

Humble guy

Francesco Molinari’s story is not of a swashbuckling brazen Italian Job, nor was his success built in a day. It was the measured accomplishment of a masterful golfer and a patient man, writes **Tom Pountney**

With an ending fit for a fairytale, 36-year-old Francesco Molinari enjoyed a vintage 2018. And the unobtrusive Italian deserves his moment in the sun; not that he will take it.

“I’ve seen guys that I think are better players than me not winning Majors and not winning Order of Merits or Race to Dubai,” he said, with typically defiant modesty after finishing on top of the season-long European Tour competition.

Molinari lifted the Race to Dubai crown in November, with Tommy Fleetwood failing to win the DP World Tour Championship on the Earth Course at Jumeirah Golf Estates. There will be no hard feelings between the pair, dubbed ‘Moliwood’ after their heroic efforts in securing Ryder Cup victory for Europe together. “[The Ryder Cup means] so much more than Majors, more than anything,” said Molinari, amid jubilant scenes on the 16th green at Paris’ Le National Golf Course in October.

American great Phil Mickelson had put his 16th hole tee-shot into the water and immediately shook hands with Molinari to confirm victory. Europe had an unassailable five-point lead. Against a backdrop of desperate political uncertainty for the UK and Europe, Molinari strode boldly into a sea of open European arms and celebrated with the people.

“It’s hard not to get emotional when you think about the other players, the vice-captains, Thomas [Bjørn], the wives,” he recalls.

By her own admission, Molinari’s wife of 11 years, Valentina, is not the greatest enthusiast for the game. But she flew in from their home in London with their two children, Tommaso and Emma, to witness Francesco’s finest moment.

Ironically, Fleetwood and Molinari came close to being separated after their 3&1 victory over Woods and Reed on the opening morning. Europe’s captain Thomas Bjørn presented his assistant captains with a proposed afternoon line-up that did not include Fleetwood. Only after Swede Robert Karlsson spoke persuasively in the Englishman’s favour was he restored to his pre-lunch position.

“I had an amazing partner in Tommy,” reflects Molinari. “It never felt like I had a rookie playing alongside me.”

“His wife, Clare, was my agent at Hambric Sports when they met. She has cousins in London, and when they come to visit, if I’m not in the US, we try to get together. Our friendship has been fundamental in creating the synergy you need for doubles.

And we’ve always been comfortable at Le National. He won the French Open in 2017, and I was second three times.”

The duo became the first European pair in history to win all four of their ties, with Molinari victorious in his singles match on Sunday to secure a 100% record for the weekend.

“I honestly don’t feel any difference bringing five points or one point, or half a point, like I did in Wales [2010] or in Medinah [2012],” he said. “It doesn’t mean anything if you don’t win the cup.

“This was the strongest European team that I’ve ever played with. If the European team is technically strong, it can also gain advantage from being a really united team. Because we Europeans have known each other since we were kids. The atmosphere within the team is playful and friendly. The Americans are more individualistic. It’s a paradox because America is one country, with one language, while we come from many different countries. But that’s the way it is.”

Molinari’s third Ryder Cup appearance was, however, almost derailed when his back seized up on day two of the famous cross-Atlantic competition. “I didn’t tell Thomas [Bjørn],” Molinari said.

“At that stage it wasn’t enough to really compromise my golf.

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FRANCESCO MOLINARI

Right: Molinari became the first Italian to hold the coveted Claret Jug aloft in July when he won The Open Championship at Carnoustie in Scotland

So I just started taking some anti-inflammatories. It’s a week that you’re sort of pumped up with adrenaline, anyway, that you could probably play on one leg.”

Bjørn evoked this unique brotherhood throughout his team – a brotherhood that left Molinari barely able to tie his shoelaces on Monday.

Lifting the Race to Dubai crown seven weeks later capped a memorable year for Molinari, who became the first Italian to win the PGA European Tour.

His maiden Major at Carnoustie (Scotland) in the Open Championship also marked the first Italian to win one of the big four. Molinari fired a closing round two-under-par 69 to finish eight-under, fending off Tiger Woods, Justin Rose and Rory McIlroy.

He also won the 2018 BMW PGA Championship, his sixth win on the European Tour, and an eight-shot victory in the Quicken Loans National, his first PGA Tour win.

So what changed? To begin with, Molinari retained consistency while adding 20 yards to his drive over the last two years. “I took the brakes off,” he said.

“They say [adding distance] can ruin your swing, and I know it probably has for some players, but it wasn’t a concern for me because we did it organically very well,” said Molinari.

“It wasn’t like one day I showed up on the range and said to my coach [Denis Pugh], ‘Let’s try to hit it farther.’ ➤





It took years to do. Luckily, I've found that the harder I swing, the better I hit it."

And Molinari has been preparing for success since graduating in Economics (specialising in business organisation of the European Tour) from the University of Torino – and prior to that, albeit subconsciously.

"I wasn't even five when I began swinging the golf club," Molinari told *Golf Digest* in November 2018.

Molinari's grandparents played golf, and his parents ended up being single-digit-handicappers, but children under eight were not allowed at the family golf club in Torino.

Above: Francesco and his wife Valentina after winning the Race to Dubai to cap an incredible season – "Valentina is the team leader" said swing coach Pugh
Right: Molinari on his way to winning the BMW Championships in Pennsylvania during a fairytale 2018 season

got a handicap. Two years later, it was down to 12, and at 16, he was playing off scratch. This despite the fact that their father only allowed them to practise on Wednesday afternoons and on the weekends because of school.

"My father was really clear," remembered Molinari.

"First we had to get degrees, and then we could decide what to do in the future. He was unyielding. And so that's what we did. Dad was always worried about our being able to have professions to fall back on if we weren't successful in golf."

From the Sherry Cup in 2004 in Spain (Sergio Garcia, Padraig Harrington and Rory McIlroy are former winners), to the semi-finals at the British Amateur at Royal Troon in 2003, these early experiences shaped Molinari.

Facing the opportunity to play in the Masters, he lost the semi-final to Gary Wolstenholme with his brother on the bag, and Giorgio Bordonni (the Italian National Amateur coach who tragically

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passed away in 2013) walking the course with them.

"Sitting on the steps of the clubhouse with Edoardo and Giorgio, we all burst into tears. The dream was gone, and in that moment, I would never have imagined that only three years later, I would be caddying for my brother at the Masters.

"When I won the Open Championship at Carnoustie, that memory came back to me: Edoardo, Giorgio and that cry we had together. Some things you just can't forget.

"There was never any jealousy between us. We always cheered one another on. And to play in the 2010 Ryder Cup [at Celtic ➤



Manor] together was very emotional. People chanted, "Two Molinaris; there's only two Molinaris." Even Prince Charles chanted it when he was visiting the European team."

Francesco met Tiger for the first time while caddying for his brother at the 2006 Masters. Edoardo explained that Francesco was already a professional and a month later, he won the Italian Open — his first professional success.

Tiger and Francesco's paths repeatedly crossed from that moment on, never more poignantly than at Carnoustie and the 2018 Ryder Cup. "I read somewhere that I had become his nightmare," said Molinari.

"Let's be real: for a champion like him..."

In a previous life, 14 year-old Francesco watched with his brother as another Italian, Costantino Rocca, defeated Tiger in the singles at the 1997 Ryder Cup at Valderrama.

Rocca, a childhood hero, was behind the ropes at Le National this year, and he hugged Francesco on the putting green.

"I think lots of Italian kids watched and I hope that it had the same effect on them that Rocca's victories had on me. We already have a lot of really strong young amateurs who win internationally. We need to increase the numbers of young players, though."

Molinari also started working with Phil Kenyon (putting coach to McIlroy, Rose and Fleetwood) in early 2018. Kenyon changed the Italian's putting posture and the results were tangible from day one.

Performance coach Dave Alred (who also worked with Jonny Wilkinson) came on board in 2016 to help Molinari better withstand pressure. "With Alred, every stroke in training has an objective — in the long game, in the short game, in putting," explains Molinari.

"If I miss that objective, I have to redo the stroke until I get it."

But Molinari's swing coach, Pugh, says that Valentina is the real team leader.

"My wife has never played golf, and oddly enough this is lucky because she gives me a completely different point of view — a neutral point of view — on many decisions, even in life."

"She was the one who suggested moving to London in 2009. She did her Masters there in 2006 and fell in love with the city."

People close to the Molinari family say that while Edoardo rides a more typically Italian emotional rollercoaster, Francesco never deviates. What is almost impossible to believe is the claim that, as a child, learning the game in Turin, his dentist-father frequently banned him for 'throwing the toys out of the pram'. "I used to throw clubs as a kid and swear and if my Dad saw me from other holes throwing clubs he wouldn't let me play for a couple of weeks. That was the punishment for not behaving on the golf course," Francesco said.

"I think I was lucky to learn the lesson as a kid. When you turn

professional you try really hard think about what you're doing and not about what happened or what is going to happen."

As well as being a West Ham fan (since his compatriot and friend Gianfranco Zola took over in 2008), Francesco is also a massive Inter Milan fan — arch rivals to his home side Juventus, who his brother supports.

Molinari will be just weeks shy of 40 years old when the Ryder Cup goes to Italy and The Marco Simone Golf Club in Rome for the first time in 2022.

"It will definitely be special because Rome is so unique. The team didn't even get to see Paris. Everything happened close to Le National, and the gala was held at the Palace of Versailles. I think in 2022, we'll get to see a bit more of the city."

"There are plenty of beautiful courses in the world. But around Italian courses, there is history, culture, scenery, food, style." ■

Pictured: Molinari changed his swing and tweaked his putting in 2018, but it is the mental side of his game that came on leaps and bounds, enabling one of the most successful seasons in the history of the sport

