

Diagnosis: Furyk Fever

By: Nathan Crace Date: April 20, 2003

He's well known on the Tour and thought of by most fans as "one of the nice guys." When most people think of Jim Furyk, the first phrase that comes to mind is not "textbook golf swing." But textbook or not, this 6'2" two-time All American from the University of Arizona has been quietly putting his unorthodox swing (and the rest of his game for that matter) to good use in the past 20 months. So far in 2003, he has made the cut in 9 of 10 events played with 7 top ten finishes and ranks 5th on the money list through the Masters. His top tens in 2003 include a fourth place finish at the Masters and a night-delayed playoff loss to Scott Hoch at the Ford Championship at Doral. Of course, Furyk is stranger to playoffs lost in—or due to—the dark. If you'll recall, in 2001 at Firestone, he went a marathon seven extra holes with Tiger Woods, ending in the dark with the aid of headlights in a memorable battle that seemed almost unfair to end with one of the two losing. Woods was looking to three-peat that year and it seemed as though Furyk would have none of it. They exchanged shots for six holes before the playoff ended on the seventh hole with a Woods birdie. Woods would later say, "It was an absolute war. Neither one of us wanted to give an inch." But at this year's Ford Championship, Furyk's playoff with Scott Hoch was delayed due to darkness because Hoch claimed he could not get a good read on a nine-footer for birdie due to the growing lack of daylight. Although not a popular call with the crowd who wanted to see the ending on Sunday, it was a good call for Hoch. They would return the next morning where Hoch would make the birdie and then win the playoff on the following hole. The playoff loss dropped Furyk's Tour playoff record to 1-4. Mental note to Furyk: avoid nighttime playoffs.

Furyk began the 2002 season with a fourth place finish at the Mercedes Championship (after winning it in 2001). In fact, since the tournament moved to Hawaii in 1999, he is the only player to have played in all five Mercedes Championships and has five consecutive top ten finishes there. He would later stumble a bit, missing the cut at the Masters before winning the Memorial in May. Later in the year, he would finish 9th at the PGA Championship and 4th at the Las Vegas Invitational before wrapping up the season with a 18th place finish at the Tour Championship. Although he always seems to linger near the top each week he is in the field, he seems to do so under the radar. Already this year, he has been threatening to win a handful of times, but has yet to do so—yet. One reason 2003 has jumped off to a quicker start for Furyk than 2002 is his accuracy—ranking second on the PGA Tour in both driving accuracy and greens in regulation. And although he ranks 136th in driving distance, Furyk ranks 2nd on the Tour in eagles this season.

Since turning pro in 1992, Furyk has 7 career wins on the PGA Tour (including one each year in 1998-2002) and one on the recently renamed Nationwide Tour at the Mississippi Gulf Coast Classic (it was the Nike Tour when Furyk won). In 1997, he set the then Tour record for most money won without a tournament victory with \$1,619,480. Also that year, he tied Davis Love III for most top ten finishes with 13—including 8 in a row. He has been on three Ryder Cup teams in 1997, 1999, and 2001 (played in 2002) and has also been a part of two President's Cup teams—competing in 1998 and again in 2000.

So why hasn't Furyk won more? There are plenty of pundits more learned than I who could pontificate about Furyk's shortcomings, but I would rather make an unscientific, yet fact-based, observation. He seems to lurk near the top quite often with a good record of top ten finishes and has finished within a few strokes of some additional wins, but a review of his stats shows what appears to be a glaring problem to the untrained eye: short game deficiencies. He ranks a less-than-enviable 127th in sand saves, and although he ranks 2nd in greens in regulation (GIR), he ranks 26th in putting (more than likely the most likely reason he ranks only 39th in birdies with as many greens as he hits). Conversely, Ernie Els ranks 3rd in both GIR and putting. Although stats can sometimes be deceiving, putting and short game are two huge keys to success in competitive golf—especially at this level. And on the "In the Bag" page of Furyk's own web site, he lists his type and brand of putter as "switches frequently." I'm no sports psychologist, but switching putters frequently would seem indicative of some self-doubt in Furyk's own mind regarding his putting skills—and most competitive golfers would agree that winning the mental putting battle can be more important than perfecting the basic mechanics of putting alone.

While I'm not second-guessing Furyk's ability, I do believe that finding the right putter (one he feels as comfortable with as an old pair of broken-in Doc Martens) will lead to more wins for the man not many seem to know, but many seem to like. And, at the risk of jinxing Jim this year, I believe that if he doesn't win a major by the end of 2003 the pundits will start moving him up the proverbial list of "Best Player to Have Never Won a Major"...yet.

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 and let him know. Copyright 2003.