



The Belfry, September 24,
1989: Christy's finest hour

REPRESENTING...
For the golf punks all across the world

Christy O'Connor Jnr

If you hooked up with Ryder Cup legend Christy O'Connor Jnr and failed to drop THAT two-iron into the conversation, it'd be like grabbing a coffee with Neil Armstrong and skirting around the subject of his lunar landing...

Words: Richard Lenton

O'CONNOR JNR GOLFING CV

European Tour wins:

1975 Martini International and Carroll's Irish Open champion
1989 Jersey Open champion
1992 Dunhill British Masters champion
Other wins:
1973 Irish Matchplay champion
1974 Zambian Open champion
1975 Irish Matchplay Champion and Irish Dunlop Tournament winner
1976 Sumrie-Bournemouth Better-Ball winner with Eamonn Darcy
1977 Irish Matchplay Champion and Irish Dunlop Tournament winner
1978 Sumrie-Bournemouth Better-Ball champion with Eamonn Darcy
1990 555 Kenya Open winner
European Seniors Tour wins:
1999 and 2000 Senior British Open champion
Senior PGA Tour wins:
1999 State Farm Senior Classic and Foremost Insurance Championship winner

The Belfry, Sunday September 24, 1989. It's the final day of the 28th Ryder Cup, and Irish hero Christy O'Connor Jnr is facing the biggest moment of his golfing life. His nip and tuck singles match with future world No 1 Fred Couples is all square heading to the 18th; a famously treacherous hole with a river running at right angles to the fairway.

Holders Europe currently lead 12-10, but the Stars & Stripes are dominating the leaderboard in the remaining matches after America's customary last-day charge in the singles. It's 14 years since the silver-haired O'Connor has experienced the pressure cooker atmosphere of the Ryder Cup. Could he cope with the weight of expectation? The hopes of an entire continent rest on the 41-year-old veteran's shoulders as he stands on the 18th tee.

With an intimidating stretch of water in front of him, Christy takes a cautious approach. His 231-yard drive nestles safely on the fairway, but he's left himself a daunting second into the green on this monster par-four.

Couples is less circumspect; ripping his drive towards the fairway bunker, and watching, wide-eyed, as it draws viciously to a perfect position just 150 yards from the flag. For a man whose natural shot is to fade the ball, it's an awesome strike against the grain. Advantage America.

O'Connor walks slowly across the tree-lined path to the fairway, gathering his thoughts along the way, while Couples strides out like a man in charge of his, and his team's, destiny.

"You've got a carry of 196 over the water, into a slight wind, and it's 240 to the flag," says caddy Matthew Byrne to O'Connor, who's staring intently at the target. He pulls a five-wood from his bag... "No way," says Byrne. "You've just hit the best shot of your life on 17 with a two-iron – 266 yards downwind. Trust me Christy, it's a two-iron shot."

O'Connor, looking aghast, replies, "you're joking me? All you're looking at with a two-iron is water and ducks." But Byrne is adamant. "You need to hit it dead straight, which you can with your two-iron. You're a great long iron player. If you make a full turn, I

promise you, you'll thank me."

O'Connor prays to the man above, before firing his ball spirit level straight, 20-yards over the water and up onto the green. It comes to a standstill just three-and-a-half feet from the flag. He pumps his right fist as the roars reach crescendo levels across this usually quiet corner of the West Midlands.

Couples is visibly shaken, but he's only a nine-iron and a putt away from a crucial half. However, in golf, there's pressure, then there's the Ryder Cup. Couples, looking decidedly unsteady, shanks his ball 30-yards to the right of the dancefloor.

After chipping onto the green, Couples has a five-footer for par. It slides an inch to the right of the hole and the devastated American concedes. O'Connor removes his white cap, flings his arms out, leans back and thanks God – and his caddy – for giving him the strength to write his name into golfing folklore in what proves to be his last ever shot at the Ryder Cup.

Europe went on to retain the trophy thanks to Jose Maria Canizares's last hole victory over Ken Green in the very next match, which secured a tie. However, Christy's two-iron remains the seminal moment of a monumental contest.

A few weeks after his Ryder Cup exploits, Christy donated the famous two-iron to a charity cancer auction, but the club – which raised £50,000 – was soon back in his bag when the buyer graciously returned it to its rightful owner. However, in 1990, Christy's car – golf clubs included – was stolen. The motor was later recovered, but the famous two-iron hasn't been seen since.

Towards the end of 1990, during a celebration party after O'Connor's victory at the Kenya Open, an elderly Irish missionary nun approached O'Connor. "Would you be so kind as to give me your two-iron for charity?" she asked, sweetly. The golfer explained the theft, and that the two-iron he was using wasn't the same club from The Belfry. The nun thought for a moment, then replied, "ah well, who'll know?" It's rumoured that that two-iron has since been auctioned far more times than it was struck.

Christy O'Connor Jnr was born in the small village of Knocknacarra, which lies just to the west of Galway City, on August 19, 1948.

"It's a lovely old farming village right on the sea and next to the golf course," says Christy, who I had the pleasure of meeting – and caddying for – just a couple of weeks after his 60th birthday at his brand new Oceanico golf course near Amendoeira, Portugal.

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“I FELT THE SHOT THE SECOND I HIT IT. IT CARRIED 215 YARDS. HALLELUJAH!”

“Unfortunately, none of us could afford membership of the course, so everybody in the village would put a candle in a bean tin and chip to it. We played for half a penny, which was a lot, let me tell you. And if you were good enough, there was a little shop, smaller than a local store, where you could spend it on whatever you wanted.”

The village was a hot-bed of talent, led by Christy’s uncle, Christy O’Connor Snr, who went on to play in 10 Ryder Cups.

“There were about 12 scratch players in the village, but they couldn’t really afford to play. They were mainly poor farmers, who would play on Mondays when they were allowed, but none of them were members of the club,” adds Christy, as I try in vain to line up his putt on the first hole of his sensational course at Amendoeira.

“My uncle played with them and then became assistant to the professional at the club, and from there on he practiced really, really hard, going from club to club teaching, as I later did.”

In his late teens, Christy broadened his horizons significantly – and suffered the fright of his young life – by crossing the Irish Sea and becoming assistant professional to Galway boy Kevin Wallace in South Shields, County Durham.

“It was my first time out of Ireland, and I’ll never forget my first plane ride,” he adds.

“The plane was one of those propeller jobs and when we got part way up in the sky there was suddenly no noise – I thought it had stopped. Luckily there was a very kind man sat next to me who put his hand on my shoulder and said, ‘it’s okay, I felt exactly the same on my first flight. Everything’s fine.’”

After a year in Newcastle, Christy’s uncle asked him to become his assistant at Royal Dublin. At the time, O’Connor Jnr wasn’t considered much of a prospect; in fact, when he announced to the members of the club back in Galway that he was turning professional, one member said, ‘Christy, prepare for starvation!’

However, under his uncle’s guidance, Christy’s talent really began to blossom. In fact, it’s rumoured that Christy Snr literally forced him to practise for hours on end.

“I did practise really hard and I then became a club professional myself in a place called Carlow. I practised solidly for 10 years, all day long, even into the night until I was good enough to win a tournament,” he adds.

Christy spent most of 1968 and 1969 in Holland, teaching the Dutch youth team, who went on to win the European Youth Team Championship in 1969. It was an impressive notch on Christy’s CV, and his professional breakthrough was just around the corner.

“I returned to Carlow in 1971 and won my first tournament that year, the Irish Matchplay,” adds Christy.

“Then I won the Martini International and the Irish Open title in 1975 (with a record score of 22-under), which were both on the main European Tour.”

That same year, 1975, O’Connor made his Ryder Cup debut for Bernard Hunt’s Great Britain & Ireland team in Pennsylvania. However, at the time, the competition was a shadow of the spectacular event that it became when GB and Ireland metamorphosed into Team Europe. His opening match was a huge shock to the system.

“Eamon Darcy and I played the world number one and the number two in the fourballs on the first day – Tom Weiskopf and Lou Graham, the US Open champion. On the front nine we went out in only 31 shots, yet we found ourselves three down.”

The Irish duo went on to lose 3&2, and the following day O’Connor and John O’Leary lost 5&3 to Weiskopf and Johnny Miller in the foursomes. The 27-year-old O’Connor wouldn’t play another shot in the Ryder Cup for 14 years.

The following year, Christy contended for the Open during the opening three rounds, before falling away on the fourth day as Johnny Miller pipped a young Seve Ballesteros to the title at Royal Birkdale. It seemed as though the only way was up for the new star of Irish golf, but he then suffered a major lull in form.

“I let my career go a little bit if I’m honest,” he adds. “Around 1976, 1977 I stopped practising. I thought I knew it all. I felt I could get by on talent alone without having to work hard at it. But then I

The 1989 Ryder Cup victors at the Belfry



Christy starts giant Mexican wave after winning



saw the light and worked hard to get it back.

"Although I wasn't winning often, I was playing well again and I had a good chance to win at The Open in 1983 when Tom Watson won it again."

He eventually finished in a tie for eighth with, among others, Nick Faldo. However, it wasn't enough to squeeze him onto the plane bound for Florida where Tony Jacklin's inspired European team pushed the Americans to the wire in the Ryder Cup. Two years later, the pair fell out when Jacklin overlooked O'Connor for a wildcard in favour of Jose Rivero, even though the Irishman was well above the Spaniard in the standings having only missed out on automatic qualification by a measly £114.

"I really thought I was going to play," he adds.

"I never even dreamt of not being picked. I was so good that year, I was winning tournaments and I contended for The Open again. It was a massive disappointment. I believe it was a consultation between two players and the captain to get other players in the team. That's what I heard later on.

"I was very disappointed because two of the players that were picked were not playing well. That put a huge hole in my career. Looking back I could have played in five Ryder Cup teams. However, sometimes a kick in the tail does you no harm. It gets you to go forward and practise and I wanted to go further."

Christy missed out by a whisker once again in 1987, but his moment finally arrived two years later when he was handed a wildcard by Jacklin.

"It was a very different experience in 1989. Of course Jack Nicklaus had been complaining for ages that Britain & Ireland couldn't handle the Americans, so it became Team Europe. In fact I think the competition would have died a death without the shake up. Back then the Britain & Ireland team were more like club professionals. They were good players in their own right, but they needed another job to sustain them. The Tour wasn't giving them enough support.

"But then all of a sudden we had the Ballesteros's, the Pinero's, Canizares, Langer from Germany. It was a very good side.

"I have to give Tony Jacklin credit. He was the captain who flew the players first class, the caddies first class, stayed in the best hotels, we dressed well. Everything was to make us equal with the Americans. They had a shock. They knew we could play but they didn't realise we were so organised."

O'Connor was arguably in the form of his life heading into the '89 Ryder Cup, having won on tour for the first time since 1975 at that

CHRISTY'S COURSE DESIGNS

Over the past 16 years Christy has turned much of his attention to golf course architecture, and his portfolio now consists of over 30 courses throughout Ireland and Europe. This has earned him a reputation as one of the finest golf course architects in the country, so much so that his talent and expertise are now being sought on an international level. Some of his projects include Mount Wolseley in Tullow Co. Carlow, the magnificent new course at Headfort, Kells Co. Meath, Galway Bay Golf and Country Club, Co. Galway and most recently PGA National, Palmerstown House, Naas, Co. Kildare.

year's Jersey Open.

"I had played superbly all year, I really had. I probably could have won another couple of tournaments that year. I was playing so well I wasn't scared of anyone."

So how did he feel standing over THAT two-iron?

"I was my own psychologist, and I talked to myself inside. Standing over the shot I felt good. I had my uncle at The Belfry that week, which was a huge help, and he'd been telling me things all morning. I had a good feeling. Number one, there was actually no grass on the lie – it was bone hard and dry, which I love. I used to practise on seaside ground so I was used to playing from that type of lie. I loved it. I could come into the ball very sharply and the one thing that I wanted was to make sure I got the carry. I felt the shot the second I hit it. Perfect. I carried it about 215 yards and then I ran up the rest. Hallelujah!"

After seeing his friend inspire Europe to retain the Ryder Cup, Dermot Kelly, a Limerick banker, accomplished balladeer and former captain of the Lahinch Golf Club, composed 'The Ballad of Christy's Two Iron'. And it went a little something like this...

*'The Ryder Cup of '89, the crowds were big, the weather fine
Men from Europe went to play, the golfers from the USA
Christy Junior from Galway City, Ronan, Seve, Cacavechee
Raymond Floyd & all the rest, ready to prove who was the best
But No.2 came roarin' in, it hugged the flag, it kissed the pin,
Oh Holy God it's nearly in, said smilin' Christy Junior.'*

Just a small point, Dermot, but surely 'Cacavechee' should have read 'Calcavechia...?'

In 1992 Christy was crowned British Masters champion to cap a stellar career on the regular tour, and he went on to fend off such luminary figures as Tom Watson and Lee Trevino en route to back-to-back Senior Open titles in 1999 and 2000. However, the latter two victories were in the wake of his teenage son Darren's tragic death in a car crash in September 1998. Darren was the reigning all-Ireland U17 champion, and earlier that fateful day he'd finished runner-up in the U21 event to prove that the O'Connor magic was very much in the blood.

"If I had to pick a tournament that means the most it would be when I won the Kenya Open," adds Christy.

"It wasn't a big tournament, but I had all the family with me, and it was the last time everybody was there before my son's death. That makes that tournament very special." **GP**