

Johnston: Lefty adds to legacy

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AUGUSTA - There was no drama this time. Phil Mickelson eliminated that.

On this day, there would be no need for tournament-clinching putts, no holding off hard-charging, shot-making opponents, no shedding of labels.

Mickelson proved he could win like that two years ago, when he stood strong on the back nine of the Masters, sank the putt no one thought he could make and slipped on his first major title, which came in the form of a green jacket.

On Sunday, Mickelson added to his collection and his reputation.

He's no longer 0-for-Phil, the young man who had "The Best Player Never To Win A Major" permanently pinned to his back for a decade. He is one of the world's premier players, with three victories in the past nine majors and two in a row, a guy whose place in "The Big Five" was cemented with another Masters victory.

This time he took his lead and embraced it. He played with maturity and moxie, with strength and savvy. He stood strong on his Sunday afternoon stroll, making his shots, enjoying his walk with Fred Couples, his playing partner for the final round.

There was no pressure, no doubt, no fear. His shots continued to find their mark, giving him plenty of reason to flash his famous smile. Gradually, his challengers began to miss theirs, giving Mickelson confidence, allowing him to pull away, to assure everybody that this time, there would be no major malfunction.

At the turn, it appeared Mickelson and Couples would match one another drive for drive, chip for chip, putt for putt, two former Masters champs out to showcase their skills, their knowledge, their desire.

At 46, Couples was determined to make history, as he made a run to supplant Jack Nicklaus as the oldest man to win a Masters. His putter remained true through the early holes and he kept pace with Mickelson.

They birdied No. 7, both going to 5 under, but then Mickelson conquered No. 8 with another bird, breaking the tie. Couples' age began to catch up and his game began to fall behind.

Saturday's rains had pushed back the third round, adding hours and holes to nearly every golfer's day. Couples had walked 22 holes to that point and had nine more to play. Putting troubles quickly festered and Mickelson strolled through the brisk April air three shots free and clear, with a lead that wasn't going to be challenged.

"You know, it's a humbling experience out there because you're trying so hard," Couples said.

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"But just, you know, some of these putts were left in great spots and I just couldn't make any of them."

Two years ago, Mickelson casually walked up the incline that is the 18th fairway, knowing that he had to make a putt to win. This time, with his second shot about a row deep in the fans, amidst chairs and bags and sunburned legs, Mickelson knew all he had to do was knock it close.

He could afford two putts. His lead was that secure.

"It was a great feeling walking up there, knowing that I had the tournament in hand," Mickelson said.

When his final putt dropped, Mickelson took a couple of steps toward the middle of the green, put his right arm around Couples, hugged caddie Jim Mackay and walked to meet his family. There was no raising his putter over his head, no flowing tears, no jumping for joy.

It was a subdued celebration, almost businesslike.

It was like he had been there before.

It was like he would be there again.

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