



Earning his

OU sophomore Brad Dalke held his own among the world's top golfers during Augusta's ultimate crash course on performance under pressure.

Masters

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH





A runner-up finish in the 2016 U.S. Amateur Championship earned OU golfer Brad Dalke an invitation to play in the 2017 Masters.

Chris Thelen/Augusta Chronicle

AUGUSTA NATIONAL is widely considered golf's ultimate stage.

Steeped in tradition, the prestigious course is home to the Masters, professional golf's first major of the year and a tournament unlike any other, thanks to its small field — only 94 player invitations — and an unrivaled blend of pageantry, theater and history.

The legendary Bobby Jones called this place home.

Arnie's Army first assembled here.

Jack Nicklaus won six Masters titles over three different decades.

And players like Byron Nelson, Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson each earned their first major victory on these hallowed grounds.

It's the coveted Green Jacket, pimento cheese sandwiches and Amen Corner.

Where golfers and golf enthusiasts are concerned, Augusta National Golf Club and the Masters represent something intrinsically magical, splashed with the bright colors of azaleas and wisteria, complete with a who's who cast of characters and a trophy room filled with stories that chronicle so many great successes, as well as heartache.

Previous page — Oklahoma sophomore Brad Dalke blasts out of a sand trap and onto the green at the second hole during the Tuesday practice round of the Masters Tournament.



Dalke's mom, Kay Dalke, golfed for OU and young Brad followed in her footsteps. Kay says he picked up his first club at 11 months and won his first tournament at age 3.

Photo Provided

To a 19-year-old amateur from Oklahoma, all of those elements thrown together at once might be a bit overwhelming. More than a few seasoned veterans have seen their nerves wilt when faced with the enormity of Augusta National's accompanying challenges.

So when Brad Dalke teed up there in April, having earned an invitation to play in the Masters thanks to a runner-up finish at the 2016 U.S. Amateur Championship, he could have understandably been swallowed up in the moment.

He wasn't.

Although the Sooner sophomore eventually missed the cut by three shots — posting rounds of 78-75 in the process — he handled all of the pressures without any significant hiccups. In fact, Dalke looked mostly at ease on the rolling 7,435-yard course, while producing two rounds of what Oklahoma coach Ryan Hybl described as “some his best ball-striking ever.”

If Dalke could have found his putting stroke on Augusta National's notoriously fast greens, he almost certainly would have played the weekend, thus becoming the first amateur OU player to accomplish that feat since the late Charlie Coe in 1971.

Only two-time U.S. Amateur champion Coe and former

Sooner All-American Hunter Haas had previously participated in the Masters as amateurs, with Coe making a record 19 starts in the event and Haas recording his one appearance back in 2000.

“I have always enjoyed playing on a big stage and the pressures of playing in front of a lot of people, so I was excited about that aspect,” says Dalke, who does not turn 20 until August 19. “Honestly, I felt comfortable out there and felt like the course fit my eye really well. Of course, there were a few nervous moments, like the first tee shot Thursday on the first hole. But overall, it was a very positive experience — even though I did not play as well as I would have liked, especially my putting.”

Positive experiences have been the norm for Dalke, who began swinging a golf club at a very young age and has had success at every level

he has played, including numerous wins in American Junior Golf Association events, as well as at the 2015 Junior PGA Championship. At 13, Dalke became the youngest boy to ever win an AJGA invitational tournament.

“When Brad was 11 months old, he started hitting golf balls. We were shocked,” says his mother, Kay Dalke, also noting that he is the youngest of seven children. “He played in his first tournament at age 3, and you could see then he had a natural talent for it.”

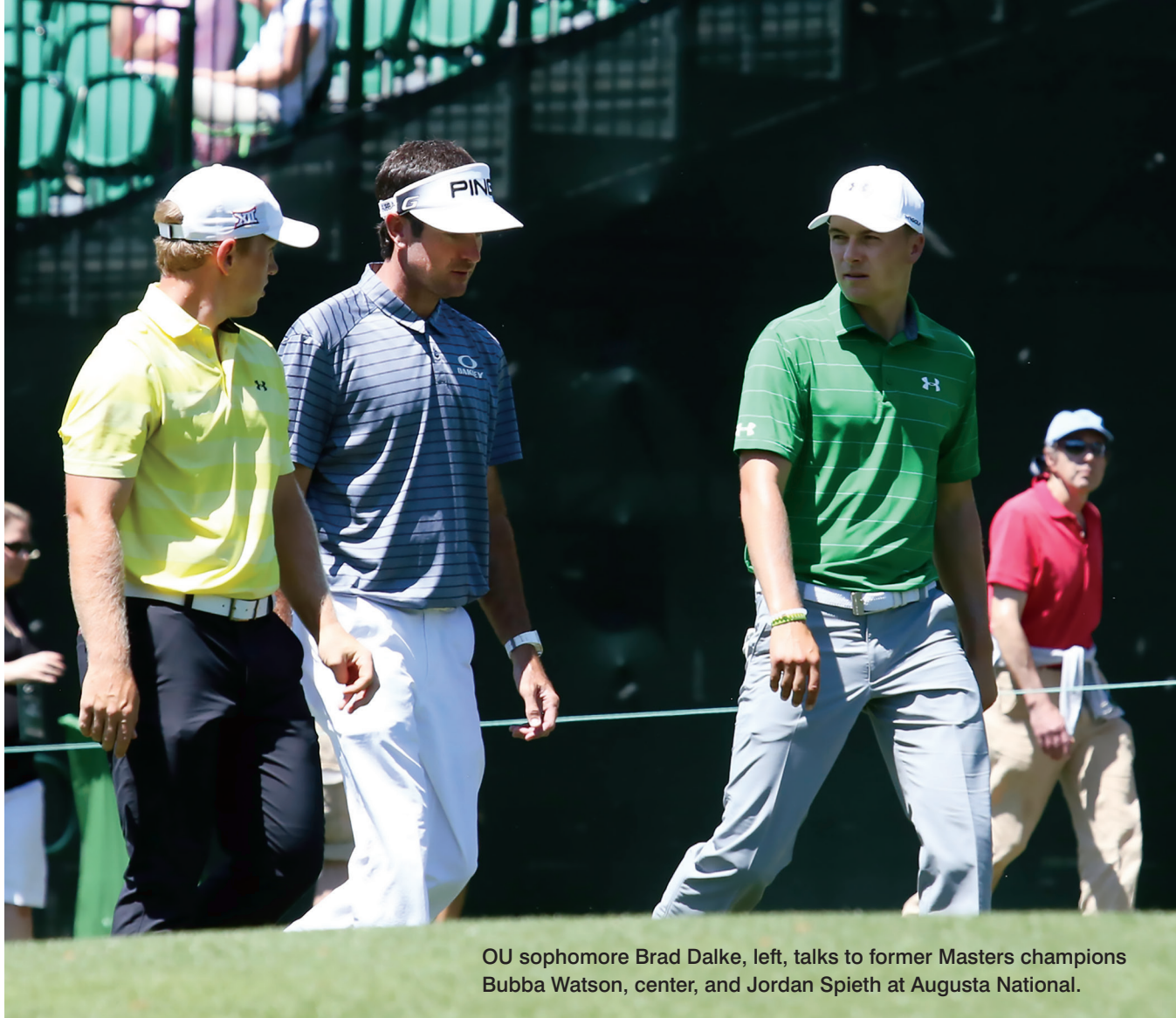
Dalke's ascent to the top of the junior golf rankings, which included earning AJGA All-America honors five straight years (2011-15), was the result of hard work and dedication to the game and made nearly every college golf coach in the country sit up and take notice.

But in reality, they were just wasting their time.

Dalke was already on his way to Norman, so to speak, committing to the OU golf program at the tender age of 12.

“That's how confident I was that the University of Oklahoma is where I wanted to be,” says Dalke. “I was basically born wearing OU gear and it is really the only place I've ever wanted to go to college. My family has a lot of history

continued



OU sophomore Brad Dalke, left, talks to former Masters champions Bubba Watson, center, and Jordan Spieth at Augusta National.

Matt Archibald/OU Athletics

here and I have grown up loving the Sooners.”

His father, Bill Dalke, was a two-year letterman and member of OU’s 1975 national championship football team, while his mother played golf for the Sooners. And if that isn’t enough of a crimson pedigree, his grandfather Ken Pryor also played basketball and baseball at OU and his grandmother Pauline Pryor was an OU cheerleader.

“I love OU. It’s always been a dream of mine to play my college golf here,” says Dalke, who completed his high school degree requirements by the end of his junior year at Christian Academy in Edmond, Okla., so he could enroll at OU a year early.

Hybl took over as OU head golf coach in 2009, two years before Dalke made his early commitment to the Sooners. By the time Dalke arrived on campus in fall 2015, Hybl was familiar with every aspect of the young phenom’s game and personality.

“I probably started watching Brad play when he was 10 or 11, even before he decided to commit to our program,” says Hybl. “It’s a little unusual to get a commitment from a 12-year-old, but Brad knew where he wanted to go and what

he wanted to do. He’s a great young man and comes from a great family.”

It’s not as if Dalke got a free pass on his golf scholarship, based on his family ties. He earned it by putting together an incredibly successful junior career that saw him play in the AJGA Wyndham Cup five times, which eclipsed the previous record held by Tiger Woods. He also won the Oklahoma Class 2A state golf title in 2014.

Dalke wasted little time making an impression as a college freshman, earning a spot on OU’s starting five his first semester on campus. In just his fifth collegiate start, Dalke helped the Sooners win the Ka’anapali Classic Invitational in Hawaii when he shot 66-72-68 to finish as the individual runner-up.

“I’ve always believed in myself and in my ability,” says Dalke, a communications major. “I feel fortunate that I have this God-given talent for golf and I want to make sure that I work hard to make the most of it.”

That talent and his patience were put to the test last spring when Dalke, after playing well in the fall, was wildly inconsistent during the spring season. He labored to find the swing and rhythm that had been the hallmarks of his game growing up.

“I feel fortunate that I have this God-given talent for golf and I want to make sure that I work hard to make the most of it.”

It seemed the harder he tried, the more he struggled.

“I was getting way too technical and overthinking everything I was trying to do,” says Dalke. “When I got back to simplifying my swing thought and trusting what I knew I could do, everything kind of fell back into place.”

That “everything” came to fruition during what turned out to be a week-long run at the 116th U.S. Amateur Championship, played in August 2016 at Pebble Beach Golf Links in California. Dalke played well enough to advance into the match-play portion of the USGA event and then reeled off five straight wins. His 3 and 2 semifinal victory over California native Jonah Teixeira not only secured him a spot in the 36-hole final, but also came with an invitation to play in the 2017 Masters and the U.S. Open.

Although Dalke’s bid for the coveted U.S. Amateur title came up short as he fell 6 and 4 to Australian Curtis Luck — the No. 7-ranked amateur in the world — the experience he gained from the event, the runner-up finish and the Masters invitation, more than eased any lingering disappointment with the finals result.

“It ended up being an amazing week overall, and I felt like it gave me a chance to see where my game is compared to some other talented players,” says Dalke. “I didn’t end up winning the title, but I couldn’t really be too disappointed in the way I played. It was a great run and a great experience.”

Dalke spent the next several months not only preparing and playing for the Sooners in the fall and several more college events this spring, but also working hard to get his game in tune for what would prove to be the most challenging tournament of his young career.

Like many of the amateurs who qualify for the Masters, Dalke stayed in the Crow’s Nest atop Augusta National’s historic clubhouse. He played practice rounds with PGA Tour stars Bubba Watson and Jordan Spieth, and shared a great chat with two-time Masters winner Tom Watson on the driving range.

It seemed everywhere he turned, there was something or someone special waiting to make his experience that much more memorable.

“The Crow’s Nest was awesome, the history of it and knowing all of the great players who have stayed there before

me. Honestly, just looking around and being in the middle of it all — I had to pinch myself a couple of times,” says Dalke.

Hybl believes that despite missing the cut, Dalke’s overall experience is going to be nothing but beneficial.

“Hugely positive week for Brad, no doubt,” says Hybl. “He looked comfortable out there and he hit the ball great all week. All in all, I thought he represented himself well on a difficult golf course and in conditions that made it even tougher. He’ll take a lot of positives away from the Masters that will help make him a better player in the long run.”

Haas, who earned his Masters invitation thanks to his 1999 U.S. Amateur Public Links victory, agrees that Dalke has a chance to turn his Masters experience into something bigger down the

road.

“It was great to see Brad put himself in that position. Earning a chance to play in the Masters is a special accomplishment, especially being just 19,” says Haas, who has four wins and more than \$1.6 million in earnings since turning pro in 2000. “I remember being in that same position and going through that whole experience. It was something I learned a great deal from.

“Hopefully, Brad will use that experience to his advantage — be patient, continue to allow himself to mature and work on his game. He’s got a chance to do some great things and I think that starts with these next two years at OU.”

Dalke has stated that he plans to stay and finish his collegiate career at OU. He has a positive relationship with Coach Hybl and feels he can contribute to the team going forward.

“Coach Hybl is great. He knows the game and knows how to relate to his players,” says Dalke. “He’s always working with us trying to make us better as individuals and as a team. We have some big goals right now and I think it’s safe to say that Coach Hybl is a big part of that.”

As for the week at Augusta National, Dalke says he returned to Norman with nothing but positive energy and more confidence than ever.

Says Dalke, “It was definitely a dream come true and an experience I’ll never forget.”



Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator.