



## A Champion's Mindset:

# How I Won The Masters

by Zach Johnson

**I**n 2001, while I was still an up-and-coming golfer playing the mini-tours, I had an opportunity to walk Augusta National during the Masters Tournament. Watching the players compete and seeing Phil Mickelson win his first Green Jacket, I promised myself that the next time I came to Augusta National, it would be as a participant, not a spectator. And I even let myself dream a little, that one day I would win the Green Jacket as well.

Six years later, on Easter Sunday 2007, that dream came true. I won the Masters. And as fate would have it, Phil, the 2006 winner, presented me with the Green Jacket.

After winning the Masters and representing my country in the Ryder Cup and President's Cup, I'm a little better known today than those days when I was working my way up through the ranks to pursue my dreams. But I'm still just a midwestern guy from Iowa. Winning the Masters has forever changed my career as a professional golfer. But Zach Johnson the person has not changed.

I played a lot of sports growing up – basketball, baseball, soccer, just about any sport you can imagine. I was very competitive and pretty good at each sport. But as kids got bigger and stronger, sports like basketball and baseball didn't seem to hold future opportunities for me like golf did where size didn't matter as much.

I first became interested in golf when I was 11 years old. My parents joined Elmcrest Country Club in my hometown of Cedar Rapids. They had a great junior golf program led by Larry Gladson, my first instructor. Larry is a great teacher and he instilled in me the fundamentals that my game is built around today.

About midway through high school at Regis, my golf really started to improve. My game got better and better, to the point I was able to earn an athletic scholarship to play at Drake University. My experience playing at Drake was wonderful, and culminated with our team making the NCAA Championships.

I graduated with a degree in business administration, but I wasn't ready to face the "real world" and get a regular job yet. Growing up, I had always wanted to be a professional athlete, specifically a professional basketball player. Never reaching six feet tall, dreams of the hardwood faded quickly. But the idea of playing a sport professionally remained, and in 1998 I turned professional and started my golf career. Given I was not the best on my high school team or at

Drake, many people were surprised by this decision. But I made myself a promise... as long as I continued to improve I would keep at it.

To reach the PGA TOUR, like so many other players, I paid my dues. I worked my way up through the mini-tours, traveling from tournament to tournament living out of my car like a vagabond. My first tour was the Prairie Tour in the Midwest. In fact, my parents still have the \$2,500 check I received for winning my first event on the Prairie Tour.

I also played on the Hooters Tour for a couple of years. While I was on the Hooters Tour, my friend, Vaughn Taylor, got tickets to the Masters and several of us came to Georgia to watch the tournament. We came out on a Monday and I walked the course for the first time. The course was incredible and I was in awe. I had watched the tournament so many times on TV growing up, but to be there and see it in person was just amazing. As I walked the course I was not really interested in watching the pros, but I had a growing sense of knowing I wanted to play there myself. And so I promised myself, the next time I came back to Augusta National it would be as a competitor!

In 2003 I earned conditional status on the Nationwide Tour. As a conditional member,

I was not eligible for the season's first events. I was able to attempt to qualify for entry though. The second event of the year, I found myself tied with six other players in the qualifying event. To get into the tournament I would have to beat them all in a sudden death playoff. Fortunately I did, making birdie on the first hole. I went on to take 2nd in the tournament which gained me exempt status the rest of the year. I went on to win twice that year and break most of the Nationwide Tour records including the one for most money ever earned in a single season.

My rookie year on the PGA TOUR started with a bang, with me winning the 2004 AT&T Classic in just my thirteenth event as a PGA TOUR professional. Back in 2002, I had "Monday Qualified" for the AT&T Classic, so it was one of the few PGA TOUR courses I had played and had any familiarity with. Going into that week, I felt confident, and thought I might have a good finish. It was one of those weeks where my preparation had been good and everything fell into place. Throughout the event I stayed real focused and did a very good job of staying in the moment and just taking one shot at a time. Being in contention on the PGA TOUR for the first time, this really helped me handle the pressure well.

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On the 18th hole, the 72nd of the tournament, I was faced with a three-foot putt to win the championship. I focused, said a quick prayer and pulled the putter back. When the putt fell, I hugged my wife, my dad and several of the executives at AEGON who were there from Iowa and had helped get me started when I turned pro. World Financial Group leaders were also there at the 18th green to see me win that tournament. So much had happened so quickly, sitting and taking it all in was very surreal, yet gratifying.

I didn't win any events in 2005 or 2006. To some this was considered a slump. However, my attention was not and has never been on wins, but rather it has always been on improving. Each year, I continued to get better, working on different parts of my game. With this improvement, I moved up the rankings steadily each year. I was chosen to represent the United States in the 2005 World Cup. In 2006, I made the American Ryder Cup team. Playing for your country under the most extreme pressure one can imagine revealed a lot about myself to me. While we lost the Ryder Cup, I came away knowing I could compete with the game's best players under the most intense heat.

Knowing the potential to compete and win at the highest levels was attainable, I set about making my next off season one of my most important to date. I



Zach Johnson receives the Legendary "Green Jacket" from fellow pro Phil Mickelson after winning his first Masters Tournament in 2007.

stayed at home for seven weeks during the off-season to work on sharpening my game, charting each area in need of improvement and dedicating time to get better. I also started working in mid-2006 with Morris Pickens, a coach who helped me improve the mental aspects of my game. I used to put too much importance on an individual shot, letting the results of one shot affect the rest of my game. Dr. Mo helped me concentrate on the process of golf rather than the outcome. This technique freed me up to focus on hitting one shot at a time the best I could, and gave me the ability to forget bad shots quickly.

Part of what we work on is having sound routines and solid preparation. To prepare for a tournament, I strategize and plot my way through the entire course hole by hole. I have a regular routine Monday through Sunday. We try and make a game plan for the entire week so

that nothing is left to chance. There are so many variables to deal with when playing golf. The weather can change drastically, the condition of the course is ever-changing, and then there is luck both good and bad. The variables are limitless so I need to be mentally tough and prepared for anything.

Part of my evolution as a player is to better understand my strengths and identify my weaknesses. I am never going to be one of the game's longest hitters, but I am one of the straightest. So I rely on accuracy and the placement of my tee shot to attack a golf course. I review the course in detail and plan how I want to approach each hole. That plan becomes the basis of my strategy for each tournament. Many of the commentators criticized me for not going for the Par 5's in two at the Masters, but I had a game plan and we had perfect

yardages in place to attack the Par 5's without going for them in two. While perhaps not popular among the broadcasters, this strategy paid off and I played these holes well under par.

During the final round, I didn't watch the leaderboard. My caddie, Damon Green, kept his eye on the board and I focused on playing one shot at a time, one hole at a time. My attention was simply on executing throughout the day.

Somewhere on the front nine, I took the lead but I didn't realize it at the time. I knew from the crowd's reaction to certain shots that I was among the leaders, but I kept to the plan of not looking at the leaderboard. Coming in on the backside, I knew I was in the mix at the top with three birdies over a four-hole stretch, but I still did not know specifically where I stood.

At one point, while playing the 15th hole, I heard a roar that engulfed the entire golf course, a roar that kept getting louder as if in stages. Instantly I knew Tiger had eagled the 13th. I knew I couldn't play defense against Tiger, so I stayed determined to simply keep doing what I was doing and stick to my game plan.

On the 16th hole, I finally asked Damon where we stood. Damon said I was a couple of strokes up—and confirmed that Tiger had made eagle. I didn't personally see the leaderboard until the 17th hole, and I saw that I was still ahead. I bogeyed 17, but knew it was my tournament to lose.

After I holed out for par at the 18th hole, it was an emotional roller coaster. I hugged and wept with my wife Kim, our son, Will and the rest of my family. Tears flowed freely from everyone until Damon snapped me back to attention and reminded me that there were still others on the course that could catch me and force a playoff. I quickly composed myself and started to ready myself for a playoff.

I sat in the locker with my manager, Brad Buffoni and quietly we watched the telecast finish. Tiger needed to hole his second shot from the fairway on the 18th hole to force a playoff. I looked at Brad and told him with Tiger... "anything can happen". When his shot missed, I hugged Brad and then we were quickly escorted to Butler Cabin for the championship ceremony.

It was over, I had held off Tiger and won the Masters.

In many ways that Easter Sunday felt like a circle being completed. I watched Phil win his first Green Jacket my first time at Augusta and now being presented with my Green Jacket by Phil. Also, how incredible is it to think I came to Augusta my first time with Vaughn Taylor, my buddy from the mini-tours. And Sunday, who was my playing partner, competing for the Green Jacket as well? You guessed it—Vaughn Taylor. As we finished that last hole, Vaughn and I

walked hand in hand up the 18th fairway, both of us probably thinking how long ago 2001 seemed.

Looking back on last year, I feel so blessed to have had all of the support that has helped me realize my dreams. Grateful to know that all of the hard work I have put in has paid off. And lastly enthusiastic to come back and try and do it again.

No matter what happens in 2008 and beyond, I know that I'll always be Zach Johnson, a midwestern guy from Iowa who's living his dream and playing a game that I love. 🏌️



AEGON-Transamerica sponsored golfer Zach Johnson has won three PGA TOUR events, including the 2007 Masters, and was a member of the 2006 Ryder Cup team and 2007 President's Cup team. He lives in Florida, with his wife, Kim, and their son, Will.

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