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Following Dreams (and Talent)

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Breaking from conventional wisdom with those we teach, work with, and guide in our daily lives is not always the easiest task. It is certainly easier, and seemingly much safer, to play the odds and lead by expecting and demanding that tasks be done as they've always been done. But Phil Mickelson and perhaps, more importantly, his father are testaments that the courage to give natural talent, headstrong commitment, or both a chance to succeed can yield great results.

Less than 5 percent of the golfers in the world play from the left side of the ball despite a left-handed population that is three times that number, and until the success of Mike Weir and most recently Phil Mickelson in the majors, the world's biggest professional golf tournaments were almost never won by lefties. It was an act of faith in talent, then, that Phil Mickelson's father followed his instincts and let his young son swing the golf club from the "wrong" side of the

ball, because the world's most famous left-handed athlete isn't actually left-handed at all. He just plays golf that way.

Born on June 16, 1970, in San Diego, California, Philip Alfred Mickelson writes right-handed, throws a ball right-handed, and eats right-handed. Yet he's one of just seven left-handed players to ever win on the PGA Tour (he owns twenty-three of the thirty-nine wins) and is well known by fans with the nickname "Lefty." How Phil Mickelson began playing as a left-hander dates back to the earliest months of his life.

Mickelson's parents both loved sports. His mother, Mary, was a good basketball player as a young lady at Our Lady of Peace High School in San Diego and is noted by friends and family for her competitive spirit. His father, Phil Mickelson Sr., was a navy and commercial pilot with a single-digit handicap and a ferocious hunger for golf. The Mickelsons already had a child, one-year-old daughter Tina, when Mary Mickelson was pregnant again in 1970. Due to the family's impending growth, Phil and Mary Mickelson went in search of a house to buy. In a new subdivision in San Diego, they found a modest house that had one characteristic that intrigued the couple: the lot was oddly shaped and abnormally larger than others in the neighborhood. They could have found a bigger house, but none for the price had the benefit of such a big yard. With one child already and another on the way, Phil and Mary Mickelson made a calculated bet that a big yard was more important than a house with greater style. The decision would play a significant role in the family's future.

When their first son was born, Phil and Mary sent out

birth announcements to friends and family that stated “the Mickelson *foursome* was now complete” and included a picture of the baby being posed on the nose of an airplane. When Mickelson was three months old, he got his first golf club, as a gift. The idea of giving such a tiny baby a golf club goes against the natural tendencies of many parents. It might be fitting, perhaps, for Peyton Manning to lay a football in the crib beside a newborn son, but Phil Mickelson Sr., pilot, giving his infant child a golf club?

Learning Is Observing

Whatever he was thinking, it worked. Just more than a year later, an eighteen-month-old Mickelson would join his father in the big yard of the family’s San Diego home for a little practice time. Just call it an apprenticeship in the extreme degree: father swinging, child watching, child imitating. All the lessons from professionals given years down the road could never duplicate or replace what occurred in Mickelson’s oddly shaped backyard with father teaching eager-to-learn son.

For a good view and also for safety reasons, Mickelson would stand adjacent to his father, carefully watching his smooth, right-handed swing. Mickelson began to grip his own club and take it back and swing, just as his father did. Mirroring his father made Mickelson’s swing left-handed, however.

“He would stand in front of me,” Phil Mickelson Sr. said, “and draw back the club, like a left-hander, and hit it with the back of the club. He hit the ball awfully good.”

Since Mickelson's club was right-handed and the child appeared to be right-handed in everything else he did, his father tried setting him up in his footsteps, on the right side of the ball, so he could strike it properly. But just before swinging, the toddler would turn around, regrip the club, and take a big swing from the left side of the ball. Mickelson's club was a homemade, cut-down junior 3-wood.

"He was watching me swing right-handed," Mickelson's father recalls. "He was hitting the way he saw me hit it. It was a right-handed club, so I kept turning him around, and he kept turning back to left-handed."

It's long been known that children learn from their parents both good and bad by observing their actions, but it often does not hit home with full clarity. Nobody illustrates this clearer than Mickelson and his father, though, serving as a powerful reminder that even the smallest of children are acutely aware of what their parents do and how they do it. By emulating his father, Mickelson created his own swing, albeit backward. It was just like his father, but in mirror image reverse. When his father tried showing him the "right" way to swing the club, it appeared wrong and the young Mickelson would have nothing of it.

Left Is Right for Some

This is the point in an unconventional situation when many parents, coaches, or business managers would throw in the towel and demand a switch to the more conventional side of getting things done. The clubhead was taking a beating as the youngster continually smacked the ball on the back of the

face. Why let the child ruin his club when he could just force him to hit from the same side of the ball used by almost everyone else in the world? His father, though, shaped the clubhead so his son could continue playing left-handed and never again tried to turn him into a right-handed golfer.

“Remarkably,” Phil Mickelson Sr. said, “he seemed comfortable and he wasn’t swinging that badly, so I decided I’d just change the golf club rather than the swing.”

Letting his son swing left-handed, when the vast majority of golfers in the world are right-handed and his son was naturally right-handed as well, was a fortuitous decision for the elder Mickelson. By allowing him to follow his natural instinct, Phil Mickelson Sr. unleashed a passion for the game of golf in his young son.

With a toddler’s blond hair and smiling disposition, Mickelson carried his patchwork club, held together with electrical tape, around with him just like other children his age carry around a favorite toy or a security blanket. And he used it at every opportunity. Mickelson’s father placed a golf cup in a hole in the ground in the family’s large backyard and cut the grass around it down short so it resembled a green. He made a tee box so his children could hit balls to the target. The toddler followed his father around with his golf club constantly, so much so that the grass was worn to the dirt. As Mickelson’s motor skills developed, his golf swing evolved at the same time, resulting in a natural and balanced stroke for the youngster.

The father’s passion for the game rubbed off on his son at an age when most children his age had not moved beyond blankets, blocks, and large, soft round balls. When pictured

in a family photo at age two, Mickelson is dressed up in knee socks, black shorts, and a double-buttoned, candy-striped white sweater, but in his left hand is a golf ball and in his right hand is his favorite golf club.

“That club,” Phil Mickelson Sr. said, “went with him everywhere he went. It was like his teddy bear. As long as it was next to him, he was ready to go to sleep.”

Mickelson’s father not only gave in to his son’s left-handed golf tendency, but he also fueled his desire by providing him tools to practice his favorite trade. By the time Phil Jr. was three, his father had handcrafted him a small set of sawed-off left-handed golf clubs. With his own bag, the youngster was eager to go where his father went on the weekends, beyond the small thirty-five-yard hole in his yard to a real golf course with full-size holes. When told no, he and a friend ran away from home, in search of a golf course. Mickelson had his favorite club in hand.

“He’d ask the neighbors for directions,” his father said, “and they kept directing him to turn right. He kept following their directions, and, of course, he ended up back in front of the house.”

Instead of getting mad and punishing his wandering way, Mickelson’s father realized his son had an unusual hunger for golf and that it was his passion and likely his talent. He was trying to push outside his boundaries because it was his natural desire. It was not a matter of escaping boundaries as much as it was an innate desire to explore new and natural ones.

His young son’s point was made, and his father realized that the three-year-old was serious about getting onto a golf

course. Among his first exposures was a round at a par-3 course, San Diego's Presidio Hills. Mickelson's father kept his son's score on a scorecard the family still has. The score was 144. It was obvious, even at age three, that Mickelson had an unusual talent. His father saw that his hand-eye coordination allowed him to strike the ball better than many beginning adults. The fact that he addressed the ball from the left side only meant that, for him, he was playing the right way.

His father supported his son's desire to play the game at every opportunity. Because his father retired as a navy pilot due to a back injury and served as a commercial pilot during his son's childhood, he worked the typical pilot schedule of a couple of days on, several days off, allowing him more time to spend on the course with his son.

"The greatest thing about my father's job," Mickelson said, "was that, if he was home for three or four days, it was for the entire three or four days. The most enjoyable times I've had playing golf have been those hours we spent together. He'd pick me up right after school. We used to go to a local municipal course, Balboa. After about fourteen, fifteen holes, it would be too dark to play. In pitch black sometimes, we'd have to walk all the way from the far end of the course through the canyons to the car. Those walks are my fondest memories in the game."

Where You Want to Be Is Where You Belong

Most fathers are not eager to take a toddler along as one of an afternoon foursome of weekend golf, but at age three and

a half, Phil Mickelson was taken along as part of a foursome to a full-length public course in San Diego. Including his father, his grandfather, and a family friend, the group had a tee time for the 18-hole course at San Diego's Balboa Park, which also has a 9-hole course. When the foursome reached the starter before teeing off, he gave them a puzzled look. Apparently, the starter was not sure that a three-year-old belonged on the 18-hole course. In most cases he would probably be right. What he did not know is that the boy's father had been resisting, assuming the very same thing. When the child showed through his actions that he was ready, though, there was nothing else to do but let the boy on the course.

The starter strongly suggested the foursome try the shorter, 9-hole course. The three men and one small boy pleaded. The starter relented, sending Phil Mickelson and his bag of sawed-off golf clubs on his way to his first full round of golf.

"He was at that age when he could walk well," his father recalled, "but he was running awkwardly. He'd hit the ball and then run after it and hit it again. He didn't slow us down at all."

Several hours after beginning the round, the foursome reached the 18th hole. Looking uphill at the finishing hole, Mickelson asked the others if it was their last to play. Assuming he was tired and not wanting to walk up the hill, the men assured Mickelson it was their last. Instead, the youngster cried, not because of the difficult walk ahead, but because he did not want his real round of golf to end.

Not one to tire from activity, Mickelson was said to be so

rambunctious as a child that his parents made him “wear a football helmet around the house because he kept running into the edges of the furniture.”

“I remember wearing it and somebody asked my mom, ‘Why is he wearing that?’” Mickelson said. “I come running around the corner, bang, right into the corner, fall down. He said, ‘Oh, I get it.’”

The golf success was only the beginning for Mickelson, though, as he began playing during every free moment he had. His home was near Presidio Hills, a “pitch and putt” par-3 layout that is the second-oldest course in the San Diego area. In “old town” and with a historical adobe building as its clubhouse, the course, built in 1928, became a “home away from home” for Phil Mickelson. It was at Presidio Hills that Mickelson claimed his first-ever golf victory, winning the Harry McCarthy Putting Contest at age five. The other golfers he beat were as old as thirteen, but Mickelson was not intimidated by the competition.

Also at age five, Mickelson and his six-year-old sister, Tina, won second-place trophies in their age groups in a Pee Wee International event. Already telling his family he wanted to be a golfer when he grew up and never considering the remote odds of making it as a professional, Mickelson played Presidio Hills so aggressively that by the time he was seven, his first score, 144, had been cut in half. To keep the par-3 course interesting, Mickelson would “redesign” the course when nobody was around. For instance, he would hit from the fourth tee to the seventh green or put himself behind a tree or in a bunker to simulate difficult conditions.

Already a fan of professional golf, Mickelson would watch

Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus on television, then pretend at Presidio Hills he was playing in big tournaments against the best in the world. Approaching the 18th green, for example, he might imagine he was paired with Nicklaus, who already had a shot close to the pin. Mickelson knew he had to get inside of Nicklaus to win. He would take dead aim at the pin, often enough getting inside of Nicklaus's imaginary ball. At other times he just played the course trying to better his previous best effort. In 1977, seven-year-old Mickelson made his first birdie (on the Presidio Hills 18th) and broke 70 for the first time.

"My parents used to drop me off there every day around eight in the morning and pick me up around six or seven that night," Mickelson said. "I loved it, I just loved it."

Simply being on the golf course was as natural for pre-teen Mickelson as playing cowboys and Indians or doll house was for other boys and girls. He was as close to being born with a club in his hand as is possible, and he could see it was a game that his father loved. His backyard was a golf hole, and his life, even at a young age, was becoming centered on golf. Mickelson obviously felt a kinship with his clubs and golf courses, and the appeal of the game came naturally to him.

The Benefits of Closeness

American corporations rarely refer to their workers as family anymore, because the term is far too endearing and attachable. The father figure is out; the colder, more professional mentor is in. People, however, learn better and

faster when advice and instruction are coming from someone they deeply respect, if not love. For Phil Mickelson, it was certainly a difference-maker, learning his first lessons in golf from his father and practicing and playing the game with his entire family.

With three children, including Tina, Phil, and younger brother Tim, the Mickelsons were a typical 1970s American family, living in the suburbs in a middle-class home. Phil Sr. had a military background, but his long, bushy hair was relative to the times, as was his mod dress. Five-foot-seven Mary was active in her children's lives, taking a hands-on role in school and sports. The family was tightly knit and active in many areas, both individually and together.

Today, for example, Phil Sr. claims to have retired "two or three times," including stints as a navy and commercial pilot. Currently, he is promoting a periscope product through the Mickelson Group that helps fans in golf galleries keep an eye on the action. Mary Mickelson, sixty-two, began playing in a San Diego women's basketball league ten years ago, and her team, the San Diego Stars, has won two gold medals in the Senior Olympics. She has a personal trainer and walks thirty-five miles a week to stay in competitive shape. Older sister Tina, known to be fiercely defensive of Phil in public, is a Class A PGA golf pro and an analyst for the Golf Channel, while younger brother Tim is the golf coach at the University of San Diego.

The entire family has always loved golf, but none more than Phil. Growing up, he did not limit his sports to the links, however. Mickelson played multiple sports through his middle school years (football, basketball, baseball, and

soccer) and was an all-star in youth baseball. Mickelson was a right-handed pitcher known for his accuracy, but standing at the plate, he clutched his bat just as he clutches his golf clubs, from the left.

Golf, though, suited Mickelson best because the result is based solely on him, not a team, and he continued to focus most of his free time on competing, practicing, and improving his game. After entering his first tournament at age six, Mickelson played in more than fifty events by the time he was nine, but did not win any. San Diego, with its year-round golf weather, was developing a strong group of junior players. The junior competition was stiff, probably more than anywhere else in the country. Even though he was not winning, Mickelson continued to work on his game and play competitively.

As a nine-year-old, he got a job working at a San Diego course named Navajo Canyon. Mickelson's duties included odd jobs such as picking up trash and cleaning the parking lot, but the perk was unlimited range balls and no greens fees. Mickelson's father came home from a trip when Mickelson was ten and joined him at Navajo Canyon for a round of golf. Mickelson shot 73, his father shot 81. It was the first time Phil Sr. had ever lost to his son. At home that evening, when the conversation had not turned to the day's golf events, Mickelson hinted to his father to share the breaking news.

"Aren't you going to tell her?" Mickelson said to his father.

He was not the type of person to brag about besting his father, but he wanted to share his enthusiasm for doing so with his mom. The family enjoyed competition among

each other, using it as a means of spending quality time together. But they also enjoyed winning, and besting his father was a milestone. It would be the first of many to come in the next year.

The Thrill of Competition

The mark of exceptional athletes or business leaders is that they truly enjoy the act of competition. They seek to turn any activity into a game of winners and losers and work hard to try to put themselves on top. For Phil Mickelson, it became apparent in his youth that competing was a passion, not just in golf, but in just about anything he did. He found gratification in competing against his father and friends on the course, but he also found gratification in competing against others, even his sister, in any activity that could be turned into a contest.

Mickelson and his sister would hit tennis balls against a garage door, keeping track of who had more returns, or race around an obstacle course set up in their yard by their father. They would play video games at home, and the young Mickelson would keep track of everyone in the family's score on a pad near the television, announcing to all who had the highest average. They would see who could do the most calisthenics in a given time.

"Anything physical like push-ups or sit-ups or diving contests at the neighborhood pool, I'd win," Tina Mickelson said. "Phil didn't like that, but he wasn't a sore loser. He just wouldn't leave until he'd mastered something or was champion of the house."

Golf, of course, is one contest that is impossible to master, so it is easy to see why the game held such allure for Mickelson, even at a very early age. You can beat opponents but still feel as though you've lost to the game. Or you can play the course by yourself and get different results every time out. The one thing you can never do is master it to the point that it no longer has interest.

It can be the most difficult game in the world, and that, no doubt, is why young Phil Mickelson kept going back for more. Beating his father was gratifying, but it did not mean mastery of the game; far from it, in fact. That was one round on one day on one course, and even at that he had left probably five, eight, maybe ten strokes on the course that could have been eliminated. Focusing more attention on another sport when so much potential competition existed in golf just did not make sense for Mickelson.

Practice Makes Perfect

A trademark of Phil Mickelson's professional golf game is the finesse and creativity he displays around some of the toughest greens in the world. How his short game got so good is not by accident, nor is it related purely to talent given at birth. Mickelson's short game first developed in his backyard, following hundreds and hundreds of hours of practice to perfect the most difficult elements of an almost impossible game.

His dad had retired from commercial flying in 1980, citing health reasons, and with extra time spent more time practicing and playing golf with his son. He also had time to make the family's makeshift, backyard practice green into

something more permanent. It took more than two years to perfect, but Phil Mickelson Sr. built a green to professional specifications, complete with a sand trap. The true green gave young Mickelson a place to continually practice his short game, and the work quickly paid off.

As an eleven-year-old, the left-handed Mickelson played on the 1981 San Diego Junior Golf Circuit and was a force. He won four events and had runner-up finishes in seven others, establishing himself as one of the top young golfers in Southern California. Even though he still played other sports, Mickelson was consumed by golf in middle school. San Diego's year-round, playable weather allowed Mickelson to work on his game 365 days a year. If friends wanted to find him outside of school, they knew to look at his favorite golf courses. If he was at home, he was likely in the backyard, working on his short game on the family golf green. Even in the classroom, the golf geek did not move far away from his passion. The only way his parents could get his attention was to banish him from the golf course for a day.

When doing a sixth-grade science project, he chose for his subject a test designed to determine which compression of golf balls worked best for junior golfers. Compression is designed to match the feel of the ball to the golfer's preference. Compression ratings are usually 80, 90, or 100. The higher the compression, the harder the ball feels at impact. Compression, however, does not determine distance. In his science experiment, Mickelson enlisted the help of some sixth-grade friends and wrote a letter to Titleist, which donated balls with compression ratings of 80, 90, and 100 for study. The project earned Mickelson a second-place award.

Recognizing their son's talent and his desire to improve his play, Phil Mickelson's parents gave the fourteen-year-old for his eighth-grade graduation present a week at a *Golf Digest* school held in the San Diego area. One of the instructors was a former professional golfer named Dean Reinmuth. Originally from Naperville, Illinois, Reinmuth grew up with golf. He was first a caddie at Naperville Country Club but worked his way up from the grounds crew to the bag room before reaching the pro shop as an assistant pro. After a successful college golf career, Reinmuth toured professionally in different areas of the world for eight years, but settled in San Diego in 1981 when he opened the Dean Reinmuth School of Golf at Carlton Oaks Country Club.

Reinmuth had immediate success as an instructor, working with a couple of top-ranked junior players in the San Diego area. When he met Mickelson and saw him play at the *Golf Digest* school, Reinmuth convinced him to join his growing list of students. Their working relationship would last for thirteen years, but the work Reinmuth did with Mickelson in his early years helped him launch an amateur career that would be the best the American golfing world had seen since Jack Nicklaus.

Commitment Equals Success

It is easy to get annoyed with people who can't quit doing or talking about the one thing they love the most. Even if it is your children or your star employee, you get sick of it and wish they'd find a few more things to worry about. But when their obsession links to true talent, Phil Mickelson is

proof that letting one develop his or her strengths and passion to the fullest extent is often quite productive.

His parents certainly worried that their child was out of touch with reality in terms of making it as a professional golfer, but when the teenager said with confidence that he wanted to play for a living, they gave him support in return, albeit with an occasional lesson that life does not always work out as we plan, particularly in the world of professional sports.

To foster the dream, the Mickelsons wanted to get their son as much national exposure as possible on the junior circuit. His mother, Mary, took an extra job, working at a nearby retirement center, so they could afford to send their son to top tournaments. Mickelson was appreciative, saying publicly at every opportunity how much he appreciated her commitment. For high school, Mickelson attended a respected, coed San Diego Catholic school. Founded in 1957 and known in the area as simply “Uni,” the University of San Diego High School overlooks San Diego Bay to the west and Mission Valley to the south. Mickelson is remembered as a personable student who had a positive disposition and desire to excel.

Mickelson’s high school class picture reveals a smiling, pretty-boy face, a short haircut, and a gold chain around his neck. Not known for stylish dress, Mickelson was clean-cut, and not a high school partier type, since he did not drink or smoke, focusing his excess time instead on improving his golf game. So obsessed with golf was Mickelson in high school that his mom suggested he take a music appreciation class to “become more well-rounded than just all focused on golf.” He took the class, but she recalls one night helping

him with a music appreciation class quiz and “realized he was memorizing great composers by comparing their music tempo to the tempo of the golf swing for different clubs” and that he “associated every classic artist with a golf club.

“I would give him a composer,” Mary Mickelson said, “say, Mozart, Chopin, or Beethoven and he would then come back and say that was like a punch 9-iron—all depending on the tempo of the classical music.”

Mickelson was so committed to golf that he gave up playing other sports, despite his love for them. He spent little time chasing girls and was not known for mischief, unless it involved golf. Once, he was sent to his room for not doing a chore ordered by his parents. When they later went to his room, he was not there. But they knew where to find him—playing at a nearby course. It’s all Mickelson wanted to do.

After school, he would walk to the San Diego course Stardust, playing and practicing until his mother picked him up at dark. He played all the good San Diego area courses, including Torrey Pines in La Jolla, where his high school team frequently held matches, taking advantage of the region’s diversified golf offerings but leaving little time for much else. On the course, he would imagine himself playing against the great professionals of the game just as he had done as a preteen, challenging them shot by shot, hole by hole. Even as a budding young prep star, it was not classmates or area studs Mickelson envisioned himself beating. Instead, he envisioned dueling down the stretch against the likes of Palmer and Nicklaus.

Stardust was transformed in his mind into Augusta and Pebble Beach, and rounds played on weekdays as darkness

neared might as well have been a Sunday in the U.S. Open with the afternoon sun still burning bright as he charged down the final holes seeking birdies that would lead to a come-from-behind victory.

“We were so worried about Philip’s direction,” his mother said, “that we looked into taking a Dobbins class on his behavior.”

Eventually, they figured out that Mickelson was simply unique. It may have been unusual for a youngster to have such a focused and lofty goal, but Mickelson clearly did, and even as a young man, he was committed wholeheartedly to making his aspirations come true.

The Difference-Maker: Confidence

Having all the talent in the world means little if you don’t have the confidence to believe you can perform above the level of your competitors. Whether on playing fields, on the first day of a new job, or in boardrooms, an ultimate secret to success when you have the talent and you’ve worked hard to prepare is believing you are better than those around you.

For Phil Mickelson, it was the ingredient that helped his junior golf career take off. With a flipped-up shirt collar, a supremely confident air, and a talkative, disarming demeanor, Mickelson drew attention to himself and his game on the junior circuit. He liked to play with flair, enjoying a crowd and eager to display an ability to pull off unique and difficult shots. Often he charged at the green from behind a tree. At other times he made seemingly miraculous shots around the green in the heat of competition. In one major junior

tournament, for instance, Mickelson seemed out of contention on the last hole because he was a shot out of the lead for a playoff and had missed the green. His shot looked impossible, but Mickelson had lots of practice around the green, particularly in his backyard. He hit what has become a patented flop shot that landed short of the hole before trickling down into the cup. Mickelson, displaying a sheepish smile, walked up to the green as 150 or so players and fans cheered.

His reputation for displaying his “aw-shucks” grin when making head-turning shots was already well established, as was a reputation for playing the game like his hero Arnold Palmer, with an attacking, all-out style. On the course, Mickelson was confident, with more than a hint of cockiness. Off the course, he countered with outspoken appreciation of others. Mickelson became well known on the junior circuit for famous victory speeches in which he would ramble on and on, giving thanks to his mother for taking a second job so he could play and to everyone from groundskeepers to concession operators to fellow players.

Robert Hartman wrote in “Masters of the Millennium” that a Mickelson speech would often develop like a mosaic of thoughts: I want to thank the greens superintendent for having the course in great shape. I want to thank my mom for getting a second job and allowing me the opportunity to play in more tournaments. I want to thank Mr. Gray for giving me a ride to the course all week. Thanks to the tournament staff, everything went smooth, tee times . . . Mr. Batten for the beautiful scoreboard. Oh, and I want to thank the waitress at Confetti’s for giving me an extra scoop of choco-

late mint. Thanks to Horseshoe Bend for the nice range balls. To Mr. Rick Bannerot at Rolex, thanks for sponsoring a great event. Chris Haack, thanks for the advice. Mickelson was so nice to fellow players, in fact, that many wondered during similar statements directed toward them what game Mickelson was playing, thanking everyone and smiling all while beating them into the ground with behind-the-tree pars and big-drive birdies.

Mickelson's on-course results as a junior golfer were staggering. His first American Junior Golf Association Tournament win came at age fourteen in the Lake Tahoe Memorial (by five strokes) and he would win eleven other AJGA events, a record that still stands. Mickelson also won sixteen San Diego junior events, shot a 9-hole course record at Balboa Country Club, and qualified as a high school junior for the San Diego and Los Angeles Opens. So prominent was Mickelson that he was chosen three consecutive years as Rolex National Player of the Year, a record that still stands.

During Mickelson's senior year in high school, the University of San Diego High School golf team was ranked sixth in the area and scheduled to compete in the California Interscholastic Federation–San Diego Section team championships. Unfortunately, the sectional play was scheduled the same day as U.S. Open local qualifying. Mickelson did not want to abandon his team, but he also believed he had a chance of qualifying for the U.S. Open. He did not want to make the decision, putting it to his teammates instead. They voted that the U.S. Open qualifying event was more important for Mickelson's budding golf career. Mickelson played the qualifying event and was replaced on the school team

by a Uni freshman golfer—Scott Peterson (of Laci Peterson notoriety).

Despite saying in his younger years that he wanted to play golf instead of going to college, Mickelson pronounced to his mother as a teenager that he did want to attend college after all to study business. The idea was that if he was going to make a lot of money playing golf, he needed to be smart enough to know what to do with it. As the nation's top recruit, Mickelson could have chosen to attend college and play golf at any university in America with a golf program during his senior year. The top program in the nation at the time, however, was Arizona State University. Located in the metropolitan Phoenix area that, like San Diego, is laden with golf courses, ASU had the coach many considered to be one of the best in the college game and was located in a golf-centered region.

Steve Loy coached golf at Scottsdale (Arizona) Community College and the University of Arkansas before going to Arizona State, where he had one of the top programs in golf before the arrival of Phil Mickelson. Loy coached future PGA professional Billy Mayfair, and Mayfair developed a friendship with Mickelson, making it clear that Loy and ASU were the right choices for a collegiate career. Mayfair was the best college player in the nation at the time, and the genuine interest he showed in Mickelson made a difference. At Arizona State, Mickelson could follow in Mayfair's footsteps, benefit from weather that, like San Diego, was nearly perfect for golf, and be tutored by a proven coach. Mickelson's parents liked Loy and ASU as well, and Mickelson signed with the Sun Devils, beginning college in 1988.

“Steve,” Mary Mickelson told the coach, “Philip will really do anything you want him to do; it just depends on how you ask him.”

On to Arizona State Mickelson went, taking along talent, commitment, and the confidence to win big at the collegiate level.

TAKEAWAYS



1 Conventional wisdom is not always best. When unusual talent and desire exist, playing the odds does not always make the most sense. Be open-minded about letting others do things differently.

2 People learn best from those they trust and respect. Finding someone to teach is easy; finding the right person to teach is not. Those who are most effective command the trust and respect of pupils.

3 Practice makes perfect. Perfection in life, as in golf, is impossible, but it's the aspiration and ethic of continual improvement that create separation from others in the same field.

4 Confidence is a competitive edge. In all aspects of life, talented people are fighting to win. The ultimate edge is believing you can beat them all.