

- April 10, 2010

Fred Couples rolls back years as soft-shoe shuffle puts him back in limelight



Fred Couples
John Hopkins, Augusta

Fred Couples stepped on to the 1st tee at Augusta National on a day of glorious spring sunshine. Rolling his shoulders to reduce the tension in his neck, and stretching his sockless feet in those distinctive, spikeless golf shoes he wears, he looked around and could see nothing but admiring faces. He must have thought he was lord of all he surveyed.

In a sense, he was. Couples was the leader after the most majestic first day of any recent Masters. His 66, added to a 67 by Tom Watson, who is 60, put them first and tied second on the leaderboard and gave renewed hope that golfers can be competitive at 50 and older. As Shakespeare might have said: "Age cannot wither them nor custom stale their infinite variety of shots."

Actually, Couples has always been competitive. Nicknamed "Boom-Boom" for the length of his drives he has a languid and enduring swing, a combination of the fluidity of Sam Snead with the club speed of Tiger Woods. It got him on to the US PGA Tour in 1980 and it kept him there, earning him at least \$1 million most years, until he turned 50 last October and moved to the quieter waters of the US PGA Champions Tour.

Couples arrived at Augusta this year as one of the most in-form golfers in the world with a second place and three subsequent victories in his past four events on the Champions Tour. Being competitive, even

among men aged 50 and over, as Couples clearly was, is one reason why he has maintained that competitive streak alongside men half that age at Augusta this week.

“If you continue to play and when the chips are down you continue to make the four-footers, as Freddie has this year, you’re still competitive,” Watson said. “Besides, Freddie’s still real long. He can carry the ball 300 yards through the air. That’s a long way for a 50-year-old.”

Of the 96 players at Augusta, Couples ranked tenth in driving distance, ahead of Tiger Woods and Sergio Garcia in his first round. But he was not just long. He was straight — the third most accurate golfer from the tee.

In the final round of the 2006 Masters, Couples played with Phil Mickelson. It was heartbreaking to watch Couples match the powerful left-hander from tee to green, but then be significantly worse when it came to putting. Couples looked vulnerable, prone to nervous jabs at the ball, and Mickelson went on to win by two strokes.

These days, the secret of Couples’s present form is his success with a belly putter.

“I feel like my putting is the best thing in my game right now,” he said. “I mean I always felt like I could hit the ball, but when I’m making eight and ten-footers for pars and birdies it makes my game easier.

“Then I can attack more, instead of trying to roll a 25-foot birdie putt up close and tap it in.”

He and Watson took the least number of putts in the first round — 24.

Couples is a martyr to back problems, which could affect him at any moment. It has bothered him for years. That is why he rolls his shoulders and hips so often, why he often crouches down to stretch the muscles in his back and why he can spend so little time putting.

It is also why he has taken to wearing distinctive footwear, tennis shoes off the course, although he did put on dress shoes for the Champions Dinner on Tuesday night, and golf shoes that resemble what Americans call sneakers and instead of spikes have rows of rubber nubs, half the size of the head of a golf tee, on the soles. Being a combination of sneakers and spikes you may call them “snikes”. They feel softer to Couples and, he says, give him less back pain than traditional golf shoes.

“I feel like I’m a very good player and I’m one of the guys to beat out there,” Couples said after his first round and he remained that way, still six under par, as he approached the end of his second round. “It’s a good sign when you start winning. The pipe dream is to win in Augusta at age 50, yeah.

“Can I still do it? Of course. It would be a nice dream that’s for sure but I’ve got a lot of golf left.”

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