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## The Year of His Life

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Five times Mark Wilson went to the PGA Tour's dreaded Qualifying Tournament and survived. Any lesser man might have given up at three or four. Like life, however, in golf, patience and persistence often pay off.

Wilson, a Wisconsin native and Illinois resident, is the embodiment of a grinder on Tour. Never quite playing well enough to stay on the big tour full-time, the 32-year old has finally benefited from the fruits of his labor. The 2007 PGA Tour season has been his best as a professional, highlighted by a win at the Honda Classic which earned him nearly \$1 million. The hefty payday not only secured his playing status for 2008, it also catapulted him into the new PGA Tour playoff series late this summer.

The breakthrough season as a golfer has coincided with new beginnings off the course as well for Wilson. He told Midwest Golfing Magazine about that among other topics including dealing with the pressure of competing in a sudden-death playoff, going head-to-head with Tiger Woods, and playing golf during the winter in the Midwest.

**Midwest Golfing Magazine:** *This has been your breakthrough season on the PGA Tour with a dramatic win at the Honda Classic (in March), what has made the difference?*

**Mark Wilson:** My improvement really has to do with a new approach to the game. I am not working as much on my physical mechanics anymore, instead realizing that I am 32 years old and have a certain swing and putting stroke and they are probably not going to change. So I work with what I have. I go play now thinking about my target and trying to send the ball there, trusting that my body knows what to do to get the ball to go in the proper direction.

**MGM:** *Describe the pressure coming down the stretch at Honda and in the four-man playoff knowing where you have been and where you might go. Did it seem like destiny that those putts kept rolling in?*

**MW:** I felt a bit weak physically, just because of the immense pressure. I

did a decent job of trying to downplay it to myself and never looked at a leaderboard until the 17th hole, but the last few holes, it almost felt like an out of body experience with a couple swings.

They went so fast I couldn't feel anything. The putts were different though. My thought process on those was the best it has ever been for me. I was physically shaking on most of those putts but I saw that as a normal reaction to the situation. That in itself calmed me, and my target focus was great. When the putt went in on 16 (a 45-footer to save par in the final round on Sunday), I definitely felt like it was meant to be for me. Then when the 30-footer went in on the first playoff hole (on Monday), I knew God was making it happen for me.





**MGM:** How do you manage to compete not being known as one of the longer hitters on tour (Wilson was ranked 137th in driving distance this season at 283.9 yards per drive through Sept. 4)?

**MW:** I never try to hit shots I am uncomfortable hitting, i.e. going at a tucked pin with a long iron or trying to advance it too far out of the rough. And when the courses play somewhat firm, you'd be surprised at how far I can drive it.

**MGM:** Tour life can be portrayed as a pretty glamorous lifestyle, what is it really like for most? What lessons have you learned? How do you manage your family life and still go forward?

**MW:** My five years on golf's mini-tours are the best thing that could have happened to me because I know how good we have it on Tour. I think the best thing is that we get to play golf courses that are in the best shape they ever will be in and they usually have been closed down for weeks before we arrive so there are few ball marks and divots. I pinch myself at the conditions we see. In regards to the lifestyle, the hardest part is being away from home so much. For instance, my wife gave birth to our first child on the Monday (Aug. 27) of the Deutsche Bank Championship, the second event of the new PGA Tour playoffs, which I was eligible for. All of me wanted to withdraw and spend the week with my wife and new baby boy, but collectively we decided that it made sense to gut it out for five days in Boston and play the tournament.

**MGM:** Because your career has been a fight to stay on Tour, did you ever think about pursuing something else? Can you think of a moment that you almost gave it up?

**MW:** I remember in 2001 struggling a bit on the Hooters Tour and thinking I was done. Then I qualified for the Western Open and found myself in sixth place after two rounds. Also

after struggling the entire year in 2002 on the Nationwide Tour, I was considering calling up the Golf Channel to see if there was something I could do for them, but that Fall, I had my best Tour school ever and got my PGA Tour card for the first time.

**MGM:** What is your best Tiger Woods story or encounter?

**MW:** We played each other in the finals at the USGA Junior Amateur in 1992. One moment stands out as it was an even match on the 17th hole. I made a six-footer for par and he fol-



lowed me in by making a five-footer for par. We hadn't talked all day long, but walking to the 18th tee where it was secluded from the gallery and therefore quiet, he leaned over to me and said casually, "Nice putt," which I returned, "You too." He ended up winning the 18th hole and the title, but it was a memory that lives on with me. I seldom go a week without thinking about that day.

**MGM:** *Why do you choose to make the Midwest your home?*

**MW:** My wife is from Chicago. Her family is still there and my parents and most of my family live in Wisconsin. So we wouldn't have it any other way. Family and friends are first. It is a short flight down to Florida if I want to get some practice in during the winter.

**MGM:** *Have you ever played golf in winter in the Midwest?*

**MW:** I have played plenty during the winter in the Midwest. If there is no snow cover, I have found myself out in 25-degree weather working on my game. My favorite story was when my friend and I went down to a course that never closes near the Wisconsin-Illinois border. There was little snow left, but most of

the greens were frozen solid. One of us would hit a great looking shot right at the pin and see it land on the green, bounce like it hit a cart path, and bound way over the green. After a few holes, we realized that we had to treat it like a U.S. Open and run the ball up to the greens. It was great for the imagination. And that hot chocolate after the round never tasted so good.

**MGM:** *How did you get into the game as a youngster and what triggered a decision to pursue a professional career?*

**MW:** My dad started me at two years old, giving me instruction and all the opportunities I could ever ask for. I played my first tournament, the Milwaukee Sentinel Junior, at Brown Deer Park, when I was 11. When I was in college, I decided I had the game to at least give pro golf a whirl.

**MGM:** *Who would be your dream foursome?*

**MW:** Ben Hogan, Les Wilson (my dad), Reginald Wilson (my dad's dad). My grandpa started my dad with the game when he was about 10 or 11 and I never got a chance to play a full round of golf with him, so that would be

extra special. Now if my new son enjoys the game and wants to play with me, I might have to bump out Ben Hogan.

**MGM:** *The PGA Tour's FedEx Cup playoffs have received mixed reviews, what is your opinion of the new format?*

**MW:** It's Exciting. It is having more of the top players play as we head into the Tour Championship. I think Jim Furyk and Phil Mickelson made their TPC Boston debuts this year, for instance. It is interesting getting a feel for how the points are working in the playoffs. The points are doubled from the regular season, but you still need to finish in the top 20 to make any kind of move. It really rewards top 10 finishes. It is much better to finish MC-MC-5th, than to finish 20th-20th-20th even though the latter would show more consistency.

**MGM:** *What's ahead for Mark Wilson, the golfer, in 2008?*

**MW:** Well, Mark Wilson can finally plan his playing schedule when the schedule is published. Other years, I didn't know what events I would get into, but in 2008, I can focus on courses I like and hopefully play my way into some major championships.

