

FEATURED INTERVIEW

How Muddy Pants Helped Nick Faldo Win a Claret Jug

Nick Faldo's youth was spent exploring woodlots and experiencing the world about him. A golfing great's adult life has been a separate adventure, laden with blessings—and with the magic of self-discovery.

BY MARK PAZDUR, PUBLISHER

ORLANDO, FLORIDA: The lunchtime red wine was rich and luscious, the pizza delectable. The conversation was every bit as engaging. Nick Faldo sat across the table at Bella Collina, the swank resort golf course he designed just outside Orlando, Florida. He was talking about one of his first television interviews after a man with six major championships had been enticed to try a bit of TV analysis. His interview subject was rock singer Alice Cooper, a man who, in golf's circles, might enjoy as much celebrity for his love of the game as he has won from his more celebrated recordings. Faldo, who as his TV audience knows can be delightfully wry, had one puzzled thought as he prepared to quiz Cooper: "Golf is about smooth harmony," he said in his familiar English lilt. "How can you sing 'School's Out' in your head and play golf?"



NICK FALDO

This is Nick Faldo. Substantive, yet playful. Insightful and curious. He can ponder subjects that drift from sublime to the silly, and enjoy every blooming facet of his quest to experience life and this world more fully. We know Faldo principally because of his great championships, his three British Opens, and his three Masters. We know him as an 11-time member of a European Ryder Cup Team and the man who has won more Ryder Cup points than any player in history. We know that he captained the European team when the Ryder Cup was played in September at Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville, Kentucky. We know him these days, somewhat more intimately, as the steady, concise, sage, network expert who can delve into the skills and the psyches of Tour players at the height of their tournament challenges. We know less, perhaps, about what forged a man of his steel and sensitivity. Nick Faldo has always seemed to represent a kind of distant galaxy, one filled with amazing and luminous elements that, for whatever reason, have appeared to be just beyond our grasp. Perhaps that is why he has been effective and increasingly popular as a TV analyst. We finally have discovered him.



PUBLISHER MARK PAZDUR (LEFT) TALKS WITH NICK FALDO.

Why that should have taken so long is in itself something of a mystery. He is from England, specifically the town of Welwyn Garden City, which is hardly the other side of the planet. He grew up in underwhelming fashion, the only child of a father, George, who worked as an accountant, and a mother, Joyce, who was a teacher and a dressmaker. He went to a neighborhood school "two turns" from his home. If his youth was relatively uneventful in a placid sort of way, it was not without its highlights, and certainly not without its simple, uncomplicated joys, which in the case of Faldo (he was born in July of 1957) so often centered on outdoor activity.

A BOY'S MAGIC KINGDOM

"The woods across the street was my play area," he recalls, and in his eyes you can see that these are years a man remembers the way he remembers his first girlfriend. "I would disappear all day long and come home to bowl up for meals."

Bowl up for meals. One learns quickly that Faldo's expressions can deliver you to England faster than a charter flight. Faldo would get so dirty during his woodlands expeditions that he took to wearing an extra pair of pants beneath his play trousers. "Before neighbors would let me come inside to play," he says, his eyes twinkling, "they would make me take off my muddy pants and leave them by the front door."

He was primarily a swimmer and a bicyclist during his boyhood days in Welwyn Garden City. His parents were supportive of anything he cared to attempt, athletically, which Faldo says was "just about everything." Not as supportive, perhaps, were his parents the day that Faldo, then 12, received from mom and dad a racing bicycle befitting a boy who loved competition. Nick, however, was also a young man of immense curiosity. He took the entire bike apart to see in exquisite detail how a precise machine actually worked. It was perhaps fortunate they did not buy him an automobile. During the heart of his adolescence a defining event occurred when Nick was awarded one of only two slots in an Outward Bound program in England's Lake District.

"I went away for a month of camping in grueling conditions," he remembers. "At one point, we had two feet of snow on the ground. I really learned a lot. Mom said when I returned home, 'You went away as a boy and came back as a man.'"

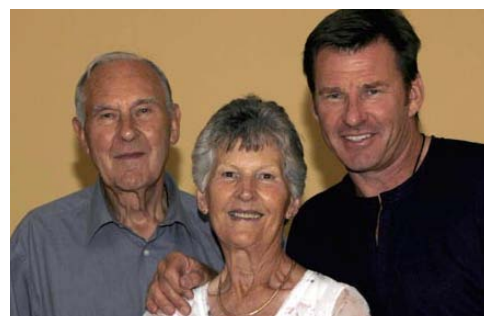
Faldo understood personally how much he had changed during those weeks in the woods. To have become aware that others who knew him had seen the same change was a noteworthy experience in self-esteem. He was only beginning with his expeditionary ways. In April of 1971, he found himself absorbed by Jack Nicklaus during the Masters tournament. Nick informed his mother that he would like to try golf.

"OK," said Mom, "but first you have to get a haircut."

Nick thought it was a fair exchange. He borrowed a set of clubs from a neighbor, booked six lessons with a golf professional, Chris Arnold, at Welwyn Garden City Golf Club, and was instantly hooked. At age 16, he was so committed to golf, and developing such promise as a player, that he quit school to work on his game full-time. It surprised no one who knew Nick Faldo that he would go about it full throttle. His routine was almost an extension of his younger days when he would disappear into the woodlands for a pants-muddying day of exploration and adventure. At the golf course, Nick would arrive by 8 A.M., equipped with a satchel filled with sandwiches he had brought from home. He would hit balls and practice until noon, eat his lunch, then get busy on the golf course. He would play 27 holes, minimally. He was becoming a man of tremendous physical stature, shooting to 6-foot-3 as adolescence gave way to adulthood. At the same time he was developing substance and dimension to his golf game. It probably helped that he challenged himself to be the best by observing the best.

EARLY INSPIRATION: GOLF'S GREATS

"Although I played by myself, I didn't feel alone," he says of those days on the practice tee, and later in the day, on the golf course. "I would play several balls and pretend it was me versus Jack [Nicklaus] or Johnny [Miller]. I would visualize hitting bunker shots like [Gary] Player, or having a follow-through like [Arnold] Palmer."



(TOP) NICK FALDO WITH HIS PARENTS, GEORGE AND JOYCE FALDO. (ABOVE) FALDO CELEBRATING HIS 50TH BIRTHDAY AT CARNOUSTIE WITH HIS CHILDREN, GEORGIA, EMMA, MATTHEW AND NATALIE.

Faldo was going to be a Tour player, no question. His talent, his work ethic, and that edgy competitiveness—a tautness that tended to gain for him the most from his physical ability—were all melding in stunning fashion. And still it was going to be a difficult path, as it is for so many golfers who have the skill and the ambition to play professionally.

By 1975, Faldo was working as a carpet-fitter when he won the English Amateur Championship, the British Youths Championship, the English Champion of Champions, as well as the Berkshire Trophy, a prize so prestigious it had Faldo all but cartwheeling.

“The actual trophy is two feet high,” Faldo said. “I put it on my car’s passenger seat and joyfully screamed all the way home.”

The stream of success led to a golf scholarship from the University of Houston. Now thinking that formal education and golf could in fact co-exist, Nick accepted. But he quit after 10 weeks when he saw that the college golf route would postpone his mission to become a Tour golfer. Perhaps not so coincidentally, 1975 was the same year that Nick and his father traveled to Carnoustie to attend Nick’s first British Open, where Tom Watson beat Jack Newton in a playoff. A year later, Faldo turned professional and had a splendid debut, finishing eighth in the European Tour Order of Merit. In 1977, at age 20, Faldo became the youngest player ever to appear in the Ryder Cup Matches, at Royal Lytham and St. Annes Golf Club.

By the early 1980s, Faldo was viewed as a world-class player who was bound, probably soon, to win a major championship. It might have happened at the 1983 British Open had he not shot 73 in the final round, which tied him for eighth. It could have happened the next year at the Masters had he not shot 76 on Sunday.

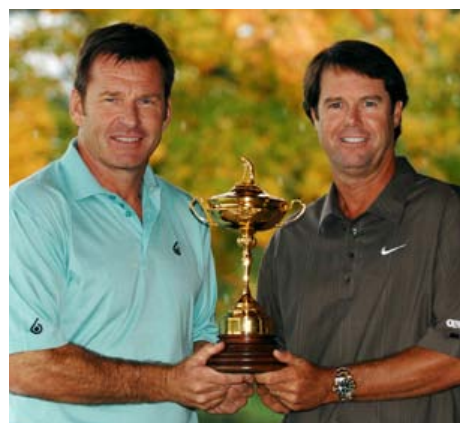
Faldo was exasperated, and not only because the ever-so-gentle British press had dubbed him “Nick Fold-o.” He had decided his golf swing, crafted during those morning-to-night sessions when he was a boy, would not hold up. It was overly long and not a swing efficient enough to make the most of his size and physical strength. It needed to be more compact, more dependable.

THE PIVOTAL DECISION

He needed help. He needed to re-craft the very thing that had made him a successful Tour player: his golf swing. David Leadbetter would be entrusted with the re-design. The process of re-doing a golf swing is absurdly challenging, especially for someone who has already known world-stage success with an imperfect swing. It is an effort that requires not weeks or months, but years. Faldo, however, was tired of being only good enough. He wanted championships. Even if it meant hitting 1,500 golf balls a day when his practice regimen was already something of a marvel. But what the swing alteration achieved was to make Faldo’s swing, already impressive in its strength and tempo, more streamlined and, therefore, more able to deliver maximum horsepower for the long run. It had been a courageous and profoundly self-critical decision that was about to pay off.

“The fact that I committed to my career,” Faldo said, “I knew I had a window of opportunity for great success. I told myself that, at age 45, I wanted to look back and be able to say that I gave it my all.”

His payoff, a full three years after he had turned his swing over to Leadbetter, was glorious. Faldo won the 1987 British Open with your not-so-typical final round of 18 consecutive pars, capped by a three-foot putt on the 18th green, the kind that can leave you with nightmares for the remainder of your professional life. In this case the putt fell, and it edged Paul Azinger by a stroke.



RYDER CUP EUROPEAN CAPTAIN NICK FALDO (LEFT) WITH USA CAPTAIN PAUL AZINGER.

The day previous, Nick Faldo had turned 30 years old.

"I just kept saying to myself, 'I really did it,'" he remembers of that most special of summers. The irony is that a man who was not known for showing excess emotion was, in fact, overwhelmed by events from a life that had spanned but three decades. It was impossible not to think of the innocence and anonymity of those days spent trodding the woods across the street from where he had grown up; how it was juxtaposed against a Sunday at a hallowed golf course in Scotland.

Two years later, in 1989, he won his first Masters, beating Scott Hoch in a playoff. He followed a year later with another Masters playoff victory (over Ray Floyd). He won the British Open again in 1990 and 1992, and in 1996 won his third Masters on a day when Greg Norman had a nightmarish final round.

He was frequently enough ranked as the world's No. 1 golfer during that merry run. His championship command, his intellect, his personal and professional depth, made him a natural for stepping toward golf course design, which led to Faldo Design, a London-based entity that has put its imprint on more than 30 golf-course projects worldwide. And we do mean worldwide: China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Denmark, Turkey, Iceland, United Arab Emirates, the Philippines, Germany, the British Isles, Portugal, Cyprus, Egypt, Mexico, South Africa, Russia, Canada, the United States, and the Dominican Republic, where he is now finishing Roco Ki Resort, on the island's gorgeous eastern shore.



FALDO (RIGHT) WITH HIS LEAD ARCHITECT, ANDREW HAGGAR.

HAVING AN IMPACT

Faldo's design philosophy extends beyond the standard architect's credo of adhering to the existing terrain and natural landscape in building golf holes. He had taken notes on the so-called traditional and modern courses and has said to himself many times, "I think I know what a golfer wants. I have two goals," he said. "My courses must require strategy and be memorable. Strategy makes you think. And if the course is memorable, you will want to come back."



*"MR. FALDO IS THE ULTIMATE PROFESSIONAL AND JUST A NICE GUY. HE IS WELL KNOWN, ARTICULATE, AND HIS STOCK IS RISING. WE ARE PROUD NICK DESIGNED OUR FIRST OF FOUR COURSES AT ROCO KI."
— NICHOLAS TAWIL, PRESIDENT, ROCO KI*

The beauty of taking on the Roco Ki project was that he had it all. Spectacular oceanside scenery was simply a grand invitation to apply his personal touch. "The view from the 17th tee is as dramatic as Cypress Point," said Faldo, offering an ultimate tribute to a 100-yard, par-3 hole, which Faldo says will be regarded by many golfers as "the best 6 they ever will make. Roco Ki is the perfect meeting of land and sea. It is one of the most beautiful locations I've ever seen. The combination of blown-out sand dunes and turquoise water is stunning. The course is like playing through a botanical garden. It plays through three distinct environments: the headlands, with stunning sea-side cliffs; the forest, with thick mangroves; and sawgrass, with long waste bunkers. The three finishing holes might be the best finishing holes in the game of golf. They play straight to the ocean. In fact, No. 18 is close to the water, waves sometimes crash onto the fairway."

Golf design was one venture suited to Nick Faldo's talents. Another avocation waiting to happen was broadcasting, even if Faldo never quite saw it coming. His first assignment was for Sky Broadcasting and NBC during the 2002 Ryder Cup. "They basically gave me a microphone and said, 'Go,'" Faldo recalls. "I was a duck in my own pond. I know golf and I am genuinely interested in what others have to say. But there were no guidelines. At first, I just rattled away. As time went on, I got better and became more articulate."

Golf equipment, naturally, was another fascination. It begot a relationship with TaylorMade, where Faldo can have influence on research and development of golf clubs in much the way he has in shaping a golf course design.

TAKEN WITH TECHNOLOGY

"Last week I was shipped a Tour Burner with a Voodoo shaft," Faldo explained. "The club is amazing. It is so light and stable. I enjoy my relationship with TaylorMade and with Mr. [Mark] King, president and CEO of TaylorMade. I really look forward to helping out in the R&D department. I'm eager to have input on irons. They are, after all, the scoring clubs. We need to work on the aesthetics of irons. You must like the look of the club to have confidence in it."

Faldo, who during his earlier days used sandpaper to make a persimmon wood conform to his swing and wishes, shook his head, a half-smile creasing his face. "I wish I had these clubs 20 years ago," he said. "TaylorMade's technology is letting Tour players hit the ball 40 yards farther than when I was in my prime playing days. Years ago, you had to fit your swing to the club. Now, clubs are manufactured to fit your swing."



ARNOLD PALMER AND NICK FALDO AT CBS SPORTS.

Fitting into his life other priorities is a steady challenge. He has four children, Natalie 21, Matthew 19, Georgia 15, and Emma 4. The girls, Faldo says with a laugh, "are allergic to golf," although he and Matthew tee it up often. "Matthew can out-drive me," Faldo says, with a sly grin. "But it's important for him to remember he still hasn't beaten Dad."

Faldo is involved in the Make-A-Wish Foundation which, in 1992, led to a profound experience during the World Matchplay Championship at Wentworth Club near London. A young boy's wish was to play a round of golf with Faldo, who learned that the boy that day had needed to ingest 66 pills just to stay alive. Faldo won the tournament and donated his prize money (100,000 British pounds) to children's charities.

Three months later, Faldo flew to Liverpool to surprise the boy on his birthday. By this time, the illness was so advanced that the boy's sister had just donated her bone marrow in an effort to keep him alive. He died not long afterward. Faldo, to this day, cannot speak of the lad who had such profound impact upon him without tearing up, without thinking of his own daughters and son and saying: "I feel blessed to have fit and healthy children."

It might explain something else Nick Faldo has vowed to pursue for the remainder of his life: new places, new experiences, and new challenges. He has taken up playing tennis, and he loves fly-fishing for trout. He hopes to see Mount Everest and any other natural wonder from a world that, for Faldo, has always been so rich and revealing.

And yet he can still say, "I am really making an effort to chill. It is funny how long it takes to learn to relax when you have been pulled in so many directions."

The pulling, of course, is a response to the pushing Faldo has directed at himself since those boyhood days in Welwyn Garden City. Amazing, what force two actions can achieve in one man's life, and in the world that surrounds him.

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