

Open man for the modern era

The elusive U.S. Open may be the only Major that stands between Phil Mickelson and a career Grand Slam, but nothing gets in the way of family for this American golfing legend, devoted husband and father of three, writes **Tom Pountney**

It has always been about family for Phil Mickelson. Despite being right-handed, the 6ft 2in San Diego-born golfer is nicknamed 'Lefty'. He literally mirrored his father's swing.

Philip Mickelson Sr. was a commercial pilot and his schedule allowed them to play together several times a week. It is reported that neighbours would bring Mickelson Jr. home after attempted break-outs to the local golf course — aged three.

Between that local course and his back yard, five-time Major winner Mickelson spent those formative years learning the value of a smart short-game — and the importance of strong family relationships.

It was of little surprise then, that Mickelson pulled out of the 2017 U.S. Open in June to attend his eldest daughter's high school graduation ceremony. "As I look back on life, this is a moment I'll always cherish and be glad I was present. There is no greater joy

as a parent," Mickelson told *The New York Times*.

When Amanda's eighth-grade commencement ceremony took place a day before the opening round of the 2013 U.S. Open, she told her father not to return to California. "It's the U.S. Open," she said. "I know how much you care about it."

He left last-minute preparations to be there for Amanda and returned to Merion Golf Club, in Pennsylvania, less than two hours before his first round tee-time.

It was there that Mickelson three-putted to bogey the first hole, but went on to finish the opening round at the top of the leaderboard in challenging weather conditions. Englishman Justin Rose won his maiden Major

in the end; Mickelson finished joint-second with Jason Day, two shots off the pace.

It was a record sixth runner-up finish for Mickelson and it was not the first time Amanda would feature in U.S. Open folklore.

In 1999, less than 24-hours before she was born, Payne Stewart sunk a 12-foot putt on the final green to condemn Mickelson to his first taste of second place at a U.S. Open. As the duel unfolded, 'Lefty' insisted that impending fatherhood came first and he would leave Pinehurst if his wife, Amy, went into labour.

Below: Mickelson with wife, Amy, daughter, Sofia, and son, Evan at the 2016 Ryder Cup Right: In action at Bethpage Black

Rules at the time dictated that a tie would have enforced an 18-hole play-off the following day, but Mickelson's beeper stayed in his caddie's pocket. In what is now a famous photograph, Stewart celebrated his win by holding Mickelson's face and saying: "Good luck with the baby. There's nothing greater than being a father."

Tragically, Stewart died in a plane crash four months later, but his words have stayed with Mickelson. The baby born the day after that Pinehurst duel has grown into a young woman who was captain of her tennis, basketball and lacrosse teams and served as the Student Body President at Pacific Ridge School in Carlsbad.

Amanda will head to Brown University later this year, where she intends to pursue her passion for Egyptology (the study of Ancient Egypt). "It feels like time has gone by so fast," said Mickelson as his eldest prepares to leave home.

"I'm really excited for Amanda to go to college, because she's really a unique and dynamic person. She is a calming influence on everybody. I'm going to really miss that and miss her laugh and miss the time with her." ►



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Mickelson's maiden Major eventually came at The Masters in 2004 after 13 years on the PGA Tour and three consecutive third-placed finishes in the tournament. After trading birdies and eagles with the great Ernie Els on Augusta's back nine, Mickelson holed an 18-foot putt to become only the third player in history to win a Major playing left-handed.

He won second and third Majors in succession at the 2005 PGA Championship and 2006 Masters, before capitulating on the final hole at Winged Foot in the ensuing U.S. Open.

Bidding to become only the third player to win three consecutive Majors, Mickelson bogeyed the 16th, hit a garbage bin on the 17th and ricocheted his drive off a corporate hospitality tent on the 18th. With a one-shot



lead still intact, he took the second shot on, rather than playing safe, hit a tree and then plugged into a greenside bunker to hand Geoff Ogilvy the win. "I just can't believe I did that.

Above: The Mickelsons ahead of the 39th Ryder Cup Below: 'Lefty' is rarely seen without a big smile and autograph pen

I'm such an idiot," he derided. "That one hurts more than any tournament because I had it won."

Mickelson, however, knows that there is more to life than golf – and winning and losing. His third child was born in 2003, but it was not without complication.

An artery in Amy's uterus ruptured during birth and Evan is reported to have not taken a breath for his first seven minutes outside of the womb.

The Phil and Amy Mickelson Foundation was established a year later to support a variety of youth and family initiatives. "Family is our own number-one priority," said Mickelson.

"Both Amy and I benefited by being raised in our own strong,

loving families and now we're fortunate and thankful to be in a position to help others strengthen their own family bonds."

The two met at Arizona State University in 1992 and were married in 1996, but Evan's birth was not the last time Amy had to fight for her life.

In 2009, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and Mickelson immediately suspended his PGA Tour schedule. The game rallied around one of golf's most popular couples and, following prolonged treatments, Amy showed signs of a strong recovery. She returned to his side in time to embrace her husband on the 18th green at Augusta the following year, when he won the coveted Green Jacket for a third time – amidst his own mother's battle with breast cancer. Mickelson's second shot on the 13th from behind a tree was lauded "the greatest shot of his life" by Sir Nick Faldo.

Mickelson's second Major also arrived by virtue of an exquisite short stroke out of trouble – and a little help from Jack Nicklaus – at The PGA Championship in Baltrusol, New Jersey, in 2005. After tapping the commemorative marker on the 18th fairway at the spot from ▶



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which Nicklaus hit a memorable 1-iron in 1967, Mickelson pulled his second shot into the deep rough in front of the green. His majestic lob wedge then popped up and dropped two feet from the hole for a birdie putt to take the Wanamaker Trophy by one shot. "We had some pretty deep rough in our back yard when I was growing up," he explained in the winners press conference.

"So that was no different to the exact the shot I have practiced since I was a kid,"

The pictures of Mickelson with that trophy also feature a 19 year-old by the name of David Finn. David, who suffers from a debilitating mitochondrial disease, had made the 45-minute journey from home to watch practice earlier that week, and after holing out on the 14th green, Mickelson gave him an autographed glove.

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"The glove was a wonderful gesture," David's mother, Vanessa, is reported to have said.

"But what made that moment so meaningful was that he [Mickelson] treated Dave like a normal kid, which is all he wants. Phil gets it. The ease and the grace he displayed says a lot about who he is."

Despite treacherous weather, David followed his new hero for the rest of the week and Mickelson continued to acknowledge his presence with an occasional smile, a nod or a thumbs-up. In the moments



Above: Mickelson was only the third left-handed golfer to win a Major Below: He always finds time for fans around the world

immediately after his triumph, Mickelson asked David if he would have a picture taken with him and the Wanamaker Trophy.

Mickelson, 47, has always enjoyed a deeply personal connection with his fans, thanks largely to that genuine smile and tireless autograph-signing.

Mickelson is now without a Major since his brilliant victory in the 2013 Open Championship at

Muirfield in Scotland. He only needs the U.S. Open title to become the sixth player in history to complete a career grand slam.

American Julius Boros is the oldest Major champion, after winning the 1968 PGA Championship aged 48, but Mickelson remains in good shape and positive spirit.

"I'll be able to play the next two years solidly before Sofia [his second daughter] graduates," Mickelson assured the press.

"Hopefully there will be no conflict with that tournament."

The tournament goes to Shinnecock Hills in 2018, where Mickelson finished second to Retief Goosen in 2004. In 2019 it returns to Pebble Beach, where 'Lefty' made his professional debut in 1992. He has also won the PGA Tour tournament there four times.

Mickelson has played the U.S. Open 26 times now and missed the cut on just three occasions. His willingness to sacrifice personal opportunity for family certainly deserves reward. And what better way than to win on 16 June 2019 – Mickelson's 49th birthday and Father's Day – at Pebble Beach. ■