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Price of Fame

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The Talented Mr. Price

Hall of Famer ♦ Major Winner ♦ Stellar Team Player ♦ Devoted Father

NICK PRICE IS ONE OF GOLF'S ALL-AROUND GREAT GUYS, AND HE'S NOT FINISHED MAKING HIS MARK JUST YET

BY VIC WILLIAMS



ick Price spent the week before Christmas doing what most Americans do — diving headlong into the last-minute flotsam of holiday gift-buying and chore-completing.

“Sorry, I’ve got to run in and pick up something for my wife. It’ll take about 40 seconds,” he said by cell phone from his home base of Hobe Sound, Fla. “It’s honey-do time, you know.” Exactly 40 seconds later, he was back on the line, and the conversation continued.

Mr. Price is Mr. Precise.

He’s also a dutiful husband and father, the ultimate family guy. In fact, to golf fans, he’s like the relative you wish would visit more often. Pick the relation — father, brother, son, uncle, whatever. He’d fit right in at the dinner table under any title.

Golfing buddy? Even better. The affable South Africa native, who turns 47 on Jan. 28, has the perfect partner’s swing: Straight back, straight through, straight on to victory, whether it’s a \$2 Nassau or the Wanamaker Trophy.

High handicappers and scratch pros alike have coveted his efficient move for more than two decades. And Price also remains a killer competitor and a first-rate team player, as evidenced by his leadership and passion at the Presidents Cup last fall — which arguably ended with one of the greatest acts of sportsmanship in golf history.

In October, Price took his rightful spot in the World Golf Hall of Fame, an overdue acknowledgement of his quarter-century as a

professional — 18 PGA Tour wins, including three majors (1992 and 1994 PGA Championship and the 1994 British Open), 24 international victories and nearly \$19 million in career earnings, sixth on the all-time list. He won 15 tournaments in the 1990s, tying him with Tiger Woods for decade dominance. He’s placed in the Top 50 for the last seven straight seasons and won as recently as 2002’s MasterCard Colonial — where, as defending champion in ’03, he made some media waves by saying Annika Sorenstam shouldn’t have been awarded a sponsor’s exemption.

“I still question what she was trying to prove,” he told *Golf Digest* recently. “I knew that she could make the cut, no problem. She could finish 40th in the tournament. What does that prove?”

Price is a straight shooter, in more ways than one. And since he’s always been such a media sweetheart — granting interviews on the practice tee, giving crisp answers, signing autographs as if his celebrity is a rare gift — fans and reporters are more likely to



CHRIS CORDON / COURTESY OF PGA TOUR PHOTOGRAPHIC SERVICES

accept his honesty while aloof types such as Vijay Singh get crucified. We grant Price a measure of hard-won credibility.

"I always feel honored when people write about me, because obviously they feel somebody wants to read about me. And I've understood the value of being able to communicate with reporters or media. And if you put across that you're honest and you don't have any b.s., then people understand what kind of person you are. That's what I've always tried to do — be totally honest and tell it like it is, however boring it might be, and let people form their opinions on truth and fact as opposed to fabrication. Some sportsmen tend to fabricate more than others."

So we pay more attention to this guy than many other players because we know he's on the square. We also respect his unique history.

NICK THE AMBASSADOR

"I've worn a unique path to where I am," he says. "And a lot of people want to read about that path. Again, it makes me feel honored — that they want to know about someone from Zimbabwe. I've been lucky. I enjoy people and enjoy people asking me questions about certain things,

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and that they know that I'll put them in a light or frame in the way I see them — particularly as it pertains to golf.

"For example, I'll say that on 17 I hit a really great shot but on 18 I hit a really bad shot though I had a good lie. But the commentator might say, 'It looked like you were in a divot,' because he's not used to seeing me hit a bad 4-iron from the middle of the fairway. 'No, I had a perfect lie, I just hit a really crappy shot!'

"Honesty, over a period of time, truth will win out, and I think that's why I've had such a good rapport with the media. It's part of my personality, but one of the things is that I understand that you guys have a job to do out there. And if I can't take time immediately to do something for someone, or speak to you, I'll do it later, I'll catch you another time. Life is a two-way street. You get out of it what you put in."

Price was raised in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), a country known more for civil and racial strife than producing world-class golfers. His father, an army major, died when Price was 10. Three years later, the youngster was playing to a 5 handicap from the forward tees, and by the time he was 16, he was down to scratch from the men's tees. At 17 he played in the Junior World Championship

in San Diego and often competed against his future (and longtime) teacher David Leadbetter, as well as fellow well-traveled South Africans such as Denis Watson and Mark McNulty.

At 19, he was inducted to serve in the Rhodesian Civil War as a radio communications expert. He escaped injury during a convoy attack though, he once said, "I knew many guys who got killed."

After two years in uniform, he returned to golf, turned professional and nearly won the 1982 British Open. He led by three with six holes to play but faded as the great Tom Watson blew by him. He moved to the United States the following year, beating Jack Nicklaus in the World Series of Golf and shooting a 63 at The Masters. In 1988, he nearly took the Claret Jug again, only to watch Seve Ballesteros fire a final-round 65 to better his 69.

NICK BE NIMBLE

In the early 1990s, Price challenged Greg Norman for the No. 1 world ranking. In 1993, he won three consecutive starts, plus the Players Championship, but it all came together in '94 — he won six tournaments, including the British Open and PGA, and remains one of only three men in the '90s to win back-to-back majors in the same year, along with Mark O'Meara and Nick Faldo. It still ranks as one of the greatest season-long performances in PGA Tour history.

Three years passed before Price scored again at the 1997 MCI Classic, and two subsequent wins in 1998 and 2002 keep him of a mind that he can win again on the big tour.

"The big thing is the desire to play," he says when asked if he can follow up guys like Peter Jacobsen and Craig Stadler, who notched PGA Tour wins last year at ages 49 and 50, respectively. "There's two ways you look at it: The desire to play and practice, and the desire to compete. They're intertwined, but which comes first? I still enjoy hitting balls and playing, and in the back of my mind I still think I can compete when I play well."

"If the day ever comes when I feel I can't compete, and I struggle to make the cut, then I'll probably lose my desire a little bit. As long as you keep getting a little bite out of the carrot now and then, a little nibble, it's going to whet your appetite. I'll be going along for eight or ten weeks, playing nicely, and then all of a sudden I'll have a chance to win, and that keeps me going. If I go out there and struggle for six or seven weeks to make a cut, that's not what I play golf for competitively. I still play socially to have fun with my friends, but the reason I work so hard is because I'm genuinely trying to get better. I want to compete."



PHOTO BY SIAM BAOZ / COURTESY OF PGA TOUR PHOTOGRAPHIC SERVICES

Tiger took us to a whole new level. I'd better thank him, and I do, every time I see him — for giving a 46-year-old the opportunity to make good money and stay on the PGA Tour."

NICK BE QUICK

Hence Price's strong work ethic and constant reaching for that swing ideal: efficiency. With Leadbetter's help, he's managed to groove his move for a long, long time now.

If Tiger Woods is an on-base-percentage guy like Barry Bonds, and John Daly is free-swinger like Sammy Sosa, Nick Price is Tony Gwynn. His stroke is brief and brash, snapping through the hitting zone like Gwynn's bat did over home plate for so many seasons. Price doesn't swing for the fences; he goes for the gap between trouble. It's a swing that has served him well since he first grabbed a club at age 8.

"I've worked with Leadbetter for 23 years," he recalls. "I was basically self-taught, then I went to see him at the end of 1981. My swing doesn't appear to have changed that much, but I've basically just refined it over the years, and Leadbetter has helped me do that, to cut out any extraneous moves. I try to make my swing as efficient as possible. Every body part moves for a reason; it's not just there for show. Obviously, the more moving parts you have, the harder it is to repeat. What I work on more than anything else is having a swing that will repeat under pressure. That's the real truth time."

NICK THE TINKERER

An avowed equipment junkie — his home shop is crammed with hundreds of clubs — Price is also willing to go off the beaten track to find the right stick for his style. His five-year association with Japanese clubmaker Sonartec has been a fruitful one — he remains the company's only paid representative on Tour though the clubs have found their way into dozens of players' bags.

He discovered one of Sonartec's clubs while in Japan on a trip for Precept (with whom he also maintains a contract).

"I was playing in the ANA Open in Sapporo, in 1999, maybe '98. One of the guys I was playing with had this fairway wood that looked very intriguing, with a cavity sole. He was hitting the hell out of the thing — it was beautiful to watch. I was hitting balls on the practice tee two or three hours later and one of their reps came up to me and said, 'You showed interest in the club,' and I said, 'Absolutely.' He said, 'I've got some here, do you want to hit some?' I said, 'Sure.'"

"To cut a long story short, I started using one off and on. Then they brought out a new model. I hit it and just loved it. That was in early 2000. Anyway, they approached me, wanted somebody to be a spokesperson and also to be involved with the design. They really wanted a presence in America. They wanted me to use a fairway wood and possibly a driver, and help with the research and development of the clubs, take them to

the next level. So that's what I've done.

"They've been such a wonderful company to be associated with because they've been so responsive to all my comments and input. The Japanese' taste in clubs is very different from Americans' taste in clubs. They're different in design and shape. I've tried to help them develop a more Western-style golf club."

Meaning?

"The modern trends are seeing a lot more back-weighting and more of a cleaner look as opposed to that old pear-shaped-type driver," Price continues. "Just like car design has changed over the years, so has golf club design. The TaylorMade and Titleist shapes are sort of a modern derivative of the old pear shape. So I've tried to help Sonartec develop a club that looks good and incorporates these modern developments. I think their technology is phenomenal, and it's proven with the amount of clubs they have in play on Tour, and they're not paying anyone."

So how have these new sticks helped his game of one of golf's best swingers?

"What I always look for in a fairway wood is versatility — having the ability to hit out of light rough or when the ball is slightly sitting down in the fairway — and the ability to manipulate the club, hit it high, low. When you fall in love with a 3-wood, you feel like your confidence in the club allows you to do more of that, being able to pull the shots off. That's what I love about the club — there's something about its weighting that really helps get the ball up in the air but doesn't put a whole lot of spin on it."

West Coast golf fans will have a chance to see Price wielding his Sonartec woods — and his Precept irons, which he can still manipulate with the best of them — at a couple of early season events this year.

After a trip to South Africa to play in an "AT&T-style event" for one of his sponsors, he'll return in time to tee it up at the Nissan Open at Riviera, where he finished in a tie for third last year, and the WGC-Accenture Match Play Championship at La Costa, where he tied for ninth in 2003 after losing to Jay Haas in the third round. Overall, Price has never had much success out West.

"To be honest, I've never really played that well out there. I came in third at Pebble one year and I've had some good finishes in Phoenix and L.A., but outside of that I've never played well. So I just sort of hang around and wait for the Florida tour to start."

Price is an avowed fair-weather player (his love for the British Open notwithstanding), and says the capricious breezes and chilly winter temperatures of places like Pebble Beach, more than anything, have kept him out of the West Coast Swing winner's circle.

"I grew up playing kikuyu grass, so I can't use that as an excuse. I just haven't

played well in the cold weather. And what they've done to some of the golf courses — I would have seriously considered playing the Buick this year if they hadn't made that golf course [Torrey Pines South] 7,500 yards. There's no way I'm going out there with the golf course that long. At Riviera and Phoenix, I feel I have an outside chance, and Pebble is always dependent on the weather."

NICK THE TEAMMATE

It was darkness, not weather, that played a part in deciding the Presidents Cup outcome at the Links at Fancourt in George, South Africa, on Nov. 23. Nick Price was there, of course. He watched the American team storm back from a 0-6 deficit in four-ball to win eight of 12 singles matches. Price's match against Kenny Perry came down to the final hole; Perry made birdie, and Price had an eight-footer to halve the match — and, as it turns out, win the Cup outright. He missed, and in a blast of uncharacteristic anger, snapped his putter over his knee.

"You could see the emotion in his face," Perry said later. "There was almost a tear in his eye. It was the hardest match I have ever played. It tore me up."

After the week's matches ended in a 17-17 deadlock, Price, Perry and their teammates watched the top two players in the world, Tiger Woods and Ernie Els, tee it up on No. 18 for a sudden-death playoff. Three holes and a dozen breathtaking shots later — including some of the most pressure-packed putts any player has ever faced — captains Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player dialed PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem on a cell phone. They would ignore the rules, call a tie and share the Cup. Nobody argued the decision.

"There was really no other option," Price says. "To be honest, everyone explored every possibility, including coming back the next day, which probably would be the most obvious situation. But it would be very anticlimactic because no one would have been watching on TV. And they couldn't play another hole because it was too dark, unless they'd have gone in and played cards for it."

"I think the Tour is looking hard at ensuring that a stalemate doesn't happen again, that we're given an opportunity to do something else to prevent a tie. Who would have imagined that you'd have 34 matches, several thousand shots struck, three extra holes with the No. 1 and No. 2 players in the world, and you'd still have a tie? It was just phenomenal."

Suddenly, the Presidents Cup — heretofore an upstart, almost ugly cousin of the much-ballyhooed and storied Ryder Cup — had earned its wings as a world-class competition. And, to a man, every player knew it as they celebrated in Fancourt's clubhouse.

"Everyone was very tired, and I think everyone understood the situation and the magnitude of the decision. It really was a huge decision on behalf of Jack and his team, and also on behalf of the commissioner and everyone else. But there was a wonderful atmosphere — no one won, no one lost. We all played our tails off for four days, and everyone was resigned to the fact that there was no other way to end it. And people will argue that, 'You should have done this or could have done that,' but it would have been very sad to have the Presidents Cup change hands either way on some whimsical decision made under duress.

"When you get Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player, two of the ultimate competitors who have played against each other for four decades, to agree — after Jack went to his team and they came back with 'we'll share the cup' — that was a wonderful gesture on their behalf."

And for golf in general.

"There could not have been a better thing for golf," Price adds. "This will never, ever happen again. Ryder Cup, Presidents Cup, Solheim Cup — it will never happen again. It was a unique situation, a unique outcome and something that will be remembered for a long, long time. Having been there and been part of it and also wanting to win very badly, I don't think they could have come to another decision."

Price has played in many majors and won three of them. How does the Presidents Cup pressure compare to a major championship?

"It's a totally different pressure. You're more concerned about messing up a shot under pressure because of your teammates. There are 11 other guys who are busting their guts to try to make a point. The last thing you ever want to do is let your teammates down.

"And I think that's where the incredible camaraderie and morale we had on our team really came through on Sunday. We were huge underdogs in singles based on the world rankings, and we knew that, so we weren't counting our chickens on Saturday night at all. We knew we had a huge day ahead of us. We hung in there. Some matches were close, some were not so close, but we had that opportunity to win. And we all wanted to win. Not one person on Saturday night said, 'We'll just cruise tomorrow.' We all knew how difficult it was going to be to beat the U.S. team in singles.

"I think of all those points changing hands and it ending up a tie at the end, and I'm still amazed."

NICK THE ANTI-POLITICO

Like Gary Player, Price is a true international star, and he recognizes that the game he plays so well has a political component. Events like the Presidents Cup bring that fact into focus, but he

prefers to play the game and rise above the fray, concentrating on what he does best and letting the well-schooled pundits handle the sound bites.

"All sports are political in some form or fashion," he says. "You can never totally get away from that. But political opinions are another thing altogether. We're all entitled to our vote and entitled to our say, but I often draw the line at some sportsmen who get involved — and I'm talking generally here — who open their mouths and comment on a situation and know very little about it.

"Any politician worth his weight in salt certainly researches a lot about what he talks about. You'll often find that athletes read the papers, hear the news and form opinions very quickly about what's going on.

"If a person's well-read and well-researched, then I listen to his opinion. Most of the time, sportsmen are really good at playing sports and they know a handful of other things, but politics isn't one of them."

NICK BE HUMBLE

Politicians are, by definition, anything but humble, which is probably why Price wouldn't make a good one. The man exudes appreciation for everything he has — his talent, his health, everything the game of golf has given him. Including second chances, courtesy of a man named Tiger.

"When I started playing, if I made \$50,000 a year from golf, I'd have been as happy as Mary," he says. "Just enough to live on and buy a house and put my kids through school.

"What's happened in golf — it's been the sport of the last decade, or probably decade and a half, since the mid-1980s. I like to think that Greg Norman, myself, Fred Couples — we all contributed to that growth in the game. We did the right things, we respected the game.

"Nicklaus handed it to Watson and Seve and a few other guys, and Greg, myself, Fred, Nick Faldo and a few others took the reins from there on in, until Tiger came along. And the whole of golf was just ripe and ready for him.

"The guy is a phenomenal athlete. And being in the minority — African-American, Asian-American, African-Asian — that's contributed maybe 10 percent, maybe a little more, to the game's popularity. But the simple fact is that he's an outstanding athlete. He's a superstar. People want to know, 'How's Tiger doing?' Or, 'How's Norman doing?' or 'How's Nicklaus doing?'"

"But Tiger took us to a whole new level. I'd better thank him, and I do, every time I see him — for giving a 46-year-old the opportunity to make good money and stay on the PGA Tour."

Beyond that are many options in golf — and the blessed opportunity to join his

wife, Sue, in raising their three children — Gregory, 12, Robyn, 10, and Kimberly, 8. Only the oldest has shown a passing fancy for the old man's game, and that's fine with Price.

"My son is 12, and he's into hockey and a few other sports," he says. "It's funny; I really haven't pushed it or done anything to sort of move him in any way. But he's just now starting to get a little bit of interest, which is great. He's been out to the range with me numerous times to hit balls, but he's never actually played more than a couple of holes. I don't think he really understands the principles of the game, but hopefully, in the next three, four or five months, I'll keep taking him out with me, and if he shows some interest, I'll be very happy."

So there's that, a torch to pass. And other challenges to undertake. There's the Champions Tour three years from now, and more golf courses to design. So far Price has had a hand in about a dozen, including twin tracks in Hobe Sound.

"Course architecture, I think, is determined by how good a job you do. I certainly hope I leave my mark on this world in golf courses. I don't envision myself building 300 courses like Jack Nicklaus and those guys, but I'd certainly love to build 50 or 60. It's something that I really enjoy, get a lot of pleasure out of.

"I'd like to play the Champions Tour, but I don't know if I want play 'til I'm 60. I'd like to play three or four years, then go and enjoy other things, like fishing. I'll still be young. A lot will be determined by when my kids leave home and go off to college and that sort of thing. I'll have to wait and see.

"I'm looking forward to next year, but the year after I haven't even thought about it. We're having such great fun with the kids; it doesn't take long for them to grow up and leave the house. I'm trying to make the most of it now."

NICK THE CHAMPION

One final question before Price rolls on into the holiday tide and beyond, to the rest of his life: What does he do with all those trophies?

Is he like Couples, who is rumored to never even getting around to taking them out of the box?

Not quite.

"I have a trophy case at home and keep a lot of them there, and the Hall of Fame's got a lot of them on loan," he says. "I don't know how long I'll leave them there, probably a year or so. I love looking at them, and they bring back so many memories. That's probably why I have them displayed. It's not something I pore over every day, I just like having them there. Every now and then my friends come through and have a look ... that's important."

But not more important than tomorrow.

