

AMERICAN IDOLS

An exciting new generation of American pros are beginning to fulfil their potential. We speak to four of them as they embark on potentially career-defining seasons

WORDS GARRETT JOHNSTON PICTURES ANGUS MURRAY, COBRA PUMA, GETTY



Style & substance

Fowler is one of American golf's most recognisable players right now.



RICKIE FOWLER A NEW BREED OF OLD SCHOOL

Rickie Fowler is ready for more success on the PGA Tour. The brash, bright 24 year old from Southern California is beginning to find his stride within the ranks of golf's upper echelon. With his wide-brimmed Puma caps and orange Sunday outfits, he is one of the most recognisable American players. His first PGA Tour win last year – achieved in a play-off over Rory McIlroy at the Wells Fargo Championship – proved his style had substance, too.

But the real-life Rickie is nothing like his alter-ego. Sure, he likes riding dirt bikes in his spare time, and has spent some of his \$3 million winnings from 2012 on his dream car, a black and orange Porsche 911 GT3. But Fowler is mature beyond his years, according to his good friend Bubba Watson. "Rickie is more mature than people think," says the Masters champion. "Even though he's real young, he understands what it takes to be a good player, a champion. But also be a great champion off the course." He doesn't drink (I'm usually the designated driver for all my buddies... I usually just sip on a Red Bull to help me stay awake) and doesn't rely on modern gadgets to help his game.

His mentor was a third generation Scot, Barry McDonnell, an old-school coach who hooked up with Fowler at the age of seven at the Murrieta Valley Golf Range. He died last year, but left a huge impression.

"He never used video or anything like that," adds Fowler. "You basically learned the game as if it were 1950 and not 1995. It was a great way to be brought up and very different to this day and age. He was a big Ben Hogan believer. I was taught the fundamentals and how to figure out how to hit the golf shot. It's a huge credit to who I am now."

Just as McIlroy took encouragement from good friend Graeme McDowell's breakthrough at the 2010 US Open, Fowler found inspiration in the Georgia pines as he watched Watson win his first Major. "I want to be in that position," Fowler tells TG. "Hopefully not in a play-off but win outright. It definitely was cool to be there to watch it all happen. It kind of gives me the drive to want to go out there and do the same thing."

A lot of success has come early to the native of Murrieta, California. Not many players can boast having beaten McIlroy in a play-off, nor being the youngest American Ryder Cup player of all time (he was 21 at Celtic Manor). Fowler's passion for the game began at a young age, and other youngsters are taking notice of him – and loving his game. Like Wayne Rooney's No.10 shirt at a Manchester United match, when Fowler plays, kids in orange caps dominate the galleries. "I loved golf from when I was three, started playing tournaments when I was four-and-a-half, and it was always a dream of mine to get out here on tour," Fowler adds.

STATS: Age: 24 World Ranking: 31 PGA Tour wins: One Best Major finish: T5, 2011 Open 2012 FedEx Cup: 28th PGA Tour earnings: \$8,579,172

DUSTIN JOHNSON LEARNING THINGS THE HARD WAY

When Dustin Johnson was 16, he was one of five boys bullied into taking part in a burglary. A gun was among the items stolen. The next day, he was persuaded by the bully, Steve Gillian, to use a fake ID to buy ammunition. Gillian later used the gun to kill a man. "It was more of a wrong-place, wrong-time thing," said Johnson. "Maybe a couple of bad decisions. But when you're a kid, you do that."

"Maybe I learned the hard way. But I learned everything on my own."

He approaches golf in the same way. Things happen. They cannot change. Learn. Move on. Do not repeat. It's been sound advice in the last few years. He led the 2010 US Open by three going into the final round; but shot 82. At the same year's US PGA, he had a one-shot lead going up the 18th, until incurring a two-shot penalty for grounding his club in a bunker. But it's water off a duck's back. "I try not to worry about things you

can't control, bad bounces," Johnson tells TG. "I always have a pretty positive attitude, don't get too mad. You can't blame anyone else but yourself. When you're on the course you're playing against the course. Sometimes the course beats you and sometimes it doesn't. It's just the way my mentality is. I don't let stuff bother me. Life's too short."

Johnson's most recent chance in the hunt to win a Major was the 2011 Open. He played in the final group with Darren Clarke and kept himself in the mix until the 14th, when he hit his second shot on the par 5 out of bounds.

In 2012, Johnson suffered a back injury that kept him sidelined for the Masters. But in just his second start back, he won the FedEx St Jude Classic. For 2013, Johnson's goals are simple. "Obviously playing the whole season," he said. "I'm looking forward to that and just trying to get better. Trying to compete a bit more. The events I played in 2012, I played really well so I'm definitely

proud about that, but I need to give myself a few more chances to win."

Johnson is hungry for more success, and with his distance and game, rightfully so. He was the only man to finish in the top 10 in all four FedEx Cup play-off events, a feat that was unmatched by all other players including McIlroy and Tiger Woods.

As a swashbuckling fans' favourite who has overcome his share of disappointment, Johnson seems to be a potential successor to Phil Mickelson, who went through a string of heartbreaking Major losses. Unsurprisingly, they are good friends. "I like his game and I like being around him," Mickelson says. "He's a fun guy to be around. He's very easygoing."

"If there's a mistake made he pretty much shakes it off within three steps," Johnson's caddie Bobby Brown tells us. "Nothing rattles him. I've never seen a temper out of him. He's got one of the biggest hearts of anybody you'll ever meet."

Chilling out
Johnson has one of the most relaxed attitudes to the game on tour.



STATS: Age: 28 World Ranking: 23 PGA Tour wins: Six Best Major finish: T2, 2011 Open 2012 FedEx Cup: 8th PGA Tour earnings: \$16,944,699

HUNTER MAHAN

'THERE IS ROOM TO IMPROVE EVERY DAY'

Hunter Mahan has five wins on the PGA Tour. He won twice early last year, he beat Rory McIlroy in the final of the WGC Matchplay and peaked at fourth in the world rankings. But then his form dipped and he was left out of Davis Love's Ryder Cup side. "It just sucked to miss out on all the fun," said the 30-year-old on Medinah.

A student of swing coach Sean Foley — along with Tiger Woods and Justin Rose — Mahan is his own toughest critic. "I'm still just trying to be the best golfer or person I can be," Mahan says. He's a detail man (Mahan had 20 pairs of shoes, all with matching outfits... when he was 10 years old). He can get down on himself when things aren't going well. But when he's on, he has one of the best swings in the game...

What's your inspiration for golf? I have my own. I inspire myself. I get motivated by guys I play with each week. Their work ethic. I have a lot of things I want to do in this game and I want to get better, so that's more motivating than anything.

You, Rickie, Dustin and Keegan are bringing new fans to golf; how do you view your generation? Golf never really had the best athletes. They all played football and baseball and basketball and other sports. Now good athletes

Dressed to impress
Mahan has always been a snappy dresser, and he takes that to the course.

are playing golf. You see it in their golf swings. They're not all the same anymore. They're different. Rickie Fowler raced motorcycles. Look at Dustin Johnson. He's a freak of an athlete. He's got huge hands, long arms, he's tall and he can jump through the ceiling.

Was there a eureka moment in your formative years when you knew golf was the one? Not a moment, something I just kept working at. I think as a kid you always dreamed about it. You just never know what it is you're doing, what you're feeling. So when you get out here you see yourself playing with everybody else, you get a better sense of what you're capable of.

What's your most common swing thought? Tempo for me, and keeping my sequence.

What do you make of the Rory and Tiger budding rivalry? I think that it's a great rivalry,

it's good for the game. It's a good challenge for Tiger, and it's a good motivator. It used to seem like only five guys could win a Major, and it seems like 20 could win a Major now.

What gives you enjoyment from golf? It's a never ending cycle, trying to become a better player. There's always room to improve every single day. It just never stops.

What were the biggest things you learned when you went from college to the PGA Tour?

To not try and be perfect. I figured all those guys on tour never missed a shot and that's not the case. Golf is just about getting it in the hole no matter how you are hitting it.

How do you prepare for Majors? You want to be rested, you want to physically be in an excited state and looking forward to it but physically not overworked. Your mind has to be the freshest because that's going to take the biggest toll.

Whose idea was the 'Golf Boys'? It wasn't mine! Bubba Watson really likes to do stuff like that. Rickie Fowler and I said that we'd be up for doing something like that too and it happened. It's been a totally freakish thing how popular it was. I guess it showed us in a different light.

What is a fact we wouldn't typically know about you? I watch a lot of the Cooking Channel. We try to do something that my wife, Kandi, and I can do together.



Sharp shooter
Bradley has used his belly putter to stunning effect — so what next?

KEEGAN BRADLEY

'MEDINAH JUST SMACKED ME IN THE FACE!'

With a steely stare and a ton of game, Keegan Bradley is arguably the best of the twenty-something Americans. He's only been on the PGA Tour for two years, but has already notched up a Major at his first attempt (2011 PGA), a WGC title (2012 Bridgestone) and made a stunning Ryder Cup debut at Medinah, where he had the best record on the American team (won three, lost one). But it hasn't all been plain sailing for the 26-year-old. When he left home he lived in a trailer park with his dad, sleeping on cushions on the kitchen table. And soon, he will need to hang up the belly putter with which he's won almost \$8 million...

How do you view the intensity you bring to golf? I'm very intense. There's no tournament or event that's bigger than anyone that I'm playing in at the certain time. It's just something that I've always had ever since I was little.

Biggest highlight of 2012? Winning in Akron (WGC) was awesome and also coming in third at the US PGA — contending, especially after winning the year before was satisfying.

What are your goals for 2013? I'm just going to go out and try and contend and win as many tournaments as I can. Win the Majors.

You've come a long way, very quickly; does it seem real? Sitting in the team room with Tiger and Phil and guys of that stature at Medinah, it kind of smacked me in the face as to where I am. Sometimes it's all happening so fast, you kind of don't catch it.

Career highlights so far? Playing in the Ryder Cup with Phil was up there. Him as a mentor, it was great. I've thought about it since I was probably five or six. I grew up watching my aunt Pat play on Solheim Cup teams, so it's been a dream of mine to be on a team like that.

You get on well with Phil, don't you? Playing with him helps me every week. I get in these games with Phil, and I've got more nerves in those than I do in the tournament. It's a great way for preparing me for the actual rounds. It's been great practice for the last couple of years.

You even got him to try a belly putter... how have you taken the proposed ban? I feel like the USGA has really put an X on our back and shone

a light on us, and I don't know if that's fair. I'm going to make a switch when I feel it's best for me. Whether that's tomorrow or in three years, we'll see. I just hope that people look at us for the type of players that we are and the accomplishments that we've had, and not because we use a belly putter.

What are your hobbies? Anytime I can watch Boston sports or fish. Patriots, Red Sox, Bruins.

Where do you like to fish? Anywhere. I do a lot in Jupiter in the ocean down in Florida. We fished a bunch when I was growing up in Vermont.

Do you have a common swing thought? I try not to have any swing thoughts while I'm out playing, none at all. That's the way you play best. **Best golf tip you've ever received?** That's hard for me to narrow down — I like to play with a lot of feel and stuff like that.

Favourite sport outside of golf? Basketball.

I don't play that much because I'm afraid I'm going to hurt myself — roll an ankle. But I love it. **If you weren't a pro golfer what else would you pursue?** I hope I'd not be living out of a trailer or something (laughs).

STATS: Age: 30 World Ranking: 26 PGA Tour wins: Five Best Major finish: T6, 2009 US Open 2012 FedEx Cup: 19th PGA Tour earnings: \$21,722,893

STATS: Age: 26 World Ranking: 13 PGA Tour wins: Three Best Major finish: Won, 2011 US PGA 2012 FedEx Cup: 21st PGA Tour earnings: \$7,669,258