

GRAEME McDOWELL

# Psychology of a winner

The people closest to the Northern Irishman throughout his formative years reveal what enables him to play at his best when it really matters

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**G**raeme McDowell is a winner. The more pressure he's under and the more important the moment, the better he performs. Whether it's taming a devilishly tough Pebble Beach in the 2010 US Open, taking down Tiger Woods at his own tournament (twice) or holing the winning putt in the Ryder Cup, G-Mac knows how to get the job done.

But you're not just born with the determination, positive mentality and nerves of steel to come through in clutch situations. These abilities have to be earned and honed through years of hard work.

To understand the man and golfer McDowell is today you have to go back to childhood. Even as a seven-year-old he was fiercely competitive when playing 'friendly' games with his younger brother Gary at the local pitch-and-putt, called the Himalayas course, in their home of Portrush in County Antrim, Northern Ireland.

This fighting spirit continued and developed as he started to play competitive matches at nearby Rathmore Golf Club. Graeme's father Kenny still remembers his son's first ever matchplay match, aged nine, as a 42-handicapper. He rounded out a seven-man team there with his brother Gary, a 45 at the time. Even then, Graeme had the tenacity to stare his competition in the eye and push his six-handicap opponent all the way to the 16th green before falling to him.

Twenty-one years later it was on the 16th green at Celtic Manor where McDowell made the pivotal birdie putt that led to him defeating Hunter Mahan on the very next hole and Europe regaining the Ryder Cup; an iconic moment in McDowell's career.

"He was always going to do something special but I didn't really know it was going to be that," Kenny said after his son's 2010 Ryder Cup heroics.

A tell-tale sign of things to come for Kenny was Graeme's accuracy in games with the



## Graeme McDowell factfile

Since turning pro in 2002 the Ulsterman has achieved much

**Age:** 33

**Born:** Portrush, Northern Ireland

**Residence:** Portrush and Orlando, Florida

**World ranking:** 15

**Pro wins:** Nine

**Majors:** One (2010 US Open)

**Ryder Cup appearances:** 2008,

2010 (winners), 2012 (winners)

**Ryder Cup record:** 5W-5L-2H

**European Tour earnings:**

€13,879,546 (18th all time)

**Awards:** 2010 European Tour

Golfer of the Year





**Quest to be the best** McDowell grooves his stroke under the critical eye of tour coach Pete Cowen.

local professional. He would line up Graeme and other youngsters from 100 yards out and tell them "closest to the pin wins a Mars bar". Graeme kept on winning and would get pushed back another 50 yards. "He ate a lot of Mars bars," says Kenny.

Rathmore's current captain and friend of the McDowell family, Eamon Donnelly, distinctly remembers a 10-year-old Graeme practising in the foulest of wind and rain while others were bundled up inside. "Even as a young fellow he was out hitting shots into the wind, seeing how the ball would react."

Along with his work ethic, Graeme's greatest attribute is his ability to hold his nerves together in the highest pressure situations. It's a quality all the great champions, especially in matchplay, have possessed; Seve Ballesteros, Tiger Woods and most recently Ian Poulter.

"He gets it from his mum (Marian)," McDowell's father Kenny says with conviction. "He digs deep and he always has, even when he was a boy."

Prior to turning pro in 2002, Graeme accepted a scholarship to play at the University of Alabama in America, starting in 1999. Much of it was made possible by a generous gesture by Chris Devlin, a fellow



**Oh dear, Hunter**  
The putt that won the Ryder Cup, 16th green, Celtic Manor, October 4, 2010.

## 'Graeme digs deep and he always has done, even when he was a boy. He gets that from his mum'

Northern Irish golfer from Ballymena, who gave up a portion of his own scholarship to ensure McDowell a spot.

A son's move to another continent would have been tough for any family, but in the grand scale, Kenny was excited for Graeme to make the move. "I was delighted for him, he was into golf and I was pleased he was going to get better, which he did obviously. So I was more than delighted for him to go. I can't say the same for his mum. She was worried in case he couldn't get a degree. She wanted him

to stay at Queens University in Belfast, which is the top University here in Northern Ireland, but I was more than happy for him to go."

To this day, he still hasn't completed his degree. He still has a semester left according to Kenny. However, the overall move gave McDowell a chance to play for a significant college team, acclimatise to America and tailor his skills to the type of courses he would play on the PGA Tour.

"He just had that will to win," says Alan Kaufman, McDowell's former Alabama golf coach. "He'd find a way." He found a way to winning the Haskins Award, the national college Player of the Year in 2002, his junior year at Alabama.

McDowell's positive attitude and willingness to continue learning are other sure reasons for his success in golf. At the 2012 Masters, McDowell reflected candidly on the negative mindset he had during his first round 75, showing total self-awareness and



**Game face** McDowell's appetite for a challenge has helped see him stare down the likes of Tiger Woods.

the desire to return to his usual positivity.

"I guess I get disappointed with myself more when my attitude is wrong," he said. "So I reset that attitude and came out on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday and was a little bit better." The result was rounds of 72, 71, and 68 that fired him into a tie for 12th.

The resetting of his attitude was a clear decision of determination that helped McDowell move in the right direction. "They're the same in their personality, because Kenny is always very positive and very keen," Rathmore's former captain and current honorary secretary Robbie Doherty explains. "When Kenny sets his sights on doing something he will do so and normally achieves it, and I can see that in Graeme."

Graeme hasn't forgotten the importance of the University of Alabama and Portrush in his career. At his former college, University of Alabama in Birmingham, McDowell hosts a tournament called the Shoal Creek Intercollegiate. It's a competition but also a



**Role model** McDowell's drive has taken him to the top, a quality he passes on to his home club juniors.

time where aspiring pro golfers at McDowell's former college can talk to and learn from him. "He comes back every year and is very supportive of the students and interested in what they're doing," says Kaufman.

McDowell also sets a good example to golfers and youngsters back home in Northern Ireland. Doherty believes it's important for the young folk to see that Rathmore and Portrush are where Graeme started, just the same as them, and if they apply themselves to the game they can achieve as much as he has.

Donnelly observes a strong interaction between Graeme and the younger ranks at Rathmore. "He has a great rapport with the young members here, the newer ones," he comments. "He encourages them and he's put Rathmore on the map."

And Graeme always makes the effort to keep traditions going when he returns to his roots. His Uncle Samuel (Uel) Loughrey, a member of Rathmore and greenkeeper at Portrush, was instrumental in teaching Graeme the mechanics of the game in his formative years. When Graeme visits, Uel and Kenny team up to play a fourball against Graeme and Gary at Rathmore and Royal Portrush. When Uel and Kenny win, Uel makes it known to all at the jovial confines of Rathmore's clubhouse that the young whipper-snappers owe the old fellows a pint.

This is the same clubhouse of locals who, when American golf is on during the wee hours of Monday morning, are up and about cheering on their man as he's in contention. Graeme often calls the club to say hello to old friends after victories.

Kenny values his son's rapport with others as much as all his professional wins and accolades. "Everybody says he's such a good guy, you know? I'm glad of that because that's just as important to me as anything else."



## Play your best under pressure

Sports psychologist Karl Steptoe on positive practice

We may not be able to see what is going on in players' heads, but subsequent actions and body language give us a good idea of how performance may be affected. Negative self talk, tension and fear become very visible with all golfers displaying their own unique reactions to pressure situations. Some quicken their pace in an attempt to get the shot over and done, others magnify the importance of the situation by taking extra time, deliberating over shot selection and strategy suggesting that it requires greater attention and effort than normal.

Great 'clutch' performers like Graeme McDowell are able to meet the demands of the most pressurised situations by maintaining strong routines, presenting positive body language and interpreting the situation as a challenge to relish.

Pressure is a very personal analysis of events. A club golfer can feel as nervous holding a medal winning putt as a tour pro feels holding on to win a tournament. But we can all learn from the best:

**Routines** – Rather than solely focusing on technique at the range take time at the end of every basket to practise full pre-shot routines that include positive self talk and controlled breathing exercises to combat negative feelings.

**Rehearse** – Create goals in practice. Hitting 10 shots in a row to an imaginary fairway recreates a sense of importance.

**Recognise Opportunities** – Before each shot you must clearly identify and state the opportunities. This will promote the appropriate sense of challenge that will in turn encourage positive thoughts, feelings and body language.

**Role Models** – Use images of players such as Graeme to model the desired behaviours associated with confidence and excitement to meet the challenge.

■ **Read about how Graeme McDowell rejuvenated his short game using a change of mental approach with golf psychologist Bob Rotella on page 114.**



## Father's pride Dad Kenny on his son

"I can't describe it," Kenny says of his pride for Graeme's success. "I'm just so glad that he does so well at what he does."

The highlight for Kenny remains being present for his son's first Major victory on Father's Day at Pebble Beach in 2010. "It was just unbelievable, one of the best feelings I've ever had. He's always been a

good wind player and coming through and winning the Major was icing on the cake. I always say when he gets in a situation he doesn't do much wrong. Somebody's going to have to come up and take it off him, but I never think he'll lose it."

Just as memorable was the occasion when Kenny drove through the night, essentially the length of Ireland, to see his son compete in his first Irish Open as a professional, at Fota Island near Cork in 2002. Kenny got there early. The security

guard invited him and a friend to cups of hot tea in a car park hut. The long trek was worth it; Graeme would shoot a 65.

He was also there to see Graeme win the World Challenge hosted by Tiger Woods for the second time in three years in December. During that final rainy Sunday the American crowd huddled up in weatherproofs, gloves, and umbrellas. Kenny was happy walking the fairways in his shorts and tennis shoes. "Great Portrush weather," it was, in his estimation.