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Inside:

Beginner Tees Up Plan To Turn Pro After 10,000 Hours

by DAN O'BRIEN

Dan McLaughlin reminds me of my own middle-agedness.

And that was even before he got started on a four-year odyssey to master a game he's never played. The 31-year-old Portlander quit his job as a commercial photographer to prove a point.

"It's a self-experiment," McLaughlin says. "I wanted to see what would happen if I devoted 10,000 hours to master something new. I happened to pick golf."

Since April 15, McLaughlin has been fully engulfed in The Dan Plan, a self-imposed regimen that demands well over 40 hours a week to learn, practice, train and repeat until he reaches his full golfing potential. Based on his best estimate, he expects to have his PGA tour card by 2015.

I met McLaughlin a year ago last summer. Our paths crossed while living an eight-to-five existence in and around a medical-equipment manufacturer south of Portland, on the edge of wine country. We worked a cubical apart. We sat in the same meetings. We did our best to care about corporate branding together, and how value-added messaging

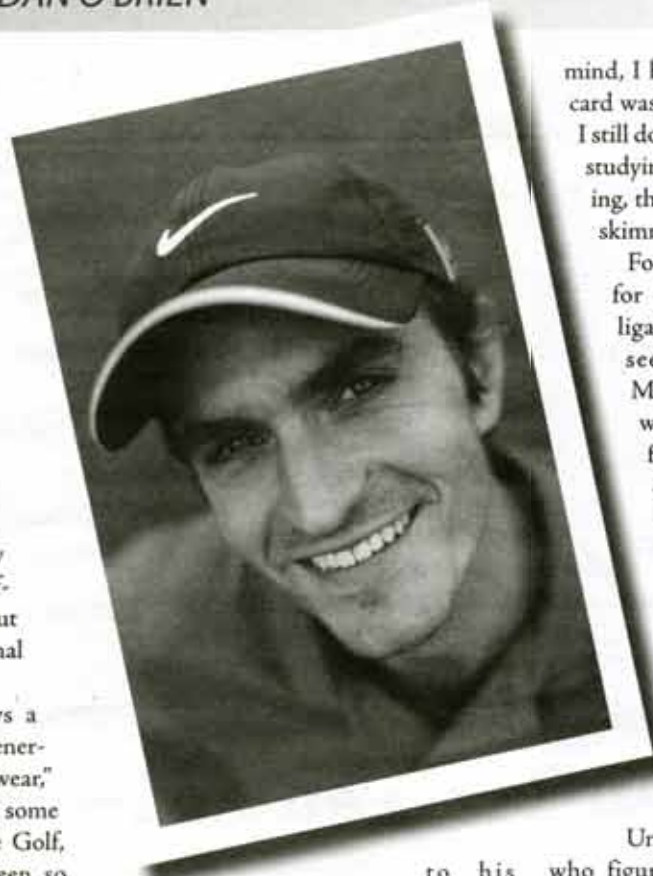
could stir souls if we used the right pictures. When McLaughlin wasn't setting up a photo shoot in Building 11, he'd be sitting under gray acoustic ceiling tiles, checking email and filling his Outlook with action items.

In other words, McLaughlin's day-in-the-life wasn't much different from a lot of us.

"It was a big decision," McLaughlin says without dwelling on the obvious. "There was the golf part, but there was also the practicality of it all." And by practicality, he might've meant affordability: McLaughlin was about to bankroll his plan with personal savings.

"At some point, there's always a chance of being a beneficiary of generous corporations with logos I can wear," he says, then laughs. Other than some big-hearted donations from Nike Golf, the sponsorship deals haven't been so forthcoming.

He doesn't seem worried. Leave that



mind, I had no idea what a PGA tour card was. I didn't know much, actually. I still don't. And the more time I spend studying it, learning the game, practicing, the more I realize I haven't even skimmed the surface."

For so many of us who've hoped for the grace of a second muligan, there's a natural thrill to see McLaughlin succeed. If McLaughlin can do this, we want to believe, we can too. And for those who find the entire enterprise sweetly and naively delusional... well, there's that too.

The more McLaughlin pored over the science of peak proficiency, the more familiar he became with the experts whose words kept appearing in quotes. Enter K. Anders Ericsson, Ph.D., the Florida State

University psychology professor

who figures prominently in Malcolm Gladwell's bestseller *Outliers* and Geoff Colvin's *Talent is Overrated*.

Mostly out of curiosity, McLaughlin contacted Ericsson to float a kernel of an idea: how could a 31-year-old accelerate a talent that required mad motor skills?

"I was impressed right away," explains Ericsson, by email. "I found Dan to be committed to and focused on what he wanted to accomplish — the right astronaut for the mission." And because Ericsson was able to appreciate a self-prescribed test case, he introduced McLaughlin to Len Hill, a doctoral candidate writing a dissertation on the connection between the mind and the golf putt.

According to Ericsson's research, people get to the top of an endeavor after 10,000 hours — which typically takes about 10 years of sustained and conscientious trial and error, often called "deliberate practice." Therefore, goes the theory, lots of people can be great at golf, provided they have some of the physical essentials, put in the hours of discipline, and apply the guidance of someone who knows what he's talking about.

Plied with Ericsson's advice, McLaughlin has become an unapologetic disciple, which is evident whenever he's asked about the lofty expectations.

Yet it's McLaughlin's chutzpah everyone likes talking about. Even a Pumpkin Ridge marshal asked if I knew when McLaughlin was going to set up a standing tee time.

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to his friends. By the time 2009 turned into 2010, the people who know McLaughlin best were still scratching their heads over why he'd chosen the sport of mucky-mucks. McLaughlin's athletic totems were limited to long-distance running at an Atlanta-area high school and playing tennis with his girlfriend. Unless holding a golf club as a six-year-old counts as "golf experience," he had none. He'd never swung a Big Bertha, walked a fairway, or — aside from approaching a windmill or sphinx — checked the angle on a putting green.

So, why take on one of the most complex and nuanced individual sports?

"I wanted something physical and outdoors, but nothing hard on the body," McLaughlin says. "This might sound funny, but at first I was just intrigued by all the math in golf. I'm a stats guy. I'd spend hours reading tournament results."

There was also the time he and his brother in Omaha watched Phil Mickelson on TV. After the three-time Masters champion crushed a ball long and straight, McLaughlin mentioned how natural the stroke looked. "I told my brother that something that fluid couldn't be that hard," he says. "My brother just shook his head."

For a lot of 2009, McLaughlin read all he could about the meaning of talent and virtues such as discipline and drive.

"I let the whole idea percolate before wondering out loud if I could make this happen," McLaughlin says. "Keep in



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McLaughlin is unfazed. He's as earnest as he is tenacious. And he takes his daily workouts very seriously.

"Make no mistake: he's doing this for real," says PGA teaching pro Christopher Smith, McLaughlin's de facto trainer and golf coach. "Dan's never wavered. Not only has he been sticking to everything we established at the start, but he also has a good sense for what the expectations are."

But what was Smith's reaction when he first met McLaughlin?

"As soon as he said he wanted to compete at the pro level, I was put off. I was thinking, get real. I have no time for this. It was an insult. It's like someone who can barely spell asking to publish the Great American Novel. I remember saying to myself, 'no way, not me, not golf: pick something easier.'"

But McLaughlin persisted in his unassuming way.

"The turning point might've been when he mentioned he'd been talking to Ericsson," says Smith, who trades time as the lead pro at Pumpkin Ridge and teaching at Beaverton's KOR Physical Therapy and Athletic Wellness Clinic. "I realized he was thinking in terms of discipline and the psychology of learning. He'd been doing his homework."

By this time last year, McLaughlin, Smith, Ericsson, and Hill gathered for a conference call to fine-tune a strategy composed of milestones and expectations. Overnight, McLaughlin says, The Dan Plan gained some muscle.

From a western edge of Washington County where Pumpkin Ridge consumes dozens of acres north of Highway 26, Smith tells McLaughlin to think about the pendulum in his swing. McLaughlin, who resembles a young version of actor Denis Leary, takes it all in.

"Based on quantity and quality of practice, Dan's a model student," Smith says. "His sense of focus and discipline is high. And his mental toughness serves him well."

Smith, whose past includes a speed-golf world record, an Oregon PGA Teacher of the Year honor, and recognition in Golf Magazine's Top 100 Instructors in America, has decades of experience with deconstructing and describing the cognitive dynamic of the game. Like the majority of golf instructors, he advocates learning close to the pin and working away, which explains McLaughlin's last eight months — more than 1,000 hours — of putting. That's at least six hours a day, rain or shine, month after month, standing over a ball a few feet from a hole.

"That's the deal," Smith says. "No one

can compete — especially at Tour level — without complete mastery on and around the putting green."

Between some light banter and not cutting McLaughlin any slack, Smith mentions the September morning when he first introduced a pitching wedge. "I won't forget the look on his face," Smith says. "He was like a kid at Christmas."

On or around a practice green at Pumpkin Ridge, Heron Lakes, Rose City, East Moreland, Broadmoor or Colwood, McLaughlin is now spending 60% of his time putting and 40% chipping. Adding to the mix are periodic teleconferences with some of McLaughlin's performance experts. He also consults with Lake Oswego physical therapist Shawn Dailey for strength conditioning.

"Chris and Shawn are ideal," McLaughlin says. "They look at the whole person, not just the game. Plus, they're both familiar with Ericsson's research and how it pertains to charting a trajectory of self-improvement."

From his back pocket, McLaughlin pulls out a notepad and pencil to chart a round of putts. I watch for a golfer's swagger, but there is none. Instead, he reaches for a brown paper bag that resembles a piece of trash. "Lunch," he says, asking if I want one of his homemade energy bars.

"Dan has character," Smith says. "There

are so many reasons to want Dan to succeed, but I think his greatest quality is how he confronts a challenge head on. In my opinion, it's a big factor. I can't count the number of times someone automatically assumes Dan has a lot of money, as if he has nothing at stake. Not only is that untrue, but it's kind of the opposite with Dan. He lives very simply. He's forgoing what most people his age would call 'a life' to pursue this. There's no agenda other than to succeed. The purity in it is admirable."

"Anyone can do this," McLaughlin says, while sipping hot herbal tea kept in a thermos. "People can try it on a smaller scale — even four hours a week is something. We can get so locked into our routines that we end up forgetting that those two or four hours a week are going to pass one way or another. Might as well put them to good use."

It's hard to know if we'll ever see McLaughlin's name on a PGA leader board, but this is certain: he'll have accomplished something personal and ambitious, which — with all the glory of irony — doesn't have much to do with golf.

You can follow McLaughlin's progress at www.thedanplan.com.