



Tom Daley,
Plymouth Golf
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Tom Daley's about to become Britain's youngest ever male Olympian, but could the European champion swap diving for driving...?

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Tom Daley

boy wonder play golf? After rearranging our meet with Daley so as to avoid a fixture clash with his Bafta engagement, it was time to navigate the A-roads of the South-West to find out.

I arranged to meet Tom and his father, Robert, at Staddon Heights Golf Club in Plymstock, which, handily for the Daleys, is within putting distance of Tom's grandfather's house. What isn't so handy is the vicious Atlantic gale that's threatening to turn my week's worth of stubble a Santa Claus shade of white.

I ring Robert and change the venue of the lesson to the more insulated local driving range, much to the disgust of one elderly member who overhears my lame excuse. "It's only a bloody mild south-westerly..." he snaps, with pure disgust. After having my masculinity questioned by a hardy octogenarian, I head for the sanctuary of Plymouth Golf Centre and an appointment with a young man who's being tipped by many to be in the running for an Olympic medal.

My only previous encounter with a so-called 'child prodigy' was a few years ago at Bethnal Green's atmospheric boxing venue, York Hall, when I spotted Ronnie O'Sullivan at the ringside. Admittedly, by then, 'The Rocket' was a somewhat gnarled 30-year-old with a plethora of titles under his belt and a few 'issues', rather than a budding genius of the green baize with the world at his feet. My efforts to coax an interview out of the then two-time world champion were met by an off-handed rebuttal and a menacing stare down from his burly minder that

'Arghhh, who dropped that banana skin...'



"I can't do Thursday I'm afraid, I'm presenting a Bafta award up at the London Palladium that night," says our potential Teach The World guinea pig, over the phone.

As excuses go, it ain't a bad one. And, when you consider that luminaries such as Louise Redknapp, The Charlatans and Phil 'The Power' Taylor have previously featured in *GOLFPUNK'S* Celebrity Swing School, it's a wholly plausible reason for postponing one's induction into GP's hall of fame. But, when you take into account the person making the excuse is a 13-year-old schoolboy from Plymouth, maybe I'm just being politely mugged off.

However, the subject in question, Tom Daley, is anything but your average schoolboy. At an age when most kids are making dens, playing football or hanging around on street corners with a 10-pack of Bensons and a can of cider, Devon's European Champion diver is preparing to make history by becoming Great Britain's youngest ever male Olympian.

Daley clinched his place in Beijing this summer in the 10-metre platform dive discipline after his stunning gold-medal-winning performance at the Euros in Eindhoven in March. When he slips on his trunks in China in August, Daley will be 14 years and 81 days young, beating the previous record set by another diver, Fred Hodges, who was obviously well past his sell-by date at an ancient 15 years and 94 days when he performed for Hitler and Co. in Berlin in 1936.

But splashing around at the local swimming baths is one thing; could the

left me on the verge of enduring the type of embarrassing accident that I hadn't experienced since I overdid the dandelion and burdock at nipper school. Admittedly, I was just blowing the froth off my seventh pint of the evening when I made my 'polite' request to Ronnie, but that's by the by.

However, my fears of encountering a precocious kid with extraordinary talent who'd been spoilt rotten by premature fame were unfounded. Tom Daley is as nice a lad as you'd wish to meet.

As I hand Tom his spanking new set of Callaway clubs in the Golf Centre car park, he's like a kid at Christmas and can't wait to have a thrash with his new toys. But he'll have to wait. The shop's doing a brisk school holiday trade and the well-wishers are emerging from the shadows to greet the local boy done good. And Plymouth's prodigal son and his father have a kind word for each and every one.

In the practice area we're met by golf tutor, Scott Macaskill, whose job it is to transfer Tom's talent for diving to the tee. But, judging by Tom's initial clumsy attempts, Scott's got his work cut out.

His first effort flies sideways off the shaft and ricochets against the wall of the practice bay. His second ball almost strikes

SWING THOUGHTS With Scott Macaskill, golf pro at Plymouth Golf Centre

I altered the way I normally teach because Tom was a total beginner. I didn't want to complicate things with lots of swing thoughts so I just kept it simple and appealed to his natural sporting ability, which he of course has got in abundance. Most sports people, if they are good at one thing, can more easily transfer skills and do well at others.

He got the grip and the posture straight away. When I teach posture I usually tell people to get on the balls of their feet and imagine that they are about to dive into a swimming pool, but I thought he might have picked me up on that so I kept quiet.

Tom was guilty of trying to hit the ball too hard, which is a basic, normal fault for a beginner, especially young lads who have got loads of energy and want to knock it into next week.

When he relaxed he was totally different. He had a lot of natural talent and could definitely be a good golfer if he wasn't so focused on his diving. That seems to take up nearly all of his time, but now he's got a set of clubs we hope to see him down here on his rare days off. When he got everything right he hit shots that you wouldn't have expected from a total beginner. He's got some promise.



Maybe the superglue was a silly idea...



Driver; long Diver; short



his left ankle, while shot three is a six-yard duffer. "At least it's straight," says GP snapper, Sam.

When someone's so good at a particular sport, there's almost a perverse satisfaction to be had in seeing him or her struggle to master another, even if the subject in question is a mere slip of a lad who really could do with a bit of encouragement. Not least from his old man who's happy to rib his boy as another wild lash screws off to the right. "Shut up Dad!" he yells at his giggling father. But Tom is anything but a stroppy 'Kevin the Teenager'. Tom's happy to laugh at himself and enjoys the friendly joshing with his father. The pair are refreshingly close. Tom no doubt realises how precious his family is; two years ago Robert came close to death after being diagnosed with a brain tumour. It's heart-warming to be in the company of such a friendly, well-mannered kid, especially in an era when the red tops tend to demonise teenagers. But anyway, let's stick to golf...

Despite demonstrating such finesse from the 10-metre board, Tom's golf swing is more than a touch agricultural. However, like all successful sportspeople, Tom's desire to succeed is frightening. Let's not forget that this is a boy who held his nerve to produce three successive near-perfect dives at the European Championships to pip Germany's World Cup-winner, Sascha Klein, and secure the title. While many kids his age would have slung the clubs to one side by now after so many disappointing results, Tom's fully focused on improving.

At first, Scott had just concentrated on ensuring that Tom's grip and posture were correct before allowing him to swing away. However, it's now time for the hands-on approach. Scott picks up a seven-iron and effortlessly crashes it down the fairway. Tom's impressed; he wants a piece of that.

It's now getting technical. Scott runs through the starting and finishing positions of the swing, and physically manoeuvres Tom into textbook postures. Tom's listening



'Just forget the ball's there and swing. Oh, hang on, it's not...'



Scott's bigger is better policy takes hold

intently. It's as though he's up on the boards with his coach learning a new dive.

Tom's swing improves markedly. The results remain average to say the least, but then – 'whoosh!' – the ball flies straight out of the sweetspot. Even his Dad is happy to applaud. "Great shot, son," he cries. Tom turns round with a grin as wide as the range of nationalities in the Arsenal first team. "That felt great," he beams.

The improvement continues, and then moves up a notch after Scott introduces the 'smack bag'. For those not in the know, a smack bag looks a bit like a pouffe, but really it's as the name suggests – a leather bag filled with all manner of soft textiles. And, yes, the idea is to 'smack it'. Tom does so with relish. Snapper Sam immediately moves in for a photo opportunity. "Give it some welly, Tom," says our less-than-technically-minded photographer.

It seems to have the desired effect as Tom fizzes another out of the middle after swapping bag for ball; he's enjoying himself now. And that's what it's all about for him today – enjoyment. When someone trains six hours a day, as Tom does during school holidays, it's hardly feasible to take your golf game to any sort of level. But if Tom feels the urge to dust off the sticks on his one day off each week and have a fun-filled whack up at the range, or at nearby Staddon Heights, then we've done our job.

"It was really good fun," says Tom afterwards. "I didn't think I'd get the hang of it, but it started getting easier towards the end. It really felt good when I started hitting the ball properly. But when you want to play a sport you have to practise it constantly. I was getting frustrated with myself at first and wanted to do it again and again because I wanted to hit the ball as far as possible."

Even though he's got his head well and truly screwed on for someone of his tender years, I'm still wondering

how he'll cope with the pressure of the Olympics. I needn't have worried.

"I'm just going there for the experience and to have fun and I'm not even thinking of medals to be honest," he says.

"To go to the Olympics is amazing. It's come from a lot of hard work and sacrifice. All the parties I could have been going to or the times I could have been going out after school with friends and I've always had to say 'no I'm going to training'."

There's plenty of time for parties Tom; the sacrifice will be worthwhile when you're out in Beijing on the biggest stage of all. And, if the pressure becomes too much, there are plenty of golf courses and smack bags in China. **GP**



Either a good shot or a chorus of Ave Maria

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