



Introduction

“Golf is like a grindstone – whether it grinds you down or polishes you up, depends on what you are made of” – Anon.

This is a story about struggle, not of the life-threatening kind, but the type that shapes sportsmen, their self-respect, their relationships, their careers.

For journeymen golfers with everyday problems like mortgages to pay, wives and children to care for, with parents who loan them money, securing a regular place on the European Tour is the one thing that drives them all. This book is about seven players’ journeys to try to fulfil the dream of a place among golf’s elite.

Some of the seven have never played on that Tour at all, others want to return after a painful absence and a few are trying to hang on to their place. But all of them understand that the road to the Tour is rugged and one of sport’s ultimate instruments of torture can stand in their way: the Qualifying School aka Q School or, more formally, the PGA European Tour School.

The 14-round, three-stage Q School is both a blessing and a curse: succeeding at the School gives players a Tour Card, the passport to playing in some of the most prestigious tournaments and a prospective jet-set lifestyle of fame and fortune. Failing at the School can leave a player in golf’s equivalent of the twilight zone.

The tension at Q School makes it one of sport’s most gut-churning events; it is where careers can either be launched in a single moment of glory or extinguished by a single mistake.

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Only players in the top 30 at the very end of the Q School marathon receive a Tour Card. Of the players who attempt this feat, 97% fail; the odds of success at Q School are long, but the players keep returning because the potential rewards are huge.

The seven professionals in this story all know Q School intimately. Sion Bebb, James Conteh, Phil Golding, Euan Little, Andy Raitt, Martyn Thompson and Guy Woodman all have different backgrounds and different ranges of ability. They are each at a crossroads in their careers and to fulfil their dream of that regular European Tour place means another trip to Q School, a place that is not just a barrier but also a lifeline..

The seven can take heart because some of the world's best players have passed through the School: Colin Montgomerie, Jose Maria Olazabal, Pádraig Harrington, Retief Goosen, Vijay Singh, Sandy Lyle, Ian Woosnam as well as today's younger superstars like Henrik Stenson, Lee Westwood, Justin Rose, Ian Poulter, Nick Dougherty and many more. And not all these players sailed through the Q School examination first time: for example, Poulter was a four-time visitor before he secured a Card.

What every Q School graduate recognises is that the event is a golfing beast that can chew up even the best players and spit them out bewildered and badly damaged.

If there was any doubt about how tough life can be on the fringes of the Tour then listen to a man like Paul Broadhurst who has seen the best and the worst of it as well as having been a multiple European Tour winner and Ryder Cup player.

Paul first got through Q School in 1988 at the age of 23, the year he turned pro and he went on to enjoy a great five years. The West Midlander won tournaments, played in the Ryder Cup and in all the major championships; he even got married and started a family. Life was good. But then his golf game deserted him and he found himself back at Q School aged 36; that was 2001 and he failed to win back a Tour Card. Suddenly, Paul saw the end his life at the top table of European golf flash before his eyes.

The following year, 2002, Paul returned to Q School again with his confidence at its lowest ebb, his life was in turmoil. Paul – a multiple Tour Winner – felt he was under a grotesque kind of pressure, a feeling even worse than trying to win a Tour title. But somehow he succeeded “When I got my Card back in 2002 I shot 67 and 66 on the weekend and that 66 is one of the best rounds I've ever had, probably not the best, but under the circumstances it's right up there. To play six under when you know your livelihood is on the line, I took a lot from that. Maybe Q School is not as much pressure for someone who's just starting out because they have plenty of other chances, but for someone like me it is. I'd been out on Tour for nearly 15 years by then and I had nothing to fall back on.”

For Paul and many of his counterparts, the Q School symbolises the professional golfer's most profound struggle. Of course, trying to win a major championship

is fraught with nerves, but the Q School is different. This strange tournament of extremes represents both hope and hopelessness and the players who succeed there are worthy of the total admiration of anyone who has ever swung a golf club. And for those who fail, there is always next year.

The idea of an end-of-season Q School for the European Tour first came about in the 1970s as the pro game looked for a better system than Monday qualifiers at each different event. Why not place the players in a ranking system so that the best would get first pick of all the tournaments and so on. Entry to tournaments became predicated on a golfer's category or his exemptions based on past performances, prize money earned, Tour titles won or his position at Q School.

The first European Tour Q School took place in 1976 and pro golf on this continent suddenly had a more manageable structure. Back then there were only a few hundred players who craved the life of a tournament pro because there were relatively few events (around 20) and prize money was small (even the Open champion won just £62,000).

It took a while for the ranking system to develop into the one we recognise today. By 1984, an elite group of 125 pros was established by the end-of-season money list; they all received a Tour Card for the next season while the Q School gave Cards to 50 players. Nowadays, the numbers have changed (Tour Cards are given to the top 115 players at the end of each season and Q School Cards go to the top 30 and ties) but the basic system remains. The Q School is open to a whole range of players, from the club pro and the golfing journeyman tournament player meet the aspiring young amateur or even the ex-Tour champion. The only major change to Q School is that it is now a huge event in itself; 11 separate tournaments staged over a three-month period in five different countries.

The PGA European Tour is not the only pro golf with an end-of-season Q School, but Europe's version is the most cosmopolitan (golfers from more than 40 countries normally enter) and is therefore arguably the toughest. The focus of this story is the European Tour Q Schools of 2006 and 2007 and the 12 months in between; both tournaments involved over 850 players and the competition was fiercer than ever before.

The seven players in this book were living their European Tour dream during this period, but it was not without risk either to their marriages, their relationship with parents, their future financial security, the risk of long-term injury or even – so it seems at times – their sanity. All the players were willing to suffer this distress because of the immense potential value of a Q School Tour Card.

All they have to do is turn up at the most important tournament of their season and, under severe, relentless pressure, play some of the best golf of their lives. The only problem is, of course, that 800 other pros are trying to do just the same thing.

The Cast of Characters

The story starts in December 2006, the month after the 2006 European Tour Q School has taken place.

The seven featured golfers would love to find a way to somehow play regularly on the Tour without having to suffer another Q School torture session, but they know that this is highly improbable. Nevertheless, as another new season dawns, hope still springs eternal.

Sion Bebb – Sion almost retired from tournament golf in 2006, the struggle – for both financial and domestic reasons – was becoming too onerous. But at the end of that season, he won a Tour Card for the very first time after 20 years as a pro and it gave him new hope. However, if he thought getting to the summit was difficult then he would spend 2007 finding out how hard it was to stay there. Sion has a self-effacing nature and probably needs to recognise just how good he actually is if he is to succeed. *Career status at December 2006: Q School Tour Card winner; 2007 prospects: regular on the European Tour.*

James Conteh – When your father was a boxing world champion (John Conteh), you have a lot of sporting heritage to live up to and it can get lonely out there even when your mum is your caddie. James is an accomplished player who is battling his own demons as a young golf pro with his own dream rather than his father's expectations. But the problem remains that James is stuck on the mini tours and his nightmare is that this is all there is to his career. *Career status at December 2006: eliminated from Q School at Second Stage; 2007 prospects: EuroPro & Jamega Tours.*

Phil Golding – No British golfer has been to Q School more often than Phil, he is Mr Persistent with 17 visits. In 2003 he shattered talk of an unfulfilled career by actually winning his first European Tour title; the years of struggle seemed to be behind him. However, three years later (2006) he found himself back at Q School and failed again to gain a Card. Now in his forties, Phil has to wonder if his best years are behind him. If he fails again at Q School 2007, his Tour career may be over for good. *Career status at December 2006: eliminated from Q School at Final Stage after four round cut; 2007 prospects: occasional European Tour invites & Challenge Tour.*

Euan Little – Euan is a charming, unassuming Scot uniformly liked by his fellow pros, but he is still waiting for the glorious golf career that was predicted for him as a teenager by his famous coach Bob Torrance. He has yo-yo'd around

the edge of the Tour for several years and in November 2006 suffered one of the most painful Q School heartbreaks, missing an 8ft sliding putt on the very final green at Final Stage to leave him one shot short of a Tour Card. Euan vows to improve in the next 12 months so that such torture will not happen again. *Career status at December 2006: eliminated from Q School after six rounds of Final Stage; 2007 prospects: Sunshine Tour, Challenge Tour & occasional European Tour.*

Andy Raitt – A freak injury to his left hand over a decade ago meant Andy has already lost his career once as well as his first wife, virtually all his money and the hope of a glorious golfing future. In the last few seasons he has spent almost as much time in an operating theatre or a re-hab facility than on the golf course. Somehow he has also found the courage to fight his way back, and his Tour Card win in November 2006 was one of the great fairy stories of recent Q Schools. But his battle with the injury is not over and it could still be the cause of a shortened career. Andy will spend the year trying to prove that he can still play with the big boys. *Career status at December 2006: Q School Tour Card winner; 2007 prospects: regular on the European Tour.*

Martyn Thompson – Martyn is a solid family man, he's very successful as a traditional club pro, and life has been good to him. But there is still a stone in his golf shoe – he believes that there is a chance that a 43-year-old naturally-athletic golfer could yet break onto the European Tour for the first time. It would be one of the most romantic stories in golf if it happened – the long-time club pro who becomes a member of golf's elite – and Martyn is prepared to risk his quiet life at home to chase the dream and the riches of the Tour. *Career status at December 2006: eliminated from Q School at Second Stage; 2007 prospects PGA regional events and pro-ams.*

Guy Woodman – Guy's dream since he was 12 has been to become a top tournament golfer, but his struggle has been almost overwhelming at times. His life changed when The Golf Channel made him a star of their reality show The Big Break in 2005. Suddenly Guy was a celebrity and tasted the big time. This is a young player who has given up so much to be the best he can be, but will his TV appearance be the high-point of his career or can he use that unique experience to create something else – a life on the PGA European Tour. *Career status at December 2006: eliminated from Q School at Second Stage; 2007 prospects: EuroPro Tour.*