

Nathan Crace's

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The Wannamaker, the Claret Jug...now where did I put that green jacket?

By: Nathan Crace Date: February 13, 2002

You've heard the stories (some true, some not, and some exaggerated) for over ten years now. You've seen the highs and read about the lows. And yet, in the midst of all the drama, personal problems, and lost corporate sponsorships, there is a human being with extraordinary talent and appeal. A person with the ability to draw thousands of fans to him to support him because—whether or not they do—they feel as though they know him. They understand him. They can connect with him. He is neither superhuman nor placed upon a pedestal for golf fans to worship. He's simply John. And although I've never met him personally, I have to believe he prefers it that way. Some people may feel sorry for John Daly, who has been forced to overcome so much in the past ten or so years, and perhaps that's why we love to see him forge on, overcome, and triumph.

When he came out of nowhere—literally—to win the PGA Championship at Crooked Stick in 1991, he had to drive through the night to make his first round tee time after getting the call that Nick Price had withdrawn and a spot was open for him. The talk quickly turned to this former mini tour player's booming drives and whether or not he could hold up against the competition during the weekend. Daly would cut corners off doglegs that other players feared. He on the other hand, knew no fear and played his style of golf for four hot and humid August days—and by Sunday afternoon, a legend was born. Of course, the pundits quickly turned to speak of Daly as a fluke. The exception that makes the rule. "He's too bold, too brash." "He's not good for the game." "He'll never win again." Ooops! He did win again at the 1992 B.C. Open. And again at the 1994 BellSouth Classic. "But he'll never win another major!" Ooops again! Daly not only won the 1995 British Open, but he also did it at hallowed St. Andrews—winning the hearts of golf fans throughout Europe in the process. International wins were nothing new to Daly. He had already won twice overseas in 1990 before his win at the 1991 PGA Championship.

But for all of his talent on the course, it was his life outside the ropes that quickly garnered more and more attention from the press. Marital problems, alcohol, and gambling seemed to weigh down the man who possessed not only raw length with his driver and irons, but the deft touch around greens one would expect from "less lengthy" players who depended on such skills to compete with longer hitters. He seemed to have an inordinate number of monkeys on his back and for each one that he would shake off, another would jump on for the ride—eventually costing him a lucrative sponsorship agreement with Callaway Golf.

This year, however, it seems like the old John is now behind Daly and the new John is coming to life on the course and at home. He was married for a fourth time in July of 2001 and since that time has appeared a calmer and more focused player. Daly himself told Reuters in a recent interview, "When I'm at home, I work on my game and when I'm not at home I work on my game. It's nice to be able to worry about golf and not all the other stuff." He admits that he is now able to come back from a bad hole and not let it ruin the rest of his round. His new approach paid off in late 2001 with another win on foreign soil, this time at the high-profile BMW International Open. A nearly record-setting win that culminated with a birdie on the closing hole and a final score that was 27 strokes below par for the tournament!

Already this year, Daly has finished in the top 10 a number of times and seemed poised to pull out his first Tour win in over six years at the Buick Invitational at Torrey Pines if not for a missed putt or two in the closing holes. So what's next for the man who has led the PGA Tour in driving distance 10 of the last 11 years? He has already pulled his world rankings from the cellar at the beginning of 2001 with a ranking of 456 into the elite class of the top 40 in recent weeks. Where does he go from here? My prediction: a green jacket. And I do mean the type they bestow upon the Masters Champion. After all, Augusta is now 300+ yards longer than it was last year and his game seems to be peaking at just the right time. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me for John to win in March first—maybe at the Honda Classic or the Player's Championship (if he's in those fields).

This is why Daly looks good to me at the Masters: a recent win against a strong international field (the 2001 BMW International Open)...check. Incredible length that has become more accurate as of late...check. A deft touch around the greens...check. The ability to stick a 235 yard 4-iron on a green the way most players do with an 8-iron from 155 yards...check. A new found desire to be among the best in the world...check. A personal life that is no longer the center of the media's attention...check. A game that's beginning to peak simultaneously with the Azaleas and Dogwoods in Augusta...check. So while many have bemoaned the changes at Augusta and—sadly—a number of past champions have hinted that this year may be their last due to the increased length and its direct effect on their ability to enjoy the course (let alone walk it or realistically compete), it seems to me that one man is poised to rise to the occasion to the delight of golf fans around the world. Someone tell Hootie Johnson to be sure they have a jacket in John's size handy on Sunday.

Nathan Crace is the Senior Design Associate at Maxwell Golf Group in Jackson, Mississippi. His freelance "Lipouts" column is based on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2002.