

Tuesday 15th April 2025

'What on earth is he doing?!' I exclaimed. From the other sofa, I got *that* look from Mrs F before she added 'hey Mr Gloomy, it's just one shot so give him a break!'

'Give him a break' I thought with barely masked frustration. The guy's cruising towards the only golf major he hasn't achieved and he's about to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. The truth was Rory McIlroy was in trouble but it wasn't the kind of trouble he concocted on the infamous final round at Augusta in 2011 when the wheels came off in spectacular fashion. Nonetheless, by chipping the ball into Ray's Creek on the 13th hole when he had acres of green to work with, it felt like at least one wheel had come off and he was going to have to hang on for dear life to stand any chance of putting on that coveted Green Jacket. All of a sudden a three shot lead evaporates and to add insult to injury, his friend and compatriot Justin Rose is heading towards the clubhouse one shot ahead.

The expectation on his shoulders already huge was matched by an overwhelming encouragement from fans in person and around the world who were willing Rory to get this over the line. But the experience of Rory at this event in recent years has been a rollercoaster. Yes, he's come close on occasions but there also appears to have been a mental block on too many occasions and the demons of 2011 resurface and the most gifted golfer in a generation starts getting the 'yips' (read mistakes) and no amount of talent will help if the space between your ears is screaming 'failure....again!'

Here is where the Sports Psychologist Bob Rotella needed to earn his money. In the build up to The Masters and throughout the week, Bob had been helping Rory to shut out the white noise and play his own game. Part of that was the pragmatism to acknowledge that mistakes will happen but make your next shot your best shot.

Over the next five holes we would see the past 11 years rolled into a microcosm of Rory McIlroy. The genius of playing a shot with so much bend and precision to land a few feet from the hole on the monster 15th hole. The failure of his putter to convert that shot. A ridiculously great shot at the penultimate hole that got him back to winning. Then the straightforward chip shot to the final hole somehow managing to be chucked in the bunker, only for a brilliant chip out but then... horror of horrors, a missed putt that sucked the life out of millions of people watching, me and Mrs F included, at well after midnight. Now he faced a playoff with Justin Rose. How would Rory recover? Had he blown his chance, his best chance possibly ever of winning the one he wanted most? He looked shattered. And yet...

I turned to Mrs F and said 'I think he can still do this'. With tired eyes she nodded but in truth I think she doubted. It all depended which Rory turned up to play and whether he could put the disappointment behind him. Would it be the fragile nervous Rory or the confident 'I know I can do this' Rory. In the end it was the latter. He played the final hole again this time to perfection and when he rolled in that putt, he sank to his knees and the sheer relief poured out of his body. Moments later, relief gave way to ecstasy. Just like the immortal line when Andy Murray won at Wimbledon 'the waiting is over' Rory is champion.

As I consider this Easter week, I heard Rory say something which stuck with me. He said that his quiet and consistent friend and caddie Harry Diamond said to him as they got in the golf cart to set off for the play off hole 'well pal, you'd have taken this on Monday morning' to which Rory said 'I took confidence from that'.

I look at Easter week and consider that a lot can happen in 7 days. The expectation of those palm waving, cheering, adulatory crowds gives way to an experience that moves from box office theatre to bile threatening hate. In the space of days, many of the crowd would turn through 180* and throw away their palm branches for clenched fists. Is there any encouragement to be found? Even His closest disciples doubted. Jesus on his journey expresses his fear and doubt about what lies ahead and His Father responds in affirmation so that He can keep going. The pain and agony of the cross could not be avoided but the grave would not hold Him and the joy and ecstasy of victory over death would be manifest on Easter Sunday. Hope fulfilled.

As I said last Sunday, we cannot skip from Palm Sunday to Easter Day and pretend that the bit in the middle didn't happen. Our lives are a combination of victory and defeat, of joy and sorrow, of agony and ecstasy. But for me, it is the real hope of Easter Day that keeps me going through the tough times. That whatever darkness I'm encountering, I trust in a Jesus who has gone through the blackout of death and emerged victorious and now lives forever. This year I hold on tighter to this hope than ever before. Death is defeated. Satan is conquered. Strongholds are broken. Jesus reigns. May the hope of this give you renewed strength and all the peace you need with the struggle you're in right now to just keep going.

Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls! Hebrews 12: 1-3 (The Message)