

# the hunger game

There are guys who want it, and guys who *really* want it. The hungriest players often come from hardship. Not Jordan Spieth. The phenom was afforded opportunity and bathed in family love. So why does he play the game as if his soul is on fire?

By John McAlley

Spieth's superb season began at the Valspar, where a 12-footer on the 72nd hole propelled him into a playoff—and to the first of his five wins in 2015.



MIKE LAWRIE/GETTY IMAGES



Late on Sunday at the Tour Championship, as he walked up the 15th fairway, Jordan Spieth was deep in prayer.

He'd plunged a fistful of daggers into his playing competitor, Henrik Stenson, and was in command, leading by three. Spieth's march into the history books was almost complete. What a year it was: a wire-to-wire Masters win, a thrilling U.S. Open victory, close finishes at the other

two majors, ascension to the top of the World Golf Ranking. And now, just minutes away, a \$10 million FedEx Cup win that would bring his Tour earnings for the year to a staggering \$22,030,465. Who could blame the 22-year-old for using this quiet time on the back nine at Atlanta's East Lake Golf Club to reflect on the years of practice, sacrifice, and family love and support that led to it?

In that solemn moment Spieth was praying, he said after the round. "I was praying that my ball was in the first cut or in the fairway.

"I was still on the grind," he insisted, racing past any suggestion that he'd been arranging his trophy case while still on the course. "It was far from over, because Henrik was in the fairway. I'm thinking, *He birdies there, he could make three birdies out of the last four holes. He's capable of doing that. Therefore, I need to go one under.* So I was hoping I had a chance to birdie 15, then make a few pars, and..."

"The guy's a competitor. He's just always hungry," Spieth's caddie, Michael Greller, said an hour earlier, seemingly as mystified

as the rest of us by his player's capacity to get at it—and stay at it. Taking in the chaotic scene on the 18th green, where Spieth hoisted both the Tour Championship and FedEx Cup trophies before a phalanx of cooing corporate sponsors and barking photographers, the comically stone-faced bag man brightened. "We're going to celebrate. And he may be a little bit tired this week, but by the time we get to South Korea he's going to be fired up again."

**THE HUNGER.** The burning that can't be extinguished. The capacity to be ferociously clutch, as he was time and time again in 2015. Where does it come from in Spieth? His persona says "Pardon me, ma'am," but his game is more like that Under Armour commercial in which a thousand Spieths come at you at once.

"I really don't know," says his friend Zach Johnson, fresh off a flight from South Korea, where he, Spieth and Team America won the Presidents Cup. "He's got these intangibles and this innate ability to get it done on the course. The hunger to get better and to win—a lot of guys have that. But Jordan has the ability to *execute* it, which is not normal. My caddie and I joke when I'm around the green pitching and chipping. We think, 'Jordan Spieth,' because he seems to make shots—a lot."

The kindling for Spieth's competitive fire was ignited early. Both of his parents were collegiate athletes, and at home in suburban Dallas his father played a very active role in his young son's sporting life. "His dad coached our baseball and basketball teams, and he was always around," remembers Spieth's childhood friend Jeff Schoettmer, who's now a bone-crunching middle linebacker for the North Carolina Tar Heels. "Anytime we'd want to take batting practice or hit fly balls he would always be the one to take us and work with us. I think his parents' love for sports really influenced [Jordan's drive]. Our group of friends growing up had a really big impact on it, too. We were competing in everything we did."

"I would think that from the time Jordan was old enough to know, he was playing to win," says Joey Anders, a golf instructor at Dallas's Brookhaven Country Club. Anders was 29, and a month or two into the job, when in the summer of 2002 Spieth's father arranged lessons for his 8-year-old in an Air Jordan cap. "The first individual golf lesson—I still remember it to this day, and there aren't many 8-year-olds I give lessons

to who I can remember 13 years later," he says. "It wasn't so much that he could hit the ball good. Lots of kids can do that. It was that he never hit the ball *bad*. That, and the types of questions he asked. He would want to know how to get different ball flights. He'd want to know why things happened. At one point I said to him, 'If you want to hit a draw, you've got to hit it a little bit flatter and more inside out,' and he turned to his dad and said, 'I told you I need to swing flatter.'"

Spieth's progress was steady and Anders was plenty impressed—with himself. "I got to thinking, *Hey, you're doing a pretty good job of*

*this!*" he says, laughing. "Now it's more than a decade later, and I don't have another Jordan. So it wasn't me, it was him."

By the time he'd reached his early teens, Spieth possessed a freakish work ethic and polish. "One morning I was at Brookhaven, getting ready to tee off, and from somewhere near the putting green I hear, 'Hey, Coach Ahern!'" remembers Fred Ahern, the longtime football guru at St. Monica, Spieth's school for grades 1 through 8. "Jordan was over there at 7:45 on a Sunday morning, by himself—no coach, no mom, no dad—and he's working on his putting. I mean, what kid in eighth grade does that? So he asks me, 'Are you going to play? Would you mind if I joined you?' Obviously, from a talent standpoint, his game was impressive—especially his short game, even then. But I'd been playing golf every week for 30-plus years, and playing with Jordan was like playing with a pro—from the way he put on his glove to the way he pulled his clubs out of the bag, prepared for every shot, repaired his divots, raked his trap. I shot a 37 on the front and he shot a 34. I was 53 at the time, and he was 13."

Schoettmer's last competitive dustup with Spieth was at Brookhaven, too. They were high schoolers, and by now that fire was familiar. "I was out with two other buddies, and we happened to run into him," Schoettmer says. "He was on the course with his girlfriend, and we ended up playing a friendly match for a couple of holes: the three of us very decent golfers against Jordan and his girlfriend. She was horrible. She'd hit the ball 20 yards, then Jordan would follow it with this absolutely perfect shot. I don't remember if we kept score, but whenever he had a chance to win, he took it."

**"YES OR NO?"** Jimmy Roberts was quietly asked as he watched from just off the 18th green at East Lake. Spieth, in the last group of the day, had overcome poor ballstriking in his third round to scratch his way into a tie for the lead. Now he was standing over a 20-foot putt to take the lead entering Sunday. It was precisely the kind of dramatic moment the golf world had witnessed repeatedly during Spieth's incredible 2015 tear. But with the FedEx Cup on the line and his Player of the Year honors put in jeopardy by a hard-charging Jason Day, it seemed too spectacularly scripted for Spieth to pull off again.

Roberts, the measured and thoughtful analyst for NBC Sports, assessed the odds for a



APRIL 11

The Masters  
Augusta National

THIRD ROUND  
18TH HOLE

After making a double bogey on 17, Spieth leaves himself an impossible flop shot (downhill lie, over a bunker to a sloping-away green) on 18. The sublime up-and-down secures his lead going into Sunday.

TOP: AP PHOTO/DARRON CUMMINGS; BOTTOM: ROBERT BECK/ISI



few seconds. With his eyes fixed on the green, he said, “Yes.” Spieth sent the ball toward the hole. When it rattled into the cup, Roberts looked up and cocked his head, as if to say, “He’s just that kind of special.”

“Actually, what I was thinking was, *This is a player who will do whatever is necessary*,” Roberts says later. “That’s a championship quality, and after the ball went in the hole, it was like, ‘Okay, I’m not surprised.’”

For more than three decades, Roberts’s front-row seat has given him a close-up look at scads of pro athletes. Many of them are great; it’s the rare one who plays better when the trophy is on the line. What’s the gift that makes certain golfers so money? “It’s somebody truly comfortable in the moment,” Roberts says, “and I think Jordan’s got that. He’s 22, and he doesn’t appear to be overwhelmed by the moment—he seizes it. His physical skills are apparent, but it’s something else. He’s not cocky, but he’s confident. The moment seems to fuel him. It doesn’t intimidate him in any way. Plenty of athletes say, ‘Yeah, I live for these moments.’ But for how many of them is that truly the case?”

Curt Sampson, the Dallas-based biographer of Ben Hogan and the author of *The Masters*, a searing 1998 bestseller that lifted the rock off the troublesome history of Augusta National, got his first look at Spieth’s game face at the 2010 HP Byron Nelson Championship. There, as a 16-year-old amateur, Spieth tied for 16th in his Tour debut. “On Tuesday and Wednesday, he was a little starstruck, amazed to be among his heroes,” Sampson recalls. “But then I saw him again on Thursday and all of that was over. The game was on, and his ‘aw-shucks’ was gone.”

Playing well in big moments—harnessing the mental toughness as only elite players can—isn’t always as simple, or as difficult, as being fearless. “Jack Nicklaus and Bobby Jones were so, so clutch,” Sampson says. “And if I’m not mistaken both of them said they were motivated by not wanting to look foolish out there. Foolishness aside, I think they really did have less fear than we mortals.”

For Spieth, it seems, the bigger the stage, the more comfortable he feels. Roberts speculates that the two-time major winner’s competitive hunger and unusual composure in pressure-packed situations can be traced back to something seminal. “I think to a certain degree, it’s the question of nature or nurture,” he says. “Athletes are born with some measure of [desire], and some of it is

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learned because of the way they experience competition: the thrill they get out of winning. I’m guessing here, but with Jordan it might also have to do with the warmth of his family and the stability of his childhood. His dad’s a great guy, his mom—they’re normal people.”

The list of jocks who use sports as a corrective to complicated or traumatic early lives, and whose ego is disproportionately entangled with their performance on the field, is a long one. Roberts points to Tiger Woods, whom he holds in high esteem—perhaps especially because of the immense pressures and expectations he has shouldered from an impossibly young age. “For many of us, failure is a defeat,” Roberts says. “Maybe Jordan has been made to feel secure enough in himself that failure or losing won’t define him.”

**TIGER.** Will a golfer ever again be measured by any other standard? In the years since his peak, players have teased us with flashes of greatness, seemingly ready to dominate. Then

JULY 19



CLUTCH!

The Open  
Championship  
St. Andrews

FOURTH ROUND  
16TH HOLE

As he goes for his third straight major win, Spieth’s 30-foot birdie putt ties him for the lead with two to play. But a bogey on 17 costs him a spot in the playoff.



OPPOSITE TOP: THOMAS LOVELOCK; BOTTOM: AP PHOTO/DAVID J. PHILLIP; THIS PAGE, TOP: FRED VUICHES; BOTTOM: SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY IMAGES

SEPTEMBER 27



Tour  
Championship

East Lake Golf Club

FOURTH ROUND  
11TH HOLE

With the FedEx Cup on the line, Spieth's 46-foot birdie bomb crushes Henrik Stenson.



they lose their mojo. Adam Scott was meant to be the man but went major-free in his twenties. Now, at age 35, he has just one to his credit. After his runaway U.S. Open at Pinehurst, Martin Kaymer was meant to be the man, but he hasn't won on Tour since. Only a few years back, Luke Donald reached world No. 1 but now seems virtually invisible. Twelve months ago, Rory McIlroy appeared poised to rule the Tour for years, yet he never threatened in a major in 2015.

After the kind of domination Spieth showed this past season, it's impossible not to hold similar hopes for him. Are our expectations unrealistic? Despite our hunger for a hero, is the game's talent pool too deep for one player to rule? Are today's young golfers pulled in too many directions, or too well compensated to care? Or perhaps they're just not motivated to make the sacrifices necessary for mastery.

"I don't think it's any of those things," says Roberts. "Tiger is the paradigm. Go back to 1996. The PGA Tour Player of the Year was Tom Lehman. He won twice that year. That was the standard for the best. That was kind of normal, because golf's a hard game. You lose more than you win, by a lot. And along comes

"JORDAN'S PROBABLY GOING TO GET BIGGER, STRONGER, LONGER," SAYS ZACH JOHNSON. "HE'S STILL YOUNG."

this young player, who changes our definition of what it means to be the best. And he wins five, eight, ten times in a year. And he does it for more than a decade. So a whole generation of sports fans comes to look at things differently. You're looking at something that only happens once a century, once in a lifetime, once every two lifetimes, who knows?"

Zach Johnson lived through the Tiger years, and even though he still has a bulldog in the race—named Zach Johnson—he'd be gassed to see the game ruled again by one transcendent talent. The guy? Woods himself. "I really hope there's another Tiger ascension," he says, "because I'd love for some of these young guys—Rory and Jordan and Jason Day, Rickie Fowler—to experience what Tiger did to us. Just like Jordan did this year, Tiger pushed the ceiling really high. Given an opportunity to compete against that [level of greatness], it becomes, How am I going to get better? How am I to succeed? How am I going to better myself so if I ever get a chance to play against that guy, how am I going to win?"

**SO WHAT** should we expect from Jordan Spieth in 2016? "I don't know if we'll see what we saw last season: two major wins and [him] contending in every major down to the last five or six holes," says Johnson. "I just can't explain that. I'm not sure we'll ever see that again. But he's one of those athletes we don't see often in any sport, let alone one where learning how to win—the intangibles of maturity and experience—takes time, and it just did not for him. So I expect him to win more golf tournaments, because now he knows how to, and he's driven. He's probably going to get bigger, he's probably going to get stronger, he's probably going to get longer. I mean, he's still young."

"What do I expect?" Curt Sampson asks. "Well, I'll say this. I was playing at Brook Hollow in Dallas, where Cameron McCormick, Spieth's coach, [was] a pro. It was a day or two after the Tour Championship, and I was in a cart driving to the practice range. In a cart coming in the other direction is Jordan Spieth. The glow was still there from winning the FedEx Cup, but he'd already been out there working. He's a glutton for hard work. So what do I expect next year? Another major, and for him to contend in the others. I mean, how can you not like the chances of a guy who acts sort of unhappy that his ball isn't already in the hole? 'What the hell is this?! An eight-footer? Get in the hole!'"