

Hale Irwin - Thoughts of a Champion

By

Jim Healey

We all believe we know Hale. We see him around town from time to time, but more frequently on TV as he captures another Senior Event. We tend to judge him by our most recent meeting, or more accurately by his most recent interview. But Hale, like most of us, is a very complex individual. As a father he is proud of his kids, Steve and Becky as they search for their career path. Hale and Sally will be moving to Phoenix within the coming year and while this does signal a substantial change in their lives, St. Louis and what it has meant to them will not be left behind. As the most successful golfer of all time, according to the all-time Money List (PGA and Senior PGA combined) Hale continues to amaze us all. As CEO of his design business, he works as a contractor for others who want to build a monument for themselves and capitalize on Hale's success. And as head of a course management firm, he must worry about the balance sheet of each facility.

In a business situation he would be perceived as confident and outspoken. He doesn't believe in hiding his cards, waiting for the other guy to show his first. He tells you what he thinks and leaves you to judge it's impact on you. He respects those with talent, but seems to have little patience for arrogance (especially where not deserved) and incompetence. He judges his peers both on a professional and a personal level and not all would score high marks on his scorecard. He can be personable one moment and brusque the next. He has a winning smile and an menacing glare. Depending on the moment, you may find him friendly or distant. In short, he can be like most of us from time to time.

While at Boone Valley for the Media Day on August 4th, I had the opportunity to speak with Hale. Standing under the large oak tree on the 3rd green, a variety of topics came up - family, the Design Business, his play, other players, the Media - and other more mundane issues. Here are some of Hale's thoughts, and my observations, on a variety of topics.

AS A PLAYER

While not diminishing what he has done in the past three years, Hale believes he was as tough a player as there was from 1974-79, winning two US Opens and eight other titles during that period. Today his play is a little different. He believes that he has better control over his emotions today than in the past. His reactions such as the high-fiveing the crowd in 1990 after sinking the 60-foot putt to force a playoff with Mike Donald at Medinah, and falling down at the Senior Open after the putt on the 71st hole lipped-out, are just spontaneous. "One of the hardest things to do is to control your internal emotions. To keep them in check." Hale told us. "I believe that as I got a little older, I got much better at doing that. This is part of the reason I'm a better player today."

His physical conditioning is outstanding. While people talk about Gary Player, and his recent win on Long Island proves he still has what it takes, Hale has the lean look of someone who could still put the pads on and hit the blocking sled for a while.

WINNING

While he was congratulated for the courage of the 4-iron approach to the 18th green at the US Senior Open, for Hale it wasn't even close. "A 5-iron to the middle of the green wasn't even an option. You don't get the chance to win a Major very often in your career. When it's there, you have to go for it. That's what you prepare your whole life for. If you don't do it then, when will you?"

He couldn't pinpoint the exact moment in the round where he began to believe he could win; but as the round progressed he began to gain more confidence. He knew that his playing partner, Ray Floyd was having his troubles, but he also kept an eye on the scoreboard and saw what Vicente Fernandez was doing. [Hale has tremendous respect and admiration for Vicente, and went out of his way to say that the press should make a point to meet with him, to learn more about the man.] He

didn't come to 12 or 13 and all of a sudden believe he could win. He continued to play his game, doing what he had to do to put himself in a position to win, to take advantage of the opportunity should it present itself. He knew that if Floyd or Fernandez had made one or two additional birdies, Hale never would have had the chance to have that putt on eighteen mean anything. Instead, by playing his game - the one where he hits the fairways, then the greens, and then one or two putts - he kept applying his kind of pressure to them. By the time they came to the 16th, he was in position to take charge. When he rolled in a birdie there, it was like taking a giant step toward the title. With that in mind, knowing what was at stake, he reacted like a boiling tee-pot when his putt at 17 spun out - he had a momentary release of steam as he collapsed on the green. But with that out of the way, and the pressure momentarily off, he played the 18th like he owned it, as he would shortly own the US Senior Open Title.

INSTRUCTION & MECHANICS

Hale plays a mostly right-to-left game - a slight draw. In fact, one aspect of his game that he is struggling with is hitting the left-to-right shot - the classic fade - to improve his overall game. The draw is the shot he hit into the 18th at Riviera on Sunday! With that said, it is sometimes frustrating for him when announcers, some of whom profess to be experts, talk about his left to right game! He wonders where they get their information.

In one respect he's very lucky. He doesn't over analyze his swing. He's a self-taught golfer who has never used a guru or swing coach. He trusts himself and his ability. One flaw found in many younger players is their attempt to achieve the perfect swing. To get it just a little bit better. For some, it means abandoning what got them there. For a few, it never comes back! After 30 years as a golf professional, Hale understands that "some days you've got it and some days you don't. And there is no use thinking about those days you don't!"

Those of you who subscribe to Golf Publications know that they are forever analyzing the golf swing. From issue to issue you may get totally conflicting statements, with enough justification for both to thoroughly confuse everyone. One topic which is frequently addressed is your "swing thought". Hale has a rather novel approach to this; you have a "swing thought" depending on the type of shot you have to hit! This may sound rather odd, but it makes perfect sense. What you might focus on for a down-hill shot is different from an uphill shot. A tee shot might require a different process than an approach wedge. Hale varies his focus with each shot on what is required at that moment. And who can argue with the success he has with this concept?

DESIGN

He does not pretend to be an architect. He has a design firm with Stan Gentry as the key designer. They complement each other very well, since Brad is a former professional while Stan has the more formal design training. What Hale brings to the table is the players perspective. He does not try to tell them what to do, he might say things like "...this is what the player would see, or would like to see at this point" and get them to question how that might fit into the overall plan. But he refuses to be the type of dictatorial designer we frequently hear much about today. Right now they have projects across the country, including ones in the Carolinas, Colorado, and With the move to Phoenix, they will be opening a design office there for the west coast projects, while maintaining the St. Louis office here for those in the Midwest and in the East.

Like any player, Hale does have certain things he likes about courses; but he is pragmatic enough to know that he also has to design a course for the owner. Where he might like tight fairways that demand precision with your tee shots, he sees the need to move play along for a public facility. And while creating an island green may be dramatic, he knows that providing a "bail-out area" for the average golfer is essential on most holes.

In a sense, Hale's designers are the artists, while Hale is like the color palette. The overall image is created before the color is added. A dab or color here, a stroke here and you have the finished creation. He doesn't tell them what to do, he has too much respect for them as designers and their profession to do that, he just tries to bring a unique perspective to each facility, to give it his touch, which is what the owners want as well.

SUCCESS

Hale is a celebrity. He sometimes feels like everyone wants a piece of him. It's tough balancing the demands of a player, the design business, his family and other business interests. But balance them he must, since they feed off each other. The more success he has on tour, the more design business comes his way, and with that comes more travel. And travel can cause fatigue, which could affect his game. It's a fine balancing act.

But his trade, where he performs his magic, is a solitary one. Sure, everyone knows his name since his first win in '71. Most who follow the game know he won 3 US Opens. But his success on the Senior Tour has, in many respects, left him little time to enjoy it. The demands of the sport mean he must fly from city to city performing his magic before thousands of strangers each week and many millions more on TV. Roaming the fairways and greens from Florida to Hawaii, from Texas to Illinois on the Senior Tour as well as the occasional leap back to the regular Tour, plus the demands of advertisers and agents (and the occasional interview with us media types) leaves little personal time. While Cardinal fans flip from their favorite TV show each time Big Mac comes to bat, Hale's strokes are performed in relative isolation. His reward is not the "Race for 61", but rather the individual trophy (along with a nice check) as the best that week. While McGwire performs over 162 games, counting his totals from week to week, with his rewards at seasons end, Hale faces new challenges each week. Last week's score doesn't count. That eighteen-under total is erased and every player in the field has a clean slate. His weeks are comprised of pro-ams and 54 holes - sometimes 72 - against the best Senior golfers in the world. He has no teammates, no coaches. He walks the fairways with his caddie; the two of them against the field.

That being said, he wouldn't trade any of it. He's at the top of his game. The design business is doing great, his family situation is wonderful and his other interests are doing just fine.

THE MEDIA & PERCEPTION

As noted earlier, Hale believes he is much better at controlling the emotions that are a part of playing golf - both good and bad. Miss a putt, hit a poor shot, you have to put it behind you "flush it away" is the phrase Hale uses. A good example of that was his round of 80 at the US Open at Riviera. To Hale it was a day of near misses. A shot goes 12 feet into the rough instead of only 6. A ball rolls through the green instead of staying on the fringes. A putt lips out. How does he deal with it? He forgets about it immediately. After the round, when US Open staffers gave him the option of going to the Press tent or not, Hale reaction was immediate. He didn't want to talk about it. It's over. It's behind him. Let's move on. The more he lets people ask him about it, the more he begins to think about it, to analyze what happened. What he wanted to do was forget about it and think about tomorrow. Some writers at the Open took issue with Hale not coming to the interview tent following his round. To Hale, all they wanted him to do was talk about it, think about it, examine it, over and over. He had no intention of doing that. The next day he shoots a 68 - one of the lowest rounds of the tournament. For some however, they still focused on what he didn't do, more so than what he did.

For Hale, it's this ability to never doubt your ability that separates him from his peers, and what drives most of the great players. After his 77 at the opening round of the US Senior Open, Hale didn't spend time analyzing what happened, what went wrong. He already knew he could do better, and should have shot par or better. It just didn't happen. What he had to do now was just shoot better scores the rest of the week if he wanted to contend. He did!

GOLF TECHNOLOGY

Hale used to play with Wilson when he was on the Regular Tour. Today he is in the Cobra stable - and glad he is. He is longer today than he was years ago and he recognizes that the technology has much to do with it. But he is not counted among those who believe you need to change the clubs. He believes that the ball technology is the place to start. He has seen things with the ball that he would term "self correcting". Balls begin to fade or even slice, then seemingly correct themselves, to appear to come back. You can buy a ball for high shots, low shots, even a ball to use for specific clubs (though a judge may soon decide that that was going just a bit too far, if Callaway

has their way!) Hale believes that by starting with the ball, many of the advantages seen by many today, and thought to be the influence of the clubs, will begin to diminish.

© Copyright Jim Healey 1999