainly ready to play his part. Confused ambitions of becoming a concert violinist or joining the NASA space programme were temporarily forgotten while he dealt with the more immediate assignment of caddying for the world's leading player.

Then there was the relationship his fifteen-year-old colleague, Rory O'Brien, had established with another leading American sportsman. Clinging to O'Meara's bag as if fearing he would be set upon by thieves, Rory was wearing the rather special number 23 caddie bib. Why that particular number? 'Because that was Michael Jordan's number with the Chicago Bulls and I caddied for Michael when he came here on a recent visit,' Master O'Brien explained.

The Kinsale schoolboy had also worked that season with American businessman Rick Goings of the Orlando-based Tupperware company. And Goings happened to be a friend of O'Meara's, which explained how Rory got a gift by post the previous month of the eighteenth flag from Royal Birkdale, signed by the Open champion of 1998. And there was more. Much more. In fact, the teenager was overwhelmed to receive, by special delivery, a set of Cobra golf clubs, courtesy of Goings.

Opened officially on 1 June 1997, the course is situated on the stunning, 216-acre Co Cork promontory. It is where, on a May afternoon in 1915, in Atlantic waters 295 feet deep, the sleek liner *Lusitania* sank with the loss of 1,195 passengers and crew, victims of a German U-Boat attack off the south coast of Ireland. By a cruel irony, it occurred on a particularly pleasant spring day, warm enough to attract locals to the Old Head for a picnic.

Given its proximity to the disaster, it was almost inevitable that for years afterwards, mention of the Old Head would prompt thoughts of the tragic events of that fateful May afternoon. By the start of the nineties, however, the majestic promontory was in the process of adopting a far more desirable image. It was to be the location of a famously peaceful pursuit that could hardly contrast more sharply with the ravages of war.

Essentially, it is a headland course rather than a links, and it carries the marvellous bonus of offering what can be very welcome distractions from the more demanding aspects of the royal and ancient game, though not for players of the quality of its latest visitors. In the event, as lunchtime approached, the air was suddenly filled with the distinctly eerie combination of a lone piper playing the traditional Cork melody ‘The Holy Ground’ and the sonorous note of a fog-horn. The players and their Irish hosts, financiers Dermot Desmond and J. P. McManus, were at the clubhouse.

There was no sign of the fog lifting as they headed for the first tee in what the locals had hailed grandly as the ‘Shamrock Shootout’. But the players didn’t seem to mind and, with the caddies indicating the best lines to take, resident professional David Murray gave more specific guidance. One imagined the players revelling in the novelty of it all, like some sort of boyhood adventure.

Up the first fairway mist came sweeping in from the right, the eastern side of the Head. The green was visible,

however, as the players hit their second shots and Tiger let out an excited ‘whoop!’ when his ball landed on the short grass. But there were challenges ahead for this child of the computer age, who would have to create mental pictures of where his ball might be landing, while also imagining what lay beyond.

As the sextet walked down the dramatic second fairway, the cliff-edge was just about visible. And still the mist came in, deepening Kirby’s disappointment that these great players were being denied the spectacle and subtlety of a course he had helped create. Frustration became all the more acute when they played the 420-yard fourth, where the distant green was lost totally in the mist. Unwilling to make excessive demands of his imagination, Woods played a three-wood off the tee safely down the right half of the fairway, which left a second shot of only 123 yards.

While walking towards the green, he stopped momentarily and looked back. Too late he realized that, with a gentle breeze helping, he could have driven the green with the big stick. Reading his mind, Kirby smiled and called across to him, ‘Maybe the next time.’ They exchanged understanding nods. That damned fog!

Though the gallery increased with every hole, it remained probably no more than a hundred, making for crowd control of a decidedly gentle nature. For Stewart, who looked somewhat unfamiliar in regular slacks rather than the usual plus twos, it was quite a change from the heady excitement of his last tournament three weeks previously, at Pinehurst No. 2, where he embellished his position within the game’s elite, through a second US Open triumph.

Now he was back in a land he had first visited in 1991, when he played in the Irish Open at Killarney a few days after capturing his first US Open at Hazeltine. And nobody could have imagined the tragedy which lay in wait for him three months hence, when he would be cruelly whipped

from our midst by a freak air accident en route to Houston and the PGA Tour Championship.

In the event, there was no hint of quitting from the super-six as tee-shots were smashed down the long tenth, which Woods reduced, downwind, to a drive, nine iron and an eight-foot putt for the only eagle of the day. Soon they were back on the cliff-edge, only now they could actually see the 300-foot drop to churning Atlantic breakers below the tee at the spectacular, long twelfth, where drives were aimed over an elbow of the rock-face, towards a landing area way in the distance.

Oh blessed day! The fog was lifting and for the first time sound was accompanied by glorious vision. As if intent on outdoing each other in spectacular flight, cormorants, guillemots and peregrine falcons, varieties which would test even the most knowledgeable birdwatcher, swooped along the cliff-face before disappearing into one of the caves which traverse the Old Head at sea level. Appleby spoke into a camcorder as he filmed the scene. Then, laying the camera aside, he couldn't resist hitting three-iron shots down towards the rocks, sending golf balls on a route more likely to be travelled by the handicap player.

Kirby smiled quietly. 'He's doing what every golfer secretly wants to do: hit a ball into the ocean,' he mused. 'It's a special thrill to just aim it down there and let it rip.' As the Old Head was gradually revealed in all its magnificent splendour, the players could now appreciate what their trip was all about. And their patience found its reward in an afternoon that could hardly have been more beautiful. By the time they headed along the 459-yard fourteenth and back towards the ocean once more, the fog had disappeared completely. Now the drama of the finishing holes could be savoured to the full.

Only three of the players found the target at the treacherous, short sixteenth, where solid three-iron shots were needed to reach the green 199 yards away into a left-

to-right crosswind that was pushing balls towards the cliff-edge. Then came the 626-yard seventeenth, where Woods hit a predictably long drive only to see it finish in the rough on the right. ‘He’s not up far enough to reach the green,’said Kirby. Whereupon Tiger let out a squeal of laughter after carving a driver second-shot high, wide and not-so-handsome, out towards the briny.

Kirby pointed out the line: the yellow, metal tower left of the lighthouse. Duval followed the instructions almost to the inch. Janzen also hit a good one. And there they were, preening themselves like spoiled children, when Stewart saw fit to demand their attention. ‘Hang on!’ he shouted. ‘I’m the old guy who just won the US Open.’

After the seventeenth, which nobody reached in two, they proceeded to the extreme back tee at the eighteenth. Looking inland over the promontory, now clear of any hint of fog, the players’ concern turned to Atlantic breakers crashing onto the rocks directly below them. Appleby joked, ‘You wouldn’t want to do a Gary Player off this tee,’ in a reference to the technique the so-called Black Knight employed of walking into his shots. Meanwhile, Rory was recounting how Michael Jordan, on a visit earlier in the year, had reduced the 459-yard hole to a drive and nine iron, though the lad neglected to mention that it was with the assistance of a brisk, following wind. ‘Not from this tee,’ protested Stewart. Yes, from that tee, the US Open champion was told.

Tiger took a short line into rough up the left, from where he reached the green with an eight iron. Stewart, with that wonderfully seductive tempo, opted for a longer line down the right and didn’t quite reach the fairway. Before settling over a second shot of 201 yards, uphill and into the wind, he agreed to be photographed with three delighted young local fans. Then, taking out a four wood, he feigned anger, while muttering, ‘Michael Jordan hit nine iron my ass.’ And

as a beautifully struck shot sailed towards the elevated green, he gave a whoop of delight.

It was approaching six o'clock as they stood together on the final green, watched by a phalanx of spectators, strategically positioned along the terrace of the clubhouse. And as the audience applauded, one suspected it was as much for their patience with the weather as for their golfing skills. The relief from John O'Connor was almost palpable. 'Having these players here is something I always imagined would happen and the sun has never been more welcome,' he said.

After further picture-taking and autograph-signing, the players headed into the locker-room where the compliments started flowing. 'Those spectacular views towards the finish were worth the wait,' said Woods. Whereupon the friend he calls Marko added, 'With that breathtaking scenery, it's got to be one of the most dramatic locations for a golf course I've ever seen.'

Then Duval, in typically measured tones, remarked, 'I really love coming to your country. I've played Ballybunion, Lahinch and, of course, Portmarnock in the Walker Cup in 1991. I have always been made to feel so welcome.' He went on, 'Some of the holes we saw towards the end – their beauty would rival the best anywhere. I imagine it could be extremely difficult in high winds, especially some of those hills along the cliff, but the views are unbelievable. Standing on tees with a 300-foot drop is not something we do every day.'

Typically passionate, Stewart spoke about 'the beauty of this place', insisting that it would become 'a must of a golfing destination for tourists from my country'. He went on, 'For my own part as a professional, I feel really blessed to have had the opportunity of visiting this very special place.' Woods then interjected, 'Unfortunately we didn't see very much of the early holes but there were some spectacular views towards the finish. I think it's great that

we've had this chance of such an amazing golfing experience.'

After changing their shoes, the players emerged to join club members and friends in a cup of tea and a sandwich, before their helicopter whisked them back to Waterville. It meant Cian Daly had to part company with a welcome burden, which had been close to his heart all afternoon. How well did he feel he had guided the world's number one through the fog? 'Tiger shot 71,' he said with a proud smile.

At the time of this greatest six-ball in the history of Irish golf, Woods and Duval were ranked first and second in the world. O'Meara was fifth, Stewart was tenth; Appleby was thirty-third and Janzen was thirty-fourth. Between them they had eight major professional titles: Stewart the 1989 USPGA Championship, 1991 US Open and 1999 US Open; O'Meara the 1998 US Masters and British Open; Janzen the 1993 US Open and 1998 US Open; and Woods the 1997 US Masters. Little more than a month later, Woods was to capture his second major when he beat off the challenge of Sergio Garcia in the USPGA Championship at Medinah. However, from a golfing standpoint, the autumn of 1999 was marked indelibly by the untimely passing of one of the game's favourite and most talented sons.

Stewart's tragic death was reminiscent of events thirty-three years previously, when another great American golfer was similarly cut off in his prime. Two years after capturing the Open Championship at St Andrews, Tony Lema and his wife were killed when their private aircraft crashed en route from the 1966 PGA Championship to a pro-am event elsewhere in the US.

On a visit to Ireland's south-west prior to the 1998 Open Championship, Stewart gained the distinction in the company of Woods and O'Meara of having a hole in one on the 217-yard, short third at Ballybunion. The club was a beautifully struck two iron into a stiff breeze and the

outcome was doubly remarkable for the fact that Woods actually had a five at the hole. When has anyone been able to boast of outscoring the world's top player by four strokes on a par three? And during the 1999 visit, much of his time was spent in Waterville, where he entertained US Tour colleagues and delighted locals with rousing tunes on the harmonica. Small wonder the club decided to make him honorary captain for the year 2000, a distinction he was delighted to accept.

His last tournament appearance was in the National Car Rental Golf Classic at Lake Buena Vista, Florida, which started on 21 October. And during the second round, he was a little taken aback to be addressed by an Irish voice as he walked from the fifteenth green to the sixteenth tee on the Magnolia Course. Initially, he responded with suitable courtesy on being congratulated for his splendid victory at Pinehurst, but the player was clearly jolted when the spectator added, 'Congratulations on being next year's honorary captain of Waterville.' This time, Stewart asked, 'How did you know that? Are you a member of the club?'

At that stage, Dublin-based solicitor Tom Duffy, a native of Mullingar, explained that he was at Disneyworld on holiday with his wife and children, and had taken the day away from them to have a look at the tournament. Whereupon Stewart asked him if he had any advice to offer regarding Waterville. Duffy replied with a smile, 'Yes. Steer clear of committee meetings.'

This brought hearty laughter from the American, who was clearly aware of the ability of such bodies to make a camel out of a horse. With that, he hit off the sixteenth tee and was followed on the remaining holes of the round by his Irish fan. Their exchanges weren't finished. As Stewart walked up the eighteenth fairway, he spied his new-found friend once more, outside the fairway ropes. Coming over to Duffy, he enquired, 'Do you know J. P. McManus?' 'Not personally,' came the reply. 'I'm afraid I don't move in the

same social circles.' 'Well, if you see him, give him my best regards.' And all of this while he was attempting to make the halfway cut, which, as it happened, he missed by a stroke after a second successive 71.

Neither man could have known this would be the last tournament hole Stewart would ever play. And by a remarkable coincidence, on that very day, he was among the leading names announced at a press conference in Limerick to compete in the McManus Invitational 2000 Pro-Am at Limerick GC the following July. Duffy, whose brother Michael is a past captain of Mullingar GC, said, 'Though our exchange was helped by the fact that there weren't many people around the sixteenth tee, I was amazed by his friendliness and willingness to chat. And I was really stunned when he actually sought me out going down the eighteenth.' He concluded, 'Obviously it's dreadfully sad that he is now gone from us, but I will treasure these beautiful memories of a generous and charming gentleman.'

On the Monday after their meeting, a freak accident claimed the life of an open and generous man, who graced his craft with abundant skill, vitality and a marvellous sense of fun. There would be no more Irish visits and the sense of loss was especially acute at the McManus Pro-Am, after which a group of leading American players, including Woods, went to Waterville on a sad assignment. With Stewart's widow, Tracey, they honoured their fallen colleague at the unveiling of a larger-than-life bronze, erected in his memory.

It became a poignant postscript to a 1999 visit during which Irish people took him to their hearts. And those of us fortunate enough to have seen him and his five colleagues grace The Old Head can still picture his mock rebuke on the seventeenth fairway – 'I'm the old guy who just won the US Open.' And in the late afternoon, we laughed with him

beneath a bright July sun on what had earlier been an extraordinary, foggy day.

Tiger, of course, won the millennium staging of the McManus Invitational, and I was in Heidelberg the following May when he swept to success in the Deutsche Bank TPC Open. His remarkable accessibility on Irish visits was brought sharply into focus by events on the Saturday evening after he had carded a sparkling third round of 63. A slim, dapper figure in sunshades gave brief and explicit instructions to the waiting television crews. 'Tiger will give three interviews,' said Mark Steinberg. 'You have two questions each. Nobody asks a third question or he walks.'

When the centre of attention descended the eight steps from the elevated score-recorder's area like a major showbusiness personality, there were further instructions from his manager. 'OK, this is the order: Sky, German, you [to Ken Brown, representing the US Golf Channel].' In such circumstances the interviewer knew he had to pick his questions carefully. Ask something like, 'Well, Tiger, you must be pleased with that round,' and question number one could deliver a brief 'Yes' in reply. These, however, were practised operators. The opening question was: 'Well, Tiger, tell us how the round developed for you.' No monosyllabic answer to that.

An exasperated TV cameraman exclaimed, 'What a circus!' Close by, a German worker was driving wooden stakes into the ground to accommodate additional security ropes. 'Crazy!' he remarked to nobody in particular. 'All zis for one person.' Brown, who was the last of the interviewers, shared his bemusement. 'It's an amazing situation,' said the former Ryder Cup player. 'As Tiger turned to be interviewed by me, he had this glazed look in his eyes, as if his mind was a million miles away. Once I started asking him questions, however, I had his complete attention. Then, when I finished, the glazed look came back and he turned automatically as if expecting another

interview. Amazing.' Still, he conceded, 'Unfortunately, it has to be this way. The demands on Tiger are such that he would never get to the locker-room if all of our requirements were to be satisfied.'

Against this background it's not difficult to imagine my excitement at being told there was a good chance of a one-to-one with the great one, as part of the build-up to the 2005 staging of the McManus Invitational. When JP expressed the hope it would happen, I took it as a done deal. And so it proved, but not before I had received a sharp reprimand. I was driving towards a barbecue in a swish area of Augusta on the Monday of Masters week when my mobile phone rang. 'You're late,' said JP. 'He's been here since six.' How, I thought in self-mitigation, could I have known that Americans believed in arriving for an evening gathering in the late afternoon? Still, having made a decidedly inauspicious start to the evening, I wasn't about to dig a bigger hole for myself.

Suddenly, the situation received an unexpected lift in the delightful form of my quarry's Swedish wife. 'This is Elin,' (pronounced Eelin), I was informed of the stunning blonde who stood before me. Her warm smile and firm handshake were hugely encouraging. 'I am hoping to have a chat with your husband,' I ventured, quickly adding the reassurance, 'Don't worry, I won't give him grief.' Her smile never wavered.

Six days later, Woods would resume his pursuit of golfing immortality by capturing a fourth US Masters, to bring him level with Ben Hogan and Gary Player on a 'major' tally of nine. And he would reach double figures on a return to the Open at St Andrews, where, in millennium year, he had become the fifth player to complete a career grand slam.

Given the context of the interview, I had to accept that matters such as the various swing changes he had undergone during the last few years, the protracted

drought of ‘major’ success which followed his US Open triumph of 2002 and his ill-fated Ryder Cup partnership with Phil Mickelson had already received a sufficient airing in the international media. So, as temperatures on a hitherto balmy, southern night dropped markedly, I focused instead on what had become his regular July visits to Ireland, prior to the Open Championship.

One of these visits had developed into something of a busman’s holiday, when, five years previously, he spearheaded a highly successful McManus Invitational at Limerick GC, which culminated in donations of €20 million to local charities. He was now set to return to the latest staging at Adare GC on 4 and 5 July, directly after the Smurfit European Open. Also competing would be familiar faces from the Old Head in the form of O’Meara, Appleby and Janzen, along with Fred Couples and Robert Allenby, among others. Indeed, rival Ryder Cup captains, Ian Woosnam and Tom Lehman, were among the high-profile line-up.

The fourth staging of the richest event of its kind in Europe owed its existence to an apparent golfing itch, which has tended to afflict the eponymous organizer every five years since 1990. When asked to explain the five-year cycle, McManus replied, ‘I couldn’t afford to do it more often,’ but before anyone could run away with the notion of the wealthy financier suddenly being strapped for cash, he added, ‘It’s very time-consuming.’

Anyway, back at the American barbecue, I was tucking into a particularly pleasant steak when a tap on my shoulder was followed by a whispered, ‘You’re on.’ With that, I stood up to be introduced to the world’s foremost golfer. Dressed casually in a red tee-shirt and black slacks, his bare head made him appear decidedly boyish. His grip was firm, his eyes were bright and his amazing smile was very different from the one I had become used to from countless press conferences. There was a warmth in his

eye-to-eye contact which I hadn't detected in what could be described as 'work situations'. He seemed prepared to talk there and then in a busy hallway, where other guests were coming and going – which wasn't what I'd planned.

Putting an arm over his athletic shoulders, I gently eased him into an empty room which I had spied earlier. Just the two of us. There, standing casually with his back to a wall, his face lit up as we talked of Ireland. I reminded him that his first visit had been to Waterville in 1998, when he had gone on to be third behind O'Meara at Royal Birkdale, and of a more extensive visit the following year, when Stewart's presence would later give cause for so much sadness.

'That's right,' he said, beaming. 'That's exactly what happened. The first time I came over with Mark, we just hung out at Waterville. And it was just great fun. Playing golf and fishing, and being with one another. Just a nice, relaxing time, chilling out before a major championship. That's what you want to do. You don't want to burn yourself ragged going into a major.

'We had a great time with the people at Waterville and with the people at The K Club the following year. We went to the pubs with Payne, and he'd get up there and start singing.' Didn't this larking about seem rather strange to a middle-class native of Cypress, California? 'No, not at all,' he replied, 'because I had heard all the stories from Mark. He'd been there a few times and he told me how it was going to be. And we had just the greatest time. But in a special way, it's going to feel pretty weird, very poignant, going back again after the last time, when Tracey [Stewart's widow] was there. Payne, like the rest of us, loved everything about Ireland, especially the people, so nice and so friendly. And it became a wonderful way for me to prepare for St Andrews.'

Recalling the visit to the Old Head in 1999, he went on, 'We didn't see very much of the early holes, but those

spectacular views towards the finish were worth the wait. Though the golf course was still very young at the time, it offered a fair test.' Interestingly, a recommendation he made that the left side of the eighteenth fairway be given greater definition was taken on board by Ron Kirby, who created extensive mounding on both sides of the buggy path, so separating it visually and physically from the seventeenth.

By this stage I felt bold enough to suggest that Woods had actually won the 2000 McManus event by default, no matter that he gave the winner's cheque of £33,330 to charity. He laughed heartily. 'I know, I know,' he acknowledged, laughing all the while. 'Stuart [Appleby] did win the tournament. There's no doubt about that.' 'So you're conceding it,' I said. 'Yes,' came the unequivocal reply. 'He won. Sure he was using a laser, but he still did the lowest score.' So he was now formally acknowledging being second best? 'Yes,' he said. 'We all do. Regardless of the DQ [disqualification]. That's the way it is.'

Perhaps I should explain. Though Woods carded rounds of 64, 68 for a 12-under-par 132 around Limerick GC, he was actually outscored by Appleby, who had the effrontery to produce 66, 63 for 129. But there was a problem. Unaware that normal tournament rules applied, the Australian used a laser measuring device on the opening day and was disqualified by Tony Gray, the PGA European Tour official in attendance, for a breach of Rule 14-3 covering artificial devices and unusual equipment. 'I honestly wasn't aware there was a professional competition,' said Appleby at the time. 'I thought I was playing only for my amateur partners, and I just wanted to entertain the public and keep my amateurs happy. But, naturally, I accept the decision.' Almost needlessly, he added, 'I didn't come here for the money.'

Given the number of tournaments Woods had played since then, it seemed remarkable that he could remember

the 2000 event in such detail. As he pointed out, ‘The whole idea was to help out JP and raise money for his charities, and the things he likes to do for the people of Ireland, especially the people of Limerick. And junior golf. It was pretty impressive. And it goes to show you the quality of the person JP is. We came together for him and for him only.’ I suggested that McManus was very much a product of his home place. ‘Correct,’ agreed Woods. ‘We all kinda are. We all love our home town. He supports his home town, which is very special.’

He went on to talk about the death of Stewart and the trip to Waterville in 2000. ‘When Payne passed, it was very special for all of us to come together like that,’ he said. He also noted how the Royal and Ancient seemed to be sharing a five-year cycle with the McManus International, where Open Championships at St Andrews were concerned. It brought to mind the lead into the 1999 Open at Carnoustie, when Stewart had told him, ‘The British Open is the best. It’s original golf. A lot of Americans speak out against it; say they don’t enjoy it. I just tell them not to bother. To stay away.’

So it was that Tiger endured the frustration of a brutal course set-up for a share of seventh place at Carnoustie and returned with his enthusiasm undiminished in 2000. That was when a performance of discipline, authority and staggering artistry delivered an eight-stroke victory without even a solitary visit to one of the 112 bunkers over the four days. A year later he was back at Limerick GC, this time for a private battle with McManus. ‘That was fun,’ he recalled. ‘JP played a two-ball scramble and I played two-ball worse ball. The problem for me in having to use my worse ball was that the windy conditions made it harder to make birdies. So he just had to make [net] pars and wait for me to make mistakes. Eventually they caught up with me and he beat me fairly easily. In fact, as I remember it, I