

Nick Price... Mr Nice Guy

From the destruction of his homeland to the vagaries of being known as the media's favourite son, Bruce Selcraig digs deep with three-time Major winner

Photography: Matthew Harris

Ask a roomful of veteran golf journalists who they sought out on tour during the last two decades when they needed a dependable, candid and articulate source, and the name most often mentioned will undoubtedly be Nick Price.

The unfailingly polite Zimbabwean and now Florida resident is so well-regarded by the media that in 2002 the Golf Writers Association of America bestowed upon him their first ever award for consistent and thoughtful cooperation and accommodation. Later came his induction into the World Golf Hall of Fame, the USGA's Bobby Jones Award.

Now the limelight has faded and Price, a content, happily married and father of three teenagers, is hitting the Champions

Tour, trying to regain just some of the brilliance that kept him atop the golf world throughout the mid-1990s – a time frame that included 10 world-wide tournament victories and back-to-back Major wins in 1993-1994.

In lean or fat times, Price was never really one who wanted or needed to relive a round shot-by-shot with reporters, so it was no surprise when I caught up with him recently in Austin, Texas that he was happy to talk about everything from the inspirational Billy Casper and his enduring friendship with Greg Norman to the downside of being golf's nicest guy and the continuing crisis in Zimbabwe, where dictator Robert Mugabe has turned Price's childhood home of Rhodesia into a rotting carcass of world-record inflation (now over 4,000%) tortured political opponents and starved rural villages.

The Zimbabwean is a precise kinda guy

Life in the sunshine state suits Mr Price



How did you handle the adoration and ego-trip of being at the top?

I never really had a presence like Greg Norman or Jack or Arnold. I was given a lot of respect, but when I walked into the room it wasn't like everyone got quiet. I'm a simple person and a lot of times I would be looked over because I didn't make a lot of noise. And that hurt a lot. I think it took longer for me to get in the World Golf Hall of Fame (2003) than it should have. They put some guys in ahead of me who only had won two Majors, and I had won three.

There's an ad right now on TV about the FedEx Cup and it goes from showing so-and-so up to Curtis Strange, then it comes to my era and it goes from Greg to Freddie Couples to Vijay – I was the two-time Player of the Year and wasn't included. That hurt. I paid my dues. But over a period of time, it's no big deal.

What did you learn, both good and bad, from your long-term friendship with Greg Norman?

Greg and I were close for a very long time but I think we just drifted apart. Our lives changed. His kids grew up and left. He basically quit playing pretty early and channelled all his energy into his businesses. I respect him a lot. There's no way I could ever repay the help and kindness he gave to me.

We're different people, and that's what made us good friends. I remember one time we were having dinner, and he was number one or two, and I was number one or two, and unfortunately Greg always had this ability to attract the loudest, most obnoxious people in the room. I don't know why. They started shouting, "Hey, Greg!" and slapping him on the back. Seven or eight people asked him for his autograph, and maybe one recognized me, and Greg looked at me and said, "Why can't I be you?" And I said, "That's why your contracts are worth four-times more than mine."

I do think all the things that happened to Greg on the golf course took a toll on him. (Larry Mize chipped in at the second playoff hole to beat Norman in the 1987 Masters. David Frost holed a bunker shot on the 72nd hole of the USF&G Classic in 1990 to beat Norman by one. David Gamez in 1990 holed a 7-iron from 176 yards for an eagle-2 on the 72nd hole to beat Norman by one at the Nestle.) Greg dealt with it all incredibly well. He dealt with adversity as well as anyone, but there's a scar deep down inside.

Was there a downside to always being accessible to the media?

I wish I had been able to say "no" more often. When you're an accommodating person people take advantage of you. If I had said "no" more often I might have extended my streak in the 1990s a little bit longer. I was pretty much worn out by the middle of 1995, and most of '96 I was sick, which was probably just stress-related.

It wasn't just the media. It was the pro-ams. What irked me was that the guys who didn't play in the pro-ams each week were the biggest grippers and always made the most noise about how they should be getting paid to play in pro-ams. There's no doubt, if you were good at pro-ams and helping the Tour, they called on you much more than anyone else.

Were there many guys on tour who were more comfortable finishing second, so they didn't have their lives dissected by us each week?

Many guys. Too numerous to mention. Guys who shorted themselves because they wouldn't put the bit in their teeth. They'd back off because in second place you get a nice big cheque and you don't have to make a speech. Bu they don't even know they're doing it.

David Feherty was one, and he admitted that in an article (*The Irish Times*, January 2007). I don't want to mention a lot of names.

“When I first came on tour we didn't have wives or girlfriends with us. We partied, chased women and drank beer.”

Many are still playing. You can see it in the way they play coming down the stretch. They're thinking too much about the consequences of their shots. John Cook is another. He should have won two or three Majors. Scott Hoch was a phenomenal top-10 finisher, but he just didn't win enough. If you saw Scott and me playing and didn't know anything about golf, you'd say if Nick Price won 45 tournaments worldwide, Hoch must have won a 100.

How do you view the phenomenon that is Tiger Woods?

I love watching Tiger because there's never been anyone who hates to make a bogey more than he does... But I wouldn't want Tiger's life for all the tea in China. I don't care how many tournaments he's won and all the millions – I've got to have a little bit of privacy.

When I first came on tour we didn't have wives or girlfriends with us. We partied, chased women and drank beer. We had an absolute blast. I wouldn't trade those days for anything. I feel sorry for Tiger because I don't think he has ever had that opportunity.

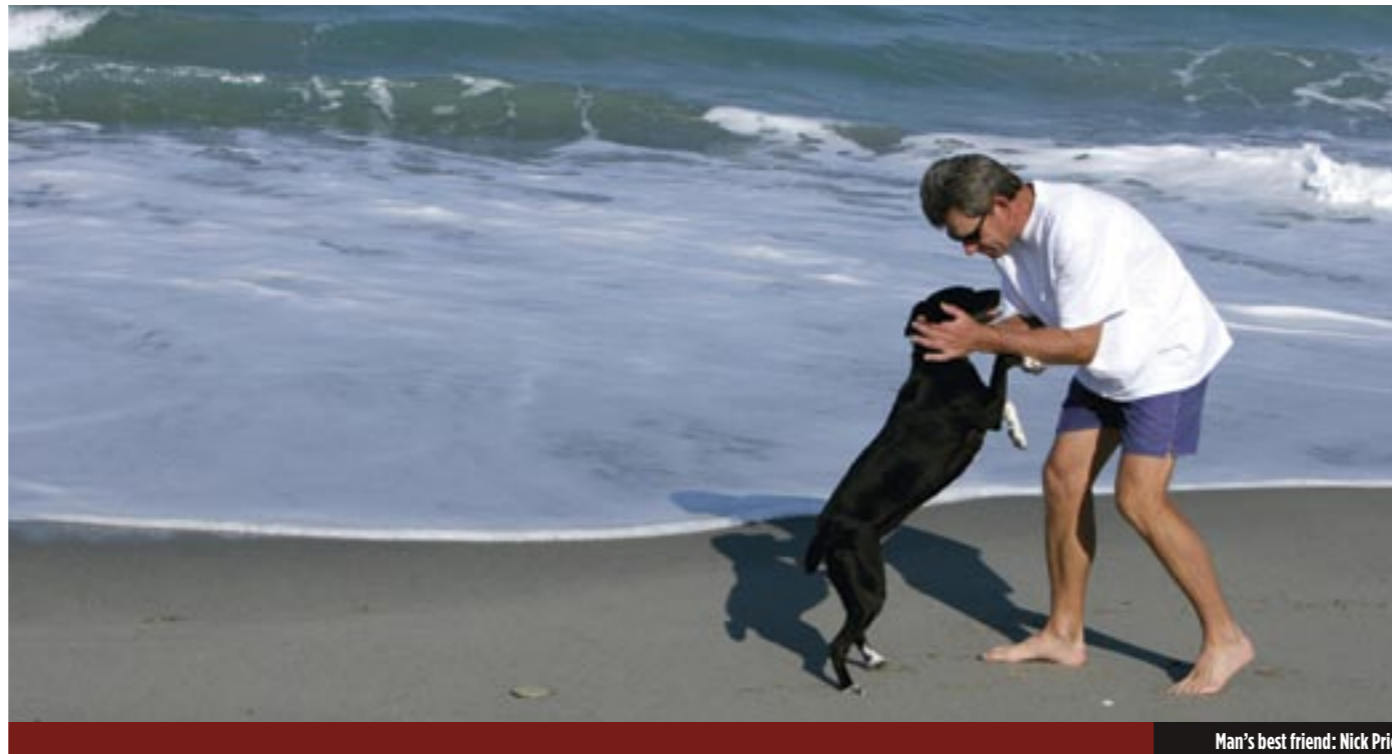
What changed your life in terms of golf?

Two things. Billy Casper – one of the greatest to ever play the game, and he doesn't get enough credit – came to my country, Rhodesia then, in 1968. I was 11-years-old. He played an exhibition with Gary Player and he gave me a golf ball on the back of the 7th green at Royal Salisbury (now Harare). It was a Wilson Staff, and I'm sure my mother still has it somewhere. That was a huge inspiration. And that's why I get irritated with some players today – I think Phil Mickelson simply doesn't travel overseas enough. Tiger does. Ernie does. Playing in the rest of the world is very important. »



Photography: Getty

Golden years: Price won three Majors



Man's best friend: Nick Price

Price is hooked on deep sea fishing



Then something crucial happened in 1981. I had progressed steadily and finished in the top-10 five or six times the year before, my third year playing in Europe, but in 1981 I began to work five-times harder and something went wrong. I played so poorly. The weather was always cold and wet and we played a lot of really poor quality courses. I actually went home to Rhodesia. That's when I made up my mind that I was going to America, and I've never looked back.

What was your childhood like?

I had two older brothers. Kit, the oldest, died in 2004 of a heart attack. My other brother, Tim, who taught me to play, is a club pro in Zimbabwe. I was the youngest by seven years. I still haven't gotten it out of my mother (laughing) whether I was an afterthought or a mistake. She keeps telling me, "You were my little girl, and you turned out to be a boy". (Wendy Price is 85 and lives in England.)

My dad, Ray, was a military man. He served in the Indian Army until 1947, retired as a major and a British citizen. Then he ran a very small clothing business, just enough to keep food in our stomachs.

He died when I was 10. He spent a lot of time with my older brothers playing cricket and rugby, and I was still the momma's boy. We did do some fishing. And then one time, I played golf with him when I was about nine. Three boys and my dad at this little club near home. My Dad and I were both left-handed, so we shared clubs, but later I switched to right because left-handed clubs were so hard to find.

It was the summer of 1966 in Salisbury. I think about that day more than you can possibly imagine. I think, if he's looking down, is he proud? That would mean more to me than anything else. Am I a person he would be proud of? I think so. I really do. I know my mom is.

How much more money could you have made if you had maxed-out your endorsement potential during the 1990s?

Probably another 35%-40%, but there would have been lots of ramifications. I could have pushed the envelope on appearance fees. There was a figure I was happy with, and I played for that. Guys who were number two, three, four in the world were making more than me. But I always gave people value for their dollar and they kept inviting me back year after year.

How old were you when you realized blacks and whites were treated differently in Rhodesia?

I'll try to explain this a little. The black people who worked for us were part of our family. Say our cook's wife got sick, my mom would put her in the car and take her to the hospital and make sure she got the right treatment. We looked after them. They were treated with the respect you would give anyone. That's the way we were brought up.

People have this image of colonialism. It's not like what you saw. It was more of a class thing – I was at a government school and didn't go with blacks. We played rugby and cricket against blacks (unlike in South Africa under apartheid). I used to drink with the caddies at our course because that's where the humour was. If I had an old shirt, old shoes, anything, I would take it to them and if I won a tournament I'd take a case of beer or two down to them.

Sure, some (whites) abused it, but the average (white) person had very little racist (tendencies)... That's why so many guys fought in the war. We thought we were trying to preserve a state everyone could live in. (The Rhodesian Bush War, or Liberation Struggle, lasted from 1964 to 1979, ended bi-racial rule and established the Republic of Zimbabwe. Price fought with the white-run government in the air force against the nationalist forces led by current dictator Robert Mugabe, who headed the Zimbabwe African National Union.)

What's it been like for you watching the steady decline of your country into an impoverished police state?

My brother, Tim, is still there and doesn't want to leave. I've got lots of friends like that. No way they're moving. Hopefully there will be truth and reconciliation hearings like South Africa had (after apartheid) because there have been many atrocities. Mugabe has seized the land of white farmers, uprooting the lives of maybe three million people who depend on agriculture. A whole segment of the economy, a billion-dollar industry, is gone.

I haven't been back since 2000, mainly because I don't want to get depressed. The country has reached depths I never thought possible. The cities are like ghost towns at night. I'm still proud to be a Zimbabwean. I've never turned my back on my country. Not ever. I still harbour hope, though the light is fading fast.