

# Just one of the Guys

One-time Tour pro turned TV analyst, Mark Roe is now establishing himself as one of the game's leading short-game coaches. Bill Elliott tracked him down at Wentworth...

Portrait: Tom Miles

**O**n a bitterly cold morning at Wentworth, Mark Roe is doing what he has always done better than most. While the wind howls around his ankles, the 45-year-old drops balls into clag that masquerades as rough before sliding a wedge through the grass and popping them high into the air. At the end of this short exhibition of subtle talent, he offers his usual brand of infectious enthusiasm for golf to the small audience that has gathered for this treat.

This audience is made up of myself, *Golf Monthly's* photographer Tom Miles and two-time winner on the European Tour, Nick Dougherty. We all smile approvingly as Roe encourages our endorsement with his trademark grin of deserved self-congratulation. "See what I mean?" he asks Dougherty. "See what I mean?" The young Englishman nods. Slowly, on this deep November morning in Surrey, Roe is unwrapping his box of short-game tricks. Dougherty is paying him to do this. He has hired the eternal prankster because his own short game is crucially deficient and because Dougherty is among the growing band of professional observers who believe Roe is emerging as one of the best short-game coaches in the world. Maybe, just maybe, he will eventually be seen as the best.

"I've come to Mark for help because I need to sharpen up around the green," says Dougherty. "Remember, I led 12 events out of 27 played in 2007, and won one. I should have won more. I've watched older guys, like Miguel Ángel Jiménez, and have seen how easy they make a stellar short game seem. If Mark can improve my scoring by one shot a round, it would be massive. It's great because I know that with some real work ethic I can genuinely improve my game."

Over the next hour, I watch as Dougherty listens and tries to improve. The big news is that even to my bleary eye, he actually does. Roe's expertise – on top of, crucially, an ability to communicate – transforms the younger man's bunker play and then encourages him to attempt the sort of recovery shot from deep rough to a short-sided pin position that he, frankly, has been afraid to try in the past. Of course their work is not yet done. Roe will continue to coax and coach Dougherty throughout 2009 and it is up to the player to have the confidence to take his new game out into the heat of battle. The one thing Roe cannot inject into a pupil is true self-confidence. But he can try. Believe, execute, and you will believe more – it's his basic mantra.

## New beginnings...

"I don't think of myself as a coach," he says later over a warming lunch, Dougherty having departed to prepare for an exit to Florida and a five-week stint of trying to hit those demanding shots in warmer weather than what was on offer at Wentworth. "No, I still regard myself as 'one of them' – a player who does a bit of coaching."

This coaching lark, however, was not part of his game plan when he retired from tournament golf two years ago. His farewell round was a 67 on the Old Course on the Sunday of the Alfred Dunhill; a classy goodbye over what always has been his favourite piece of turf. More than a few players had greeted with incredulity his earlier announcement that he was done with the game as a professional. After all, he was 43 and still in decent shape. His game was good enough and the thought that he might add to his three Tour victories was not greeted with anything other than agreement by rivals. In other words, he was not, as so often is the case, clinging on. »



He had, though, had enough. Not of playing, but of travelling; the eternal flights; the blandly comfortable hotels; the hours of aching boredom. A bright man can only have so much enthusiasm for these chores and for Roe, the jerk of constantly leaving behind his wife Julia and twin daughters, Alexandra and Emily, had grown too large and painful.

So he walked away from what could have continued to be a very comfortable life earning a more than decent living. He knew it was the right thing for him to do, but he knew also that he had voluntarily turned his life upside down. Roe has earned well over the years, but he is not rich; he needs to work both for money and sanity. He agrees that there was the odd panicky moment as he surveyed what he could do next.

“Yes, of course, I had trepidation about the future, but I’d made the decision carefully. I realised that it was over for me when I got into a taxi to head to another airport and felt, really felt, that I just didn’t want to do this anymore. The kids were getting older (they are now eight) and you’re just passing through their lives, dumping off washing and then heading out again. It was getting harder to be a father and husband.

“I wanted a change after 22 years of doing the same thing. You know, we all think we’re Peter Pan and we can go on forever, but that’s not the way it is. I was still competitive and still able to play good golf, but the compensations such a lifestyle demanded were no longer good enough.”

## Take two

After leaving the European Tour, Roe spent the first six months doing this and that, being a dad and husband and learning martial arts – although whether this latter skill improved the family’s life is uncertain. “It gave me back my pees,” he grins. “For the first time in years I had a full six-pack again.”

Then came a stroke of good fortune, not to mention timing. Setanta had emerged as a rival to Sky for golf coverage, so when Rupert Murdoch’s network set up their *GolfNight* programme in response to the newcomer, Roe was asked if he would like to be on it. He always had media work in mind and had been one of the few pro golfers to wander into a media centre and watch and learn what this black art demanded. Setanta offered work too, but Sky’s package was too good to turn down.

“I’d always had a good trick-shot routine anyway, and I figured that I’d get corporate days doing that. But the Sky job has just been brilliant.

I’m working with an old mate, Rob Lee, and I’m still involved in the game I love, properly involved. Plus, it means I watch an awful lot of golf and I see players’ shortcomings if they have any. That’s why I got involved with Nick Dougherty.

“He is a world-class talent, but his short game doesn’t match the rest. My perception of Nick was that he was excellent tee to green, but that he then got away with poor technique because of an excellent rhythm. What I’m teaching him is spin control.



Roe aims to make Dougherty a more complete player

Roe’s growing reputation means many top players now seek his short-game advice

Once you have that, you have the feel for these shots. I really do believe that ‘feel’ can be taught.”

This, of course, flies in the face of accepted wisdom, but Roe is adamant on this point. He has even promised to improve my bunker play – a problem we will tackle next spring and I’ll tell you how we get on. Believe me, if he can fix that, he really can fix anyone. We’ll see.

Roe was also one of the few players Seve Ballesteros would seek out for a bit of serious chipping competition. Still, he never thought of coaching until after he retired and bumped into Lee Westwood, who claimed that if he had had Roe’s short game, a couple of Majors would by now be in the bag. Roe replied that if Westwood had enjoyed his short game, then he would have won half a dozen big ones. But out of this piece of typical locker-room banter grew an idea: for Roe to teach Westwood.

He travelled up to Worksop at his own expense, asked for no recompense and got to work. The change to the player’s short game was incredible and almost paid the richest of dividends at this year’s US Open.

Under the most exquisite pressure, Westwood revealed a touch to truly envy. One 40-yard up-and-down out of a bunker (an effort that put Lee back in the lead in San Diego) had Roe giggling with delight. “I’d seen him struggle with a couple of

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long bunker shots during the Irish Open and so I got him here at Wentworth and we worked for an hour on that shot. He can play it now.”

He now coaches not just Westwood and Dougherty, but Richard Finch, Ross Fisher, Darren Clarke (for a time anyway), Thomas Bjorn and one or two others. He says the maximum he can teach is eight players. He is more than a little gratified that all his pupils have improved their world ranking and that his four main players have earned in excess of £5 million since he took them on. And, yes, he charges. “I’m not cheap and I know I’m not cheap, but I do believe I’m good.” (Check out his website at [www.markroe.info](http://www.markroe.info).)

## The last laugh

I’m glad Mark Roe is doing so well. In the twenty-something years I’ve known him, he always was one of the good guys – even if his delight in practical jokery meant you knew that eventually you’d have to kill him if you were stranded together on a desert island. Like all instinctive clowns, however, he is actually a serious thinker about serious things.

Photography: Tom Miles, Getty Images

## THE HIGHS AND LOWS

**1985** Joins the European Tour four years after turning pro. Earns just £6,456 and finishes 104th on the Order of Merit.

**1989** Wins first European Tour event at the Catalan Open in Spain. Two other top-ten finishes leave him 26th on the money list with £107,648 in winnings.

**1993** Wins the Lancome Trophy in Paris to record his second Tour victory.

**1994** Most successful season on Tour, finishing ninth on the Order of Merit with £312,540 in winnings. Victory at the French Open is complemented with appearances for England in both the Alfred Dunhill and World Cups.

**1995** Earns only £39,105 (126th OOM), and just £88,329 a year later (79th).

**2003** Tied for 3rd place at the close of the third round at the Open Championship, Roe is disqualified after a scorecard mix-up with Jesper Parnevik at Royal St George’s (left).

**2006** Finishes with a 67 to tie for 15th place at the Alfred Dunhill Links Championship, his final Tour event.



Before he travelled up to see Westwood he had to deconstruct how he actually hit the short shots. It was something he had never properly considered before. For him it had all seemed so natural, so obvious. “That was a really interesting thing for me to do and the great thing is that I don’t just have the full-on theories now; I can prove to you that they really do work. Nothing convinces a player that I know what I’m talking about than for me to explain the theory and then to execute the shot in front of them. That gets them on board very quickly.

“Lee’s great weakness, for example, was playing out of deep rough. It meant he was always frightened of short-siding himself and he didn’t practise the shot because you tend not to do what you’re poor at. That’s human nature. Now he loves the challenge. He has real enthusiasm for all these shots and that delights me no end. Once you’ve mastered these shots it means, for any player, that you can go for the flag on holes where before you’d be aiming for the centre of the green. In pro golf that’s a crucial difference.”

So, the man from Sheffield who was a schoolboy diving champion and an accomplished gymnast is now enjoying a significant TV career as well as a growing reputation as a coach. Happy days indeed... Still, it’s not all been smiley stuff. He is, after all, the silly sod who forgot to exchange cards at the 2003 Open and so tossed away his one chance of winning. “I’m not that presumptuous to think I’d have won The Open,” he says. “No, what niggles me is that I would have played the final round with Tiger Woods. That would have been something to tell the grandchildren. You couldn’t buy that on eBay.”

But you can, apparently, buy a terrific short game... ☺