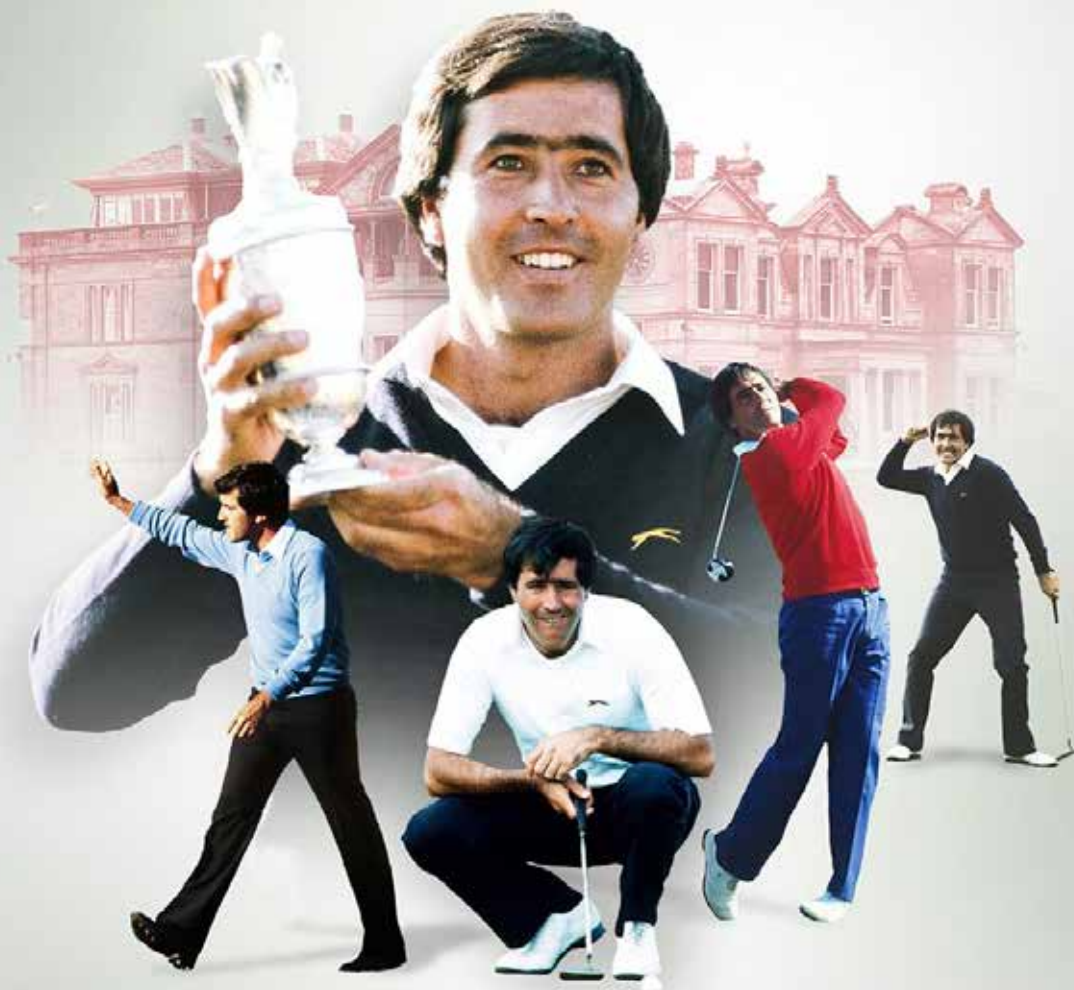


# SEVE BALLESTEROS'S

*Touch of Class*



The 1984 Open Championship and the  
Meaning of Europe's Greatest Golfer

**KENNY REID**

Foreword by Andrew Cotter

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# PRACTICE ROUND

*'Everything you can imagine is real.'*

**Pablo Picasso**

## 1983: The Masters Tournament

### *Battles at Augusta National – A Dramatic Charge – Tension in 1980 – A Chip-and-Run*

SEVE GESTURED the American should go first. Tom Watson motioned for the Spaniard to play, Ballesteros stoic as he glared, focused on his approach to Augusta National's alluring but dangerous par-five 15th. Into a strong breeze, with Watson hooking his drive, both players had laid up and faced testing wedges to a pin cut front left, silvery waters beckoning a mishit or undercooked third shot. Was Watson being polite, wondered Seve. Maybe it was politeness cloaked in an effort to disconcert him? On the angle, it was Ballesteros to play. He took the pin out of the equation, knocking his ball to the back of the putting surface. Watson learned nothing, and the European's four-shot lead was intact.

The 1983 Masters Tournament was once again within Severiano Ballesteros's gift, but for 90 minutes it had been in the balance. A Monday finish was the result of rain wiping out Friday's play, and on this bright spring day in Georgia, as the rest of the planet went about its daily toil, Ballesteros had seemingly tried to erase his own lead. Playing in the penultimate group with Watson, one stroke behind the leaders Ray Floyd and defending champion Craig Stadler, the Spanish two-time major winner had left the starting grid with all cylinders firing.

Dressed in his favourite final-day blue – a paler shade courtesy of Lacoste when in the US – in contrast to the sombre brown and fawn of Watson, and with American Nick DePaul hefting his Sounder bag around the course of Bob Jones's dreams, Seve immediately attacked Alister MacKenzie's masterpiece. He striped a 7-iron through the breeze into eight feet at the 400-yard 1st. Birdie. At the downhill, boomerang-shaped 555-yard 2nd the Spanish *experto* smacked a drive 300 yards, flushed a 4-wood on to the green and canned the 15-foot eagle putt: this was met with barely a change in demeanour, a subtle smile acknowledging the second gain of the day. A par followed at the 360-yard 3rd after almost holing a 20-footer for another birdie. Then Seve stiffed his 2-iron at the tricky par-three 4th. Two feet. Seve was four under par through four holes and had vaporised the leaders' slim advantage: three, three, four, two saw him accelerating away from Watson, overtaking Floyd and Stadler at speed, beating the field average for those holes by more than four shots. He was two ahead of Floyd, three in front of Watson and Tom Kite. Kite remarked that while the rest of the field were Chevrolets, Seve had started like a Ferrari. Then, like a finely tuned, high-end sports car, Seve began to misfire.

'Tall, dark, and handsome, Ballesteros had blossomed into an exceptional golfer and a major box-office attraction. He hit glorious long irons and could shoot like Wyatt Earp – he was deadly.'

**Robert Sommers**, *The US Open: Golf's Ultimate Challenge*

A front nine of 31 cemented his position, but at the often-treacherous short 12th, Golden Bell, he overshot the green, perhaps a subconscious pull as a reaction to the threat of missing short right and ending in Rae's Creek. The tee shot landed in the shrubbery, but trickled back towards the short stuff. Earlier,

Scott Simpson had taken a treble bogey from the vegetation. Ballesteros settled for a four. At Azalea, the par-five 13th, Seve hooked his drive into the woods left of the stream, fortunately found his ball, hacked out on to the fairway and then took on the pin with his next, a 6-iron. Crazy or confident, he whipped it through the breeze, right at the stick, the pin cut towards the water. The ball stuck on the front of the green, 15 feet from the pin, 15 feet from the creek. In a later Masters video compilation, Jim Kelly, the US commentator, would say, 'Oh my, goodness gracious, where does a man get the moxie to pull off a shot like that, at a moment like this?' Severiano Ballesteros was no stranger to moxie.

Seve burned the right side of the hole, narrowly missing his birdie. They would say Ballesteros was lucky finding his tee shot, and getting it back into play with his second. He resolved to complete the final four holes in par; he'd been in this position before. Almost. On winning the Masters in 1980, he faced similar dilemmas. Entering round four he was 13 under par and seven shots ahead of American Ed Fiori, bidding to become the second overseas winner after Gary Player, three green jackets in his wardrobe. Player's most recent had been the 1978 instalment when he shot seven birdies in the last ten holes, a 64, and defeated, among others, the defending champ Tom Watson into second place. Seve told his early biographer, Dudley Doust, 'I think Player maybe likes to think people are against him so he can fight harder. I'm like that. The more against you are the crowd, the more you want to prove something.' This brand of negative reinforcement would become a salve to Seve Ballesteros. Great sportsmen and women use all manner of methods to galvanise themselves. To the fan he was artist and noble warrior; to others, invader and pillager. By the time Seve entered the back nine in 1980 he'd mentally gone through winning the tournament, but had these visualisations truly considered a lead of ten shots



with nine to play after he engineered a flawless 33 on the front side? The lowest winning total was there for the taking. A back nine of 34 would hand Seve the first Masters trophy won by a European, from the biggest-ever 54-hole lead, in a total of 270 blows. Then he faltered severely, as if he stopped focusing, and it became, for a while, a contagion. He three-putted the 10th, double-bogeyed the 12th, and bogeyed the 13th as his nearest challengers made advances. At one stage his lead was cut to four. Was this in Seve's mind in 1983? Possibly. It's likely it was in Tom Watson's. Maybe there was a score to settle. In 1980 Seve eventually won his first green jacket; in 1981 he missed the cut and, as defender, measured up Tom Watson for his second. In 1983 the Spaniard pulled himself together, made four more pars and came to the last with a four-shot lead as Stadler endeavoured to make birdies behind him.

On the final tee, sweater illuminated by the dying sun, Ballesteros's tee shot was slightly pushed, his backswing almost perfectly reaching the horizontal but pointing a fraction towards the pines. Tom Watson watched, as did Seve, the Spaniard listing to the left, cosmically encouraging his ball to do likewise. As the hole breaks to the right at the top of the steep rise, then about 250 yards from the tee, the ball clattered into the timber but pinged back to the side of the fairway. Lucky in anyone's book. Seve tramped up the rise looking relaxed, right hand raised, acknowledging the polite near-victory applause from the patrons. His Hollywood features were radiant in the dusky sunlight, shadows amplifying his good looks, belying the pressure of the last few hours. As the shadows grew, and fuelled by the near-certainty of a second win in Georgia and a breeze at his back, Seve's approach overshot the green by some 15 yards, beyond the flag by 20. He was faced with a chip back over short grass before reaching a fast green, the pin, and then the slope to the bottom tier.

'I was four shots clear. I wasn't worried at all,' Ballesteros would say.

He eyed up the chip for a couple of minutes, hands on hips, arms moving back and forth, imagining the shot, how the ball would react. As he took his stance, he realised he had to move some of the gallery back, including a Pinkerton guard who'd get a mouthful of wedge if he remained stationary. Tom Watson and his caddy, Bruce Edwards, watched from the back right of the green. Some in the US media would say the Spaniard fluffed his chip, but in truth he struck a delicate shot that stuck to the short grass a fraction more than expected, finishing a yard shy of the putting surface. At Augusta, another ounce of power or a fractional change in one of the ball's hops could've delivered it to a matter of feet. Seve gave a wry smile. He walked to caddy DePaul, handed his iron back, surveyed his lie and the remaining few feet to the green: a shot that would gather pace on a green as slick as a billiard table. As Ballesteros contemplated the proposition, Stadler missed birdie at the 17th and the Spaniard's lead remained intact. Seve did not know this. Yet. CBS commentator Ken Venturi suggested the safe shot would be a putter, 'guiding it down as close as he can'; however, the player had already pulled an iron. He got over the ball, feet close together, body fractionally open, clubhead just ahead of the heel of his left golf shoe. His strong, slender hands looked relaxed and at home on the grip. With a short swing and fluid cock of the wrists the ball was smoothly chipped on to the putting surface.

'Go in!' came the high-pitched tone of a southern belle. The ball smoothly rolled straight into the heart of the hole. Ballesteros straightened up, looked around and gave a gentle fist pump followed by a shake of the arm. He'd won his second Masters in three years. He saluted the crowd and walked to the hole. CBS declared it destiny; but also focused on an alternative.

'That ball was not going very slow,' declared Venturi.

'If he hadn't hit the pin, he might have gone down that slope,' Pat Summerall figured.

Venturi continued, 'It hit the pin, it went in the hole, it was meant to be.'

CBS seemed to think he was lucky – Tom Watson was later reported to have concurred – even though the ball ran into the cup like a well-paced putt. It was dramatic, great for the fans and global television. Seve had won in the USA. Again.

Ballesteros resented the tag of being lucky. He'd been crowned the 'Car Park Champion' at Royal Lytham in 1979 on winning his first Open. Hale Irwin declared him fortunate on a number of occasions that week. Seve had attacked the Lancashire links from the outset, recognising the further up a hole one got, the less intense the rough. At Augusta National, some of the media and players focused on luck and chance, but the numbers didn't lie. In the heat of battle, the Spaniard shot the second-lowest round of the day, only Ben Crenshaw had beaten him, with a classy 68. Watson, Floyd and Stadler shot 73, 75 and 76. Their Chevys had piled up on the first lap, fenders crumpled, engines smoking, co-driving caddies dazed and confused. Even if Seve hadn't chipped in he could've two-putted and won by two. He could've lost more shots on the back nine, but he didn't. 'The greats' like Palmer, Nicklaus and Player all recognised the wisdom of luck, that it appeared often when one was in full flight, when all the hard work had been put in elsewhere and in preparation, and now it was time for a gentle break. But often a gentle break can be golf's Grim Reaper in disguise, toying with a player's mind, a suggestion of time running out or that one's reserves have been depleted. Quality players refocus and charge on, taking good fortune as a sign of what now must be done, not entertaining the threat of future shots being met with no luck or, worse, bad luck. Later in 1983,

when Seve chipped in to force World Match Play extra holes against Arnold Palmer, Palmer was asked if the Spaniard was lucky: 'No, not lucky. When I was young and making those, I used to like to think they were just good shots.'

Watson and Ballesteros did not directly get on, and while there was never hostility, there was also no sense of *genuine warmth*. There was, however, the respect one must give to one's hunter. Perhaps Watson was not conscious of his own luck and how, as so often in the way of golf, great players make that happen. In the 1977 Open Championship's 'Duel in the Sun', on the 15th hole of the final round at Turnberry, Watson pulled his 4-iron to the short hole, landed inches beyond the bunker guarding the left and came to rest five yards from the putting surface in some scraggly grass. He faced a putt of 60 feet: after leaving the putter face the ball jumped slightly, but landed back on Watson's intended line. With at least ten feet of pace too much the ball rattled the pin and dropped. It was a massive dent in Nicklaus's expectations. Jack was 12 feet from the hole but did not come close to making birdie. The rest, in 1977, is history. In 1982 Watson chipped in at Pebble Beach's 17th, helping him win his only US Open. Watson predicted that chip in, telling his caddy he'd make it, but later admitted it may have been a once-in-a-lifetime shot. To utilise luck you have to be in position, playing well, with a crystal-clear mind. Seve was now the luckiest player in golf. He was three days into his 26th year, had won three majors, two of them in the USA.

In summing up the 1983 Masters Tournament, Herbert Warren Wind wrote in *The New Yorker*:

On [sic] the last round of the Masters, after taking command with that glorious surge in the first four holes, he kept his emotions well in check and played his way home with the blend of assertiveness and prudence the

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situation called for. If he sets his mind to it, there is no limit to what Ballesteros can accomplish in the years ahead.

Tom Watson would tell *The New York Times* that during the early holes of that final 18 he felt like a boxer being floored twice in the first round. In Seve's opinion, the first four holes in the last round were the best he ever played.