

**Best of the Best?**

By: Nathan Crace Date: April 23, 2004

Was this year's Masters the best ever? There are many arguments to be made and many issues to consider. Mickelson was definitely the fan favorite. Not necessarily that anyone dislikes Els, but Mickelson has seemingly endured so much in his personal life during the past year that it was good to see the professional monkey of not winning a major jump clear of Phil's back. But to say that this was the best Masters ever would mean that you would have to dismiss the 1986 win of Nicklaus or the 1960 birdie-birdie finish of Arnold Palmer to claim one of his green jackets. You could even go further back to the Masters championship that would prove to be one quarter of the Bobby Jones grand slam.

Mickelson himself would later say that the 2004 Masters was not as historic as the 1986 event. However, if you are looking for memorable final rounds of Majors in the past few years, Sunday at the 2004 Masters was the most memorable final round of a major since the 1991 PGA Championship when then unknown John Daly became everyman's champion. Of course there was the 1999 British Open when Jean Van de Velde imploded on the final hole, but that memory is more infamy than history.

The virtual "slugfest" between Els and Mickelson would have only been better if the two were playing in the same group. Or would it? Part of the suspense was the fact that the two were not watching each other's every move and were dependant upon the scoreboards and the roars of the crowd that echoed through the dogwoods and azaleas. Every roar would have to have made both players wonder what was going on with the other. And lurking in the background were the veteran Langer and relative newcomer Choi trying to sneak into the mix.

In the end, it was the left-hander from San Diego who would finally claim his green jacket and silence the critics...for now. It was a subtle change in his game plan (throttle back when necessary and don't go for every pin) and his own work to "re-center" himself personally that enabled him to win the Masters. This is an important point that makes it so memorable: Els didn't lose it. Mickelson won it. Phil didn't just hang on to walk away the Masters champion. When he walked up the 72<sup>nd</sup> hole, he knew he had to make a birdie to avoid a playoff and he rose to the challenge. Of course, some part of me wanted to see a playoff so that the two titans could square off face to face—so long as Mickelson would have won.

Not to take anything away from the final round 67 Els put together, but if you would have told him prior to Sunday's round that he would make two eagles and some of the day's best saves and still lose he would have thought you were crazy. Especially since they were digging around in the members' locker room for a green jacket in Ernie's size with five holes to go. In fact, his final round 67 was only bettered by a Sunday 66 by Sergio Garcia—who finished five strokes behind Els. Els will eventually win a Masters and a PGA Championship to complement the two US Open titles and one British Open title he currently holds and round out his career grand slam. He's too talented not to and he's only 34 years old.

Friday in Augusta was for Arnold Palmer, but Sunday at the Masters was Mickelson's day in the sun and no other player could have made the golfing world happier that day. You could see it from the first hole with his smile that almost exceeded the physical capacity of this face. He loved it when playing partner Chris DiMarco made a birdie or a great par save. He relished the cheers of the crowd. It was almost as if he could not contain himself. And eighteen holes later he didn't have to.

Amidst unconfirmed reports that Bob Charles will spend the next year re-grooving his game in a bid to make the 2005 Masters the third leg of a back-to-back-to-back lefty "threepat," when asked what it was like playing in a major without Woods in contention, Mickelson's simple reply was, "It doesn't suck." And neither did the winner's paycheck. But for some reason, when you saw Mickelson with his children when he emerged from the scoring building, it wasn't too hard to imagine that the money really didn't matter to Phil. The green jacket was his, his family was there to see it, and the monkey had left the building.

*Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to [www.lipouts.com](http://www.lipouts.com) and let him know. Copyright 2004.*