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## Hale Irwin, 65, talks golf's toughest tournament, lessons from his dying father, and why he believes in ghosts

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Nick Faldo says, "He's the best ballstriker I ever saw," referring not to Hogan, Nicklaus or Woods but to Hale Irwin, he of 65 PGA and Champions Tour wins. "I once saw him hit a one-yard draw. On purpose!" Irwin's reply — "That's nice of Nick, but that was back when you could really move the Balata ball..." — is typical Irwin, the model of Midwestern modesty. If he's understated about his game, Irwin is an overachiever when it comes to our national championship, which he's won three times. "The U.S. Open brought out the best in me, excited me, really suited my game," he says. "I loved it, just like I loved playing for my country [in the Ryder Cup]." Twenty years after his last Open win, at age 45, the native Kansan reflects on his Open prowess, his old man and why today's young pros just don't get it.

**GM:** The final round of the U.S. Open always falls on Father's Day. What lessons did you learn from your dad, Hale Sr.?

**Irwin:** Two big things. My dad was not a conversationalist. He dispensed wisdom, not words. He lived through wars and the Depression, when deeds meant more than words. But he told me, "Learn to speak," because he couldn't talk that well. He felt inadequate about that. But his actions spoke volumes. The other lesson: "Don't start something you can't finish." That stayed with me. I remember playing the Florida Citrus Open in Orlando in '76. I opened with a 74, which was high for that course. I was tired. I'd played a lot. I told an official I wanted to withdraw, went in to clean out my locker, and it felt ... wrong. I could hear my dad: "Don't do it." I kept playing and figured if I missed the cut, at least I hadn't quit. I shot a second-round 64, then two 66's on the weekend and won a four-hole playoff. I went from withdrawing to winning. That put a nail in the quit coffin — dead and buried. You never give up.

**Were you and your dad close?**

I can still hear his car coming up the driveway. A hug and kiss, and grab the baseball to play catch. Wow, it's amazing you asked about him. I had a dream last night that he came back to see me play, and I never dream about my dad. Maybe he knew we'd be talking. I don't believe in coincidences. Things happen for a reason.

**Growing up in Kansas, you taught yourself to play on a 9-holer with sand greens. But you loved football, too.**

I was 9 or 10 playing on a neighbor's yard against kids bigger and older than me. I'd go home with a bloody nose, my mom would clean it, and I'd go right back out to play more. That's how you learn — by competing with bigger, stronger kids. By testing yourself.

**Your family moved to Colorado. Though you were a fine golfer, you received a football scholarship — not bad for a skinny kid who looked like an insurance salesman.**

My mom and dad didn't have money, and no one came knocking on the door with a golf scholarship, so I played football. I wasn't big. It was like a pebble hitting a mountain. But hit that mountain enough and it comes down.

**Did you talk trash on the football field?**

Not really, because I always wanted an edge. Disrespecting opponents makes them grow in their own eyes. Don't add fuel to the fire. But when I was disrespected, I let guys know.

**Speaking of brutality, let's talk "The Massacre at Winged Foot" — your first U.S. Open win, in 1974. You won at 7-over-par. Is that the hardest setup you've ever seen?**

Yes. I remember grabbing that rye-grass rough. It was 15 inches long. And on the greens, you wanted a 30-footer uphill over a 10-footer above the hole. Jack Nicklaus, the greatest player ever, putted off the first green! The players moaned about how hard it was, and I thought, Well, there goes about three-quarters of the field. I just tried to make pars — which felt like birdies — and accept some bogeys.

**How would today's pros do on that setup, with modern equipment?**

Something over-par still wins. They hit it farther [today], but you still have to hit the fairway, and you're not reaching the green from the rough.

**Ten years later, the Open was back at Winged Foot. You led entering Sunday, trying to win it for your father, who was on his deathbed with prostate cancer. How badly did you want it?**

It was 10 years later on the same course, so there was a romance to it. I shot 69 on Saturday and called my mom. She said Dad wouldn't last much longer. I went out Sunday to win it for him. But I had built this huge mountain, too big to climb. I shot a 79. I played with [eventual champion] Fuzzy Zoeller. I won't say hostile, but the crowd was for him. I felt I was letting my dad down, I wanted it so badly. He died one or two weeks later.

**Did you two grow closer in the months leading up to his death?**

My dad opened up like I'd never seen. He told stories about being a young man — 19, 20 — in the Depression. How he left Oklahoma for Seattle with the clothes on his back and hopped trains, knocked on doors, worked mines, walked ridge lines. He called it "being a bum." He was with two other young guys. Lord knows what they went through; people look to hurt young kids. Ask yourself, "Could I set out with nothing in my pocket — no money, no car, no cell phone — and make it from Oklahoma to Seattle?" It's amazing what his generation endured.

**I couldn't find this golf course without the GPS.**

That's my point. We're soft today.

**Was your dad in your thoughts at Medinah?**

Absolutely. I hadn't won since 1985. From '86-'89 I played horrible, distracted golf. I'd started a design company. I put golf second. So in the winter of '89, I said to myself, "You're approaching 45. Let's make 1990 special. The time is now." My game was fine, but my mind was confused. I'd forgotten how to think like a winner. Good things started happening. Quality shots. Better focus. Two weeks before Medinah, I had a dream that I won. Again, there are no coincidences.

**You started Sunday four strokes behind co-leaders Mike Donald and Billy Ray Brown. You shot a back-nine 31. Were you going for broke?**

Not at all. On the 11th tee, I was in 16th place. My goal was simple: Make the top 15 and get invited back. I believe in setting attainable goals that are just out of reach. "Birdie this hole," not "pass 15 guys and win!" I birdied 11 and said, "Okay, let's go for a top-10 finish." Then I birdied 12. Then 13. Then 14! All of a sudden, if I make birdie on 18, I post 8-under [for the tournament] and tie the leaders, who are an hour behind me. On 18, I stood over that 45-foot [birdie] putt and had a good feeling. As my ball reached the crest seven feet from

the hole, I realized, "My god, it's going in!"

**Your excited reaction became a classic U.S. Open moment, in part because it seemed so uncharacteristic. Why'd you go nuts?**

I didn't realize I was doing it until it happened. I saw the people clapping and applauding. It was share time. I had to share the feeling! I was 45, hadn't won in five years, had been in 16th place. How do you play the last eight holes of a U.S. Open at 5-under? It led to this huge release of emotion. It felt like a football game.

**You watched the leaders. Mike Donald bogeyed the par-4 18th, forcing an 18-hole Monday playoff. What stands out about the playoff?**

His one big mistake. I'm down one [stroke]. We get to the tee on 18 [a par-4]. All day, Mike was using this metal-wood to hit fairway after fairway. He couldn't miss. I'm thinking, Mike, hit the driver! Hit the driver! And I'll be damned: On 18, he pulls driver and hooks it in the trees. I'm asked about the greatest shots I've ever seen. Well, Mike hitting driver was the antithesis of that. All he needs is to hit one more fairway and green to win. But he didn't. He made bogey. We tied. On the 19th hole, I hit a sand iron to 10 feet. The rest is history.

**Minutes after you won, you were sitting in a cart with your wife Sally, and your daughter on your lap. You cried.**

My emotions from the playoff, being a USGA invitee, the previous four years — it all bubbled up. I'd exorcized some demons.

**You also said, "God bless Mike Donald. I almost wish he had won." Why?**

I felt for him. He had the U.S. Open won several times, but the moment escaped him. He didn't embrace it. Maybe he didn't see himself taking home that trophy. I wanted it. Deeply.

**What separates major winners from guys who don't close the deal?**

Some of it is luck — a good or bad bounce from the golf gods. Also, Nicklaus, Watson, Trevino — they weren't locker room guys. They showed up, did their job, left. Mike was happy telling stories in the locker room at regular events. But regular events are very different than a Masters or U.S. Open.

**You've had enormous success on the Champions Tour, including nine wins in 1997. If you'd played the PGA Tour in '97, at 50-plus, how many times would you have won?**

At least a couple. I was playing the best golf of my life that year. [Tom] Kite was the 1997 [U.S.] Ryder Cup captain. When he was considering captain's picks, I played with him and two team members in a practice round and beat all three of them. I said, "Tom, I'm playing the best golf of my life." But he didn't pick me. Maybe he felt pressure to pick younger players.

**Why were you better at age 52 than at age 32?**

I learned to play more shots better. There was no shot I feared. I went after tight pins. It all came together. My game opened up like an accordion, and I made some beautiful music.

**Will we ever see a 50-year-old win a major?**

Yes. I can see Fred Couples winning a Masters, or Bernhard Langer at the British. We saw Watson almost win a British at 59. Calc's got the game, but he's gotta get fit — I think he's looking forward too much to riding in a cart.

**Earlier you suggested a supernatural connection between your dreams and your late father. Do you believe in ghosts?**

I'm open to it, yes. I was in Hawaii once, at the blessing of a property. It was a warm night, but all of a sudden I got this cold chill. My wife felt it, too. The minister said, "The spirits are letting you know they're here." When I was a kid in Kansas, I saw this ball of light, like a train light. It's called the Spook Light. You get closer to it, and it disappears. I don't know what it was, but I saw it.

**When did you last cry?**

When our granddaughter Tatum was born [in 2009], I cried tears of joy. I cry at birthings. But gimme a tissue and I'm fine.

**You're 65 in June. As a golf elder statesman, what's your take on today's younger players?**

I see these kids with a coach and a guru and a guru for the guru. A whole entourage. I just don't get it, and I don't want to get it. Young players won't last long doing things this way.

**Why? What are they missing out on?**

Who he or she really is. It's instinctive. If I gave you a stick and said, "Go hit that rock," your swing would be instinctive. Not "interlocking grip, this and that," but instinct. But if a guru hand-feeds you the swing, well, what happens at crunch time? You return to instinct — to your marrow, your blood — and your swing is confused.

**You once told a reporter, "A sports psychologist doesn't know what to tell you on the 18th tee."**

I heard a sports psychologist tell a player, "Aim at a leaf in the fairway." What if you miss it? That's a small target. If I miss that leaf, I'm bummed!

**If young Hale Irwin had had an entourage — complete with swing coach and nutritionist — would he have won those three U.S. Opens?**

Yes.

**Really?**

Absolutely. Because he would have fired them all the first day.

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