



“It’s a Dream Life!”

Insists “that guy who blew the British Open,” Jean Van de Velde. **BY MICHAEL KONIK**

WHEN THE BEST players in the world compete this month for the oldest major championship in golf (the Open Championship, a.k.a. the British Open) on perhaps the oldest golf course extant (The Old Course at St. Andrews), I will be rooting feverishly for a young man whose greatest claim to fame is “losing” the iconic claret jug last year at Carnoustie.

Jean Van de Velde, the handsome Frenchman who outplayed the field all week and needed only to make double bogey at the last to become his country’s first winner of the Open, famously made triple, and eventually fell to Scotsman Paul Lawrie in a painful four-hole playoff. With apologies to Lawrie and the other participant in the playoff, American Justin Leonard, I was desperately hoping the French guy would prevail in extra innings. I think most everyone who was not related to the two other combatants through either blood or endorsement deals felt likewise.

Please, we implored the golf gods, *let him have that most elusive gift: redemption! Let him overcome his previous errors and rise again!*

Here was a man who had let what is arguably the most cherished prize in golf slip through his fingers in the most improbable fashion: First, after pushing his drive badly to the right, he hit an ill-advised and only slightly wayward approach shot into a grandstand railing; the ball caromed wildly backward, drawing a pernicious lie in knee-high grass. The now rattled Van de Velde dunked his next shot into the burn fronting the 18th green. (Was there a more indelible image from last year’s majors than that of M. Van de Velde wading barefoot into the stream after his errant ball while the Open Championship quite literally floated away from him?) Then, after thinking better of hitting out of the water, he took a one-stroke penalty and dropped the ball back into the long rough. He then pitched into a greenside bunker and had to make a world-class up-and-down just to get into overtime.

The reason this was such gripping stuff to the average golf fan was that we’ve all been there (not Carnoustie—I mean helplessly watching our game disintegrate). We’ve all melted under the heat of competition, whether it’s for the C-flight of the club championship or a \$5 Nassau with our buddies. Van de Velde’s implosion occurred on the most epic of scales, and anyone with an ounce of compassion in his heart had to be horrified.

I do not think it is overstating the situation to say that in the minds of many careful observers, what we were witnessing at Carnoustie’s 18th was the cruel spectacle of a man’s dreams being extinguished. We were seeing an essential part of his life’s work and hopes excruciatingly crushed. We were watching a man who would never—couldn’t possibly ever—be the same.

Well, those who believed we would never hear of Jean Van de Velde again were mistaken. He did not quit the game of golf. He did not return to France in shame and stumble aimlessly through his haunted life, trading his clubs for a set of gardening shears. He did not crumble.

Happily, Van de Velde’s grace, savoir-faire and estimable golf talent in the wake of last year’s tragedy have spared him from being merely “that French guy who should have laid up.” On the strength of his 1999 earnings, he became in 2000 a full-time member of the American PGA Tour, where he has been anything but a footnote—“that guy who blew the British Open.” As of this writing, he was in the top 70 on the official Tour money list, bolstered by a tie for second in Tucson and a top-20 finish at the Masters.

He’s not going anywhere. And for those of us who love golf, that’s a good thing.

THE VAN DE VELDE FILE

Full Name Jean Van de Velde
Birth Date May 29, 1966
Birthplace Mont de Marsan, France
Residence Geneva, Switzerland
Family Wife, Brigitte; children, Alexandra (age 8), Anne Sophie (3)
Turned professional 1987
PGA European Tour Victories 1
Career Highlights 1986 French Amateur champion . . . represented France on 10 World Cup teams . . . winner 1993 Roma Masters on the PGA European Tour

When I first meet Jean Van de Velde, I am more nervous than I usually am with a new acquaintance. Part of my anxiety is knowing that if I am any sort of responsible journalist I must bring up the, um, well, Carnoustie debacle. (I get stomach cramps just thinking about it, and I wasn't the guy making triple bogey on the 72nd hole.) The other part of my anxiety is that Van de Velde is French—like, seriously French, a certified gastronome and oenophile and, for all I know, an expert on Ingres and Delacroix. One does not take the best French golfer on the planet to Denny's or, for that matter, Mandarin Express. No, one finds the best French restaurant west of the Mississippi, bones up on the Bordeaux vintage charts, does some way-too-obvious name-dropping—"I shall be bringing Monsieur Van de Velde; a nice table, please?"—gets the good suit cleaned and pressed, and prays that monsieur speaks English far better than one speaks français.

So I meet with him at L'Orangerie, easily the swankiest, most Gallic joint in Los Angeles, where a bottle of Evian water goes for \$8.50 and the service is as polished as the silverware. It is a perfect place for "My Dinner With Jean."

The Wine: 1990 Pichon-Longueville

He is cordial and elegant and debonair and well-mannered and eloquent and basically just about everything most professional athletes are not. I forget for a moment that this is the Carnoustie guy. He is dressed beautifully in a perfectly tailored blue suit, and impeccably groomed and instantly personable.

After perusing L'Orangerie's encyclopedic listing of first-growth treasures, Van de Velde pronounces the wine list magnifique—which is a relief, since he is a devout wine man, with his own label, La Réserve de Jean, a meritage produced on a small plot in the Medoc. "I was born in Mont de Marsan, 80 kilometers south of Bordeaux," he explains in lightly accented English. "I grew up even as an infant drinking the good wine. Dinners were always a three- or four-hour affair, and wine, with great body and good smell and a pleasant easy drink, was an important part. Yes, I love wine."

He selects a 1990 Pichon-Longueville and promises it will be one of the best bottles I have ever drunk. "It's my favorite," he says. "I could recognize it blindfolded." I'm happy.

We settle on the five-course menu dégustation, and Van de Velde looks around and says, "A very nice place. Great choice." I'm happier still.

I figure while he's in a good mood I might as well pop the question. As the waiters set down our amuse bouche of artichoke on something I cannot identify, I ask him to tell me how he feels about *what happened*.

"No one likes to lose," he says. "But this game teaches you that you don't win that often. I have no right to complain—and I don't! We're only playing a game, and that is the perspective you must always try to maintain. Of course, I would have rather won than not. And perhaps next time I will. I plan to learn from my mistakes. My first mistake, and maybe my biggest, was that I *didn't think it was over*. I played the 72nd like it was the third or the 27th. If I had truly thought, 'OK, this tournament is over, no one can win it except me,' I probably would have played differently. But you know what? Sometimes I feel I'm not good enough to be mad at what happened. One day I will need to hit a 2-iron over water and make a putt to win a tournament. I didn't do it that day, but I know I can.

"You've got to understand, I play only because I love the game. I play for myself. I could not have laid up then. All week, that is how I played the hole, and at the end I didn't feel I was trying anything spectacular. It's a shot I know I can hit. I just didn't at that moment!"

He is not agitated. Indeed, he seems about as far removed from agitated as one can be while still caring.

First Course: Cream of Eggs and Chestnut Soup

Between sips of the sublime purée, Van de Velde does not need much prodding to continue his remembrance of last July. "I never stopped trying," he says. "It's not like I threw it away because I didn't care. And, honestly, I can tell you I am feeling good with the result. I didn't lose the Open after 72 holes. I lost in a playoff. I mean, what a magic week."

The Grass Office: Dublin, Ireland

The best golf courses in and around Ireland's capital are private, and securing a tee time often requires advance booking. **Citywest Golf Course** (Saggart, County Dublin, 353-1-4010500), the chief amenity of a hotel and conference center about 20 minutes from the heart of the city, is a completely public "daily fee" facility that welcomes outside play on short notice. This course, however, is slightly schizophrenic: The front nine has several holes squeezed into a too-tight plot of land marred by power lines and a neighboring motorway; the back nine has several sublime holes in a far more pastoral setting. Portmarnock it's not. But in a pinch, aye, 'twill do. **Greens fee:** US\$25 and US\$30 on weekends. No restrictions, but very heavily booked most weekends.

—M.K

I like this guy.

His wife calls from France on his cell phone, and Van de Velde looks stricken, mortified. He looks more embarrassed than when he walked off Carnoustie's last green. He apologizes not only to me but also to the patrons at the adjoining table for "the rudeness" and politely asks if he might be excused to take this call.

I *really* like this guy.

Second Course: Lobster Papillotte With Caviar

Van de Velde is telling me about how he became a golf professional, which, I quickly ascertain, happens to Frenchmen with about the same frequency as ownership of a McDonald's franchise.

"I was 6, almost 7," he remembers. "I hated the ocean, where my family went on summer holidays. Somehow I just picked up a club and started swinging it."

He grew up idolizing Seve Ballesteros and Tom Watson and Lee Trevino and, most of all, Jack Nicklaus. "They all had different techniques, so I didn't try to hit it like anyone—I just tried to hit it! I always had the desire, I just didn't think I had a chance," Van de Velde confesses.

Apparently he did. At age 20, after a distinguished amateur career in which he won just about everything there was to win in French golf—which at the time wasn't much—Van de Velde gave himself a two-year "probation" to try being a professional. He qualified for the PGA European Tour in 1988 and has subsequently never lost his card. (His worst year was 70th on the money list.) "The adventure continues," he says, shrugging. "And I'm still here."

One of the restaurant's owners stops by our table. She and Van de Velde banter in French for a few minutes. When she glides away, he courteously translates their conversation for me, unbidden.

This guy is a professional athlete?

Third Course: Filet of John Dory With Fennel Confit

To test my suspicions, I ask Van de Velde to assess his game. This is a prime opportunity for most sports stars to haul out their favorite clichés and neologisms. Leave it to a Frenchman to forgo the obvious in favor of aesthetics. "I'm average in all areas, I think," he says. "But I am a very good 40-foot putter. I try to let my body do what it can, and on the greens I feel I can express myself best."

Express himself?

"Yes, without too much analysis of mechanics," he continues. "You know, when I'm playing my worst I avoid the range so I don't focus on results." After pausing to appreciate the perfectly prepared fish, he says, "It really is a silly game. I'm not even sure I have a gift for it."

Come on, I urge him. Get real. He has a beautiful, lazy golf swing that's like drawn butter dribbling over poached seafood; he can roll the rock like Crenshaw in his prime; and, as the world rankings handily attest, he's one of the top 100 players in the game. No gift?

"Well, I could stop tomorrow and enjoy my life, with or without golf," he says. "I love it, yes. But I choose to focus on my family and friends, my passions: skiing and wine and traveling and restaurants and love. That's what I live for."

Fourth Course: Roasted Rack of Lamb

We are down to the last precious ounces of our wine, which goes marvelously with our chops, tender and tasty as a 100-yard pitch into a freshly watered green. Van de Velde seems genuinely pleased with the meal, underlining his pleasure by saying, "Being here in America, on the PGA Tour, has been fantastic. Great facilities, great golf courses. And they treat the players like royalty. We are spoiled."

"It's a good life you have," I comment.

"No, it's not a good life," he corrects me. "It's a dream life!" Sipping his last drops of the Pichon, Van de Velde says, "But you must know something about me: I would give all the majors I could win to have a balanced life."

I nod a silent toast and drink the last of the wine.

Fifth Course: Chocolate Soufflé

While Van de Velde chats amiably with the waiters and busboys in French and Spanish, I wonder to myself, "How has he done it? How has he so firmly and fully put the past behind him?" We all have been stung by

disappointments, by wounds that never seem to heal completely. Yet M. Van de Velde, who suffered one of the most profound disappointments a professional golfer could endure, has clearly moved beyond his sorrows into a fine clean space where only the next day's adventures await him. What has— or hasn't—happened to him on a golf course seems at this moment a faint and untroubling memory.

"What is it you want from golf, Jean?" I wonder out loud.

"Pleasure," he says, savoring a mouthful of dark chocolate. "Not recognition or fame or riches. I want to be happy with my playing and with the life my playing gives me. Being engraved in history books? Well, in 150 years nobody will remember me anyway. But meeting good people, experiencing interesting travel, inspiring kids to take up this wonderful game—that would be nice."

And winning the Open Championship at St. Andrews?

Jean Van de Velde smiles wryly and says, "That would be nice, too." 🏌️

Nice Shot, Mr. Nicklaus! a collection of articles by Sky golf columnist Michael Konik, will be published this fall.