

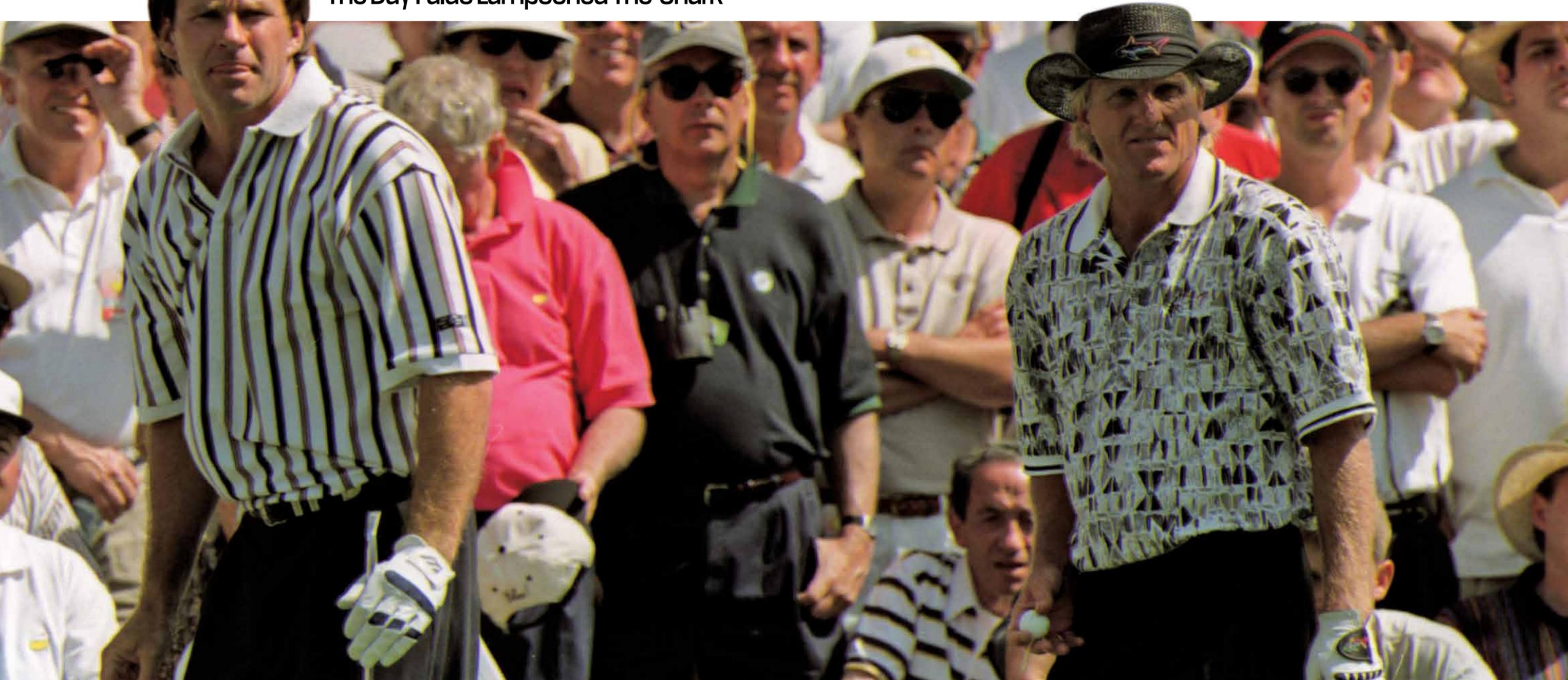


# Scarred for Life

The Day Faldo Lampooned The Shark

IT is 20 years since Australia's greatest golfer, Greg Norman, squandered a six shot lead on the last day at Augusta leaving award-winning golf writer CHARLES HAPPELL scarred for life.

Photo by GETTY





**T**he first thing apparent to any moderately observant golf watcher on that fateful Augusta Sunday was Greg Norman's pre-shot routine. It had become a jittery, twitchy mess.

The natural, fluid brilliance that had taken Norman to a first-round 63 in that 1996 Masters-tying the major championship record low score- and a six-shot lead after three rounds had all of a sudden deserted him.

Whether it was the weight of history on his shoulders that unnerved him - no Australian had won the green jacket before - or the steely, unflinching play of his nemesis, Nick Faldo, Norman slowly started to implode on the biggest day of his life.

He pulled his opening drive of that final round into the trees separating the first and ninth fairways, from where he made a bogey. His six-shot lead suddenly became five - a bad start for a player prone to nerves - and he then began to seize up with the tension.

As he stood over the ball for the rest of his round, Norman gripped and re-gripped his club, seemingly unable to get comfortable. It often took him 15 or 20 seconds before he felt ready to pull the trigger and begin his backswing.

Over the other side of the fairway, Faldo didn't need to be a great student of body language to understand that his great rival was threatening to come apart at the seams.

And this, of course, is exactly how Faldo had hoped that final day might pan out. In Saturday's third round, the Englishman realised as he surveyed the leaderboard beside the 18th fairway that he needed to make a birdie at the final hole to break out of the tie with Phil Mickelson and earn himself the right to feature in the last pair, alongside Norman, on Sunday. Only then would he be able to stare down the Australian and have any chance of winning. That he duly did, holing a nerve-racking side-hiller

to finish at seven-under 209, with Mickelson at 210 and Norman lengths in front on 13-under 203.

As a first-time visitor to Augusta National, where I was covering the year's first major for *The Age* and *Sydney Morning-Herald*, I was quietly high-fiving myself on the Saturday night, thinking: 'here I am at my first major, and I'm going to be writing about a Greg Norman victory ...'

Not, I hesitate to add, as some kind of misty-eyed groupie but because the story would play so well back in Australia and, who knows, maybe lead to more trips to Augusta.

Norman and Faldo were due to tee off at 2.49pm on that sunny Georgia Sunday. On the practice fairway warming up, Norman was the picture of relaxation. He chatted with Kiwi Frank Nobilo, then worked his way through half a dozen irons and woods, pausing now and then to joke with his caddie, Tony Navarro, and coach Butch Harmon.

Not far away, Faldo-who hadn't played well in his third-round 73 - was all business. There was no by-play with his caddie Fanny Sunesson, and coach David Leadbetter: it was down to work as he tried to iron out glitches in his swing.

It seemed Norman had not a care in the world while Faldo was the one wrestling with some inner demons.

So as I jauntily set off with the Shark on that Sunday, who could have possibly presaged what was about to happen over the next four hours?

But every golf fan in Australia knows how this story ends up, and how Norman's dream of winning his first major in the US, and being the first Australian to leave Augusta with the green jacket draped over his shoulders, was dashed in the harshest, most public way. Even when it is mentioned now, 20 years on, it elicits the same groan of disbelief among golfers.

What seemed like half of Australia set their alarms on that Monday morning, full of hope and not a little expectation, only to trudge off to work several hours later, cursing Norman for making them sit through another Masters horror show and perhaps kicking the cat on the way out the door.

First came the bogey at No.1, then a birdie at the par-five second, followed by a terribly unlucky bogey at No.4, the long par three, where Norman's four-iron floated high and straight towards a pin on the far right edge of the green, tucked behind the front bunker.

But then it somehow stabbed into the hill of grass between the green and bunker, took a hop, and rolled back into the sand. Norman recoiled as if he'd taken a blow to the chest then leant forward and put his hands on his knees, as if taking a deep breath. That image ended up adorning *Sports Illustrated's* next magazine cover.

From that moment on, everything started to head south: Faldo's birdies at No.6 and No.7 piled pressure on the Australian and narrowed the gap to three shots. Norman then bogeyed the 9th, 10th and 11th so that when the pair stood on the tee of Golden Bell, the devilish par-three 12th, they were on level terms.

His six-shot lead had dried up in not much more than two hours.

But it was when Norman's tee shot at the 12th splashed into Rae's Creek that I turned and headed back up the hill to the media centre. I'd seen enough; there was no coming back from there. Norman, so buoyant on



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the practice fairway hours earlier, now looked an utterly forlorn figure.

His close friend, Nick Price, had a similar reaction to me. Watching the telecast in the players' locker-room, he turned away after Norman's tee shot on 12. "I can't watch this," the Zimbabwean said. "It's making me feel sick."

Augusta, the scene of so much heartache for Norman over the years - seven top-six finishes, including the desperate near-misses in 1986 (to Jack Nicklaus) and 1987 (to Larry Mize) - had once again mugged him in broad daylight.

After I'd filed my final story for Fairfax, and began to think about the Monday flight back to

Australia, via Atlanta and Los Angeles, *The Age's* sports editor Patrick Smithers - who always had a good nose for a news story - rang to suggest I follow Norman to Hilton Head in South Carolina, where he'd entered to play the Heritage Classic the following week.

The task was simple, said Patrick: get a one-on-one interview with Norman.

I managed to hitch a ride to Hilton Head with that most excellent Australian freelance golf writer, Bernie McGuire, and found a room in a cheap hotel.

On the Tuesday, Bernie and I knew Norman would make his first



Commsiderations: Faldo and Norman embrace after the final round

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When he awoke on Monday morning, it hit home for the first time what a golden opportunity he had let slip.

“I woke up angry, only angry at myself because I realised I had let myself down, which you don’t like doing but sometimes it happens in life,” he said.

He said his spirits had been lifted by the messages of sympathy he had received from around the globe: “There’s been a flood of commiserations from all around the world, to tell you the truth. It’s been phenomenal. I really can’t describe

messages from all parts of the globe, but mainly Australia.

“I started reading some of them and it breaks you up, some of the responses. I’m going to keep every single one of them; I’m not going to throw them away,” he said.

After the questions had finished, and Norman began to walk away, he mentioned to McGuire that he was having a party that night aboard his boat, *Aussie Rules*, which was moored in Hilton Head harbor. Would he (McGuire) like to come? Sure, said Bernie, and can I bring along my mate, Charlie? No problem, said The Shark.

So that’s how two scruffily-dressed Australian journalists found themselves aboard *Aussie Rules* that night.

At 29 metres, it was more a luxury liner than a boat, panelled inside with Australian silky oak and filled with enough television sets, bars, chairs and exotic trimmings to equip a small hotel.

Among the first to arrive were Nick Price, and his wife, Sue. Then came Frank Chirkinian, producer of CBS television’s golf telecasts, Jeff Sluman, Davis Love, Peter Jacobsen, Frank Nobilo and a host of other golfers. Navarro was playing barman.

Dressed casually, the world’s highest-profile golfer welcomed each guest with a smile and warm handshake that appeared heartfelt. If Norman had suffered a tragedy in the past 48 hours, he wasn’t letting it show.

And he still found time to give Bernie and me a guided tour of the boat, proudly pointing out all its bells-and-whistles features.

Yet, beneath the stoic façade, you sensed that he’d have traded it in – and many of his other million-dollar toys besides – for the one prize he most coveted: a garish green woollen jacket that might struggle to sell at the local op shop. ☐



All aboard: Norman and friends on his luxury boat

appearance at the Harbour Town course for a practice, even though we felt he’d try to sneak in and out without being noticed.

And after just nine holes, he did try to scarper from the ninth green with Navarro but a handful of journalists managed to head him off at the pass. Norman could have put his head down and marched straight to his courtesy car but – as he invariably did – looked his questioners in the eye and answered every question that was fired at him.

“OK, so people realise he does screw up, he does make mistakes, he is a human being, he does take 78 on the final day of a major,” Norman said of himself. “But I’m stronger than that. It will take a lot more to lay me out - like a bullet here between the eyes.”

the support I’ve had - from friends I knew I had, and some I didn’t know about. There hasn’t been a player who hasn’t come up and said something, which means a lot,” Norman said.

After flying back to Florida on Sunday night, Norman, his wife, Laura, daughter, Morgan-Leigh, and manager, Frank Williams, were met at the airport by three close friends and the group stayed in the plane on the tarmac for the next hour-and-a-half, drinking beer and talking.

Less than four hours later, Norman took Morgan-Leigh and his son, Gregory, to school then, still tired and hungover, went to his office for an early meeting. There, he found the fax machine awash with