

Ryder Cup record-breaker **Sergio Garcia** talks about playing for Europe, the Majors, his hopes for the future and, of course, his move to LIV two years ago

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When I was asked to travel to Portugal in September to talk to Sergio Garcia about his career and the second, nearly finished course at Terras da Comporta that bears his design signature –

the Torre – I’ll admit to being a little hesitant. Yes, he’s a big name and a great player, but in many people’s eyes his reputation has been more than a little soured due to various incidents on tour and, of course, his high-profile defection to LIV two years ago.

For many, here was a man who appeared to have been served extremely well financially by the two main tours for 23 years making it sound like it had all been a bit of an ordeal. I would count myself among them, reflecting that when he and Justin Rose were battling it out for the 2017 Masters, it was the Spaniard who I was willing to win over and above the Englishman on account of his long, and hitherto fruitless, quest for the maiden Major most felt his golf game more than warranted. Seven years on, I couldn’t imagine myself rooting for him in the same way.

Garcia has always been a great player but slightly fiery character. When I interviewed him nearly 20 years ago just after the 2005 Open in St Andrews, I raised the subject of his occasionally feisty nature,

writing this: “I have to confess that I, like many I suspect, have struggled to warm to him in light of various misdemeanours in his early years, whether kicking a misbehaving shoe down the 15th at Wentworth in 1999, doubling the size of an offending divot in St Andrews’ sacred turf in the 2000 Open, or openly slating European Tour referee John Paramor over a ruling in 2001.”

Garcia responded this way in his defence back then: “I think we all do stupid things. I was really young when I came out and I was a bit more fiery. I can control myself a little bit better now. I do learn from those things.” Two decades on, many would raise their eyebrows and say that, actually, little appears to have changed other than, of course, Garcia no longer being able to use youthfulness as an excuse.

Garcia remains hopeful about both Majors and the Ryder Cup

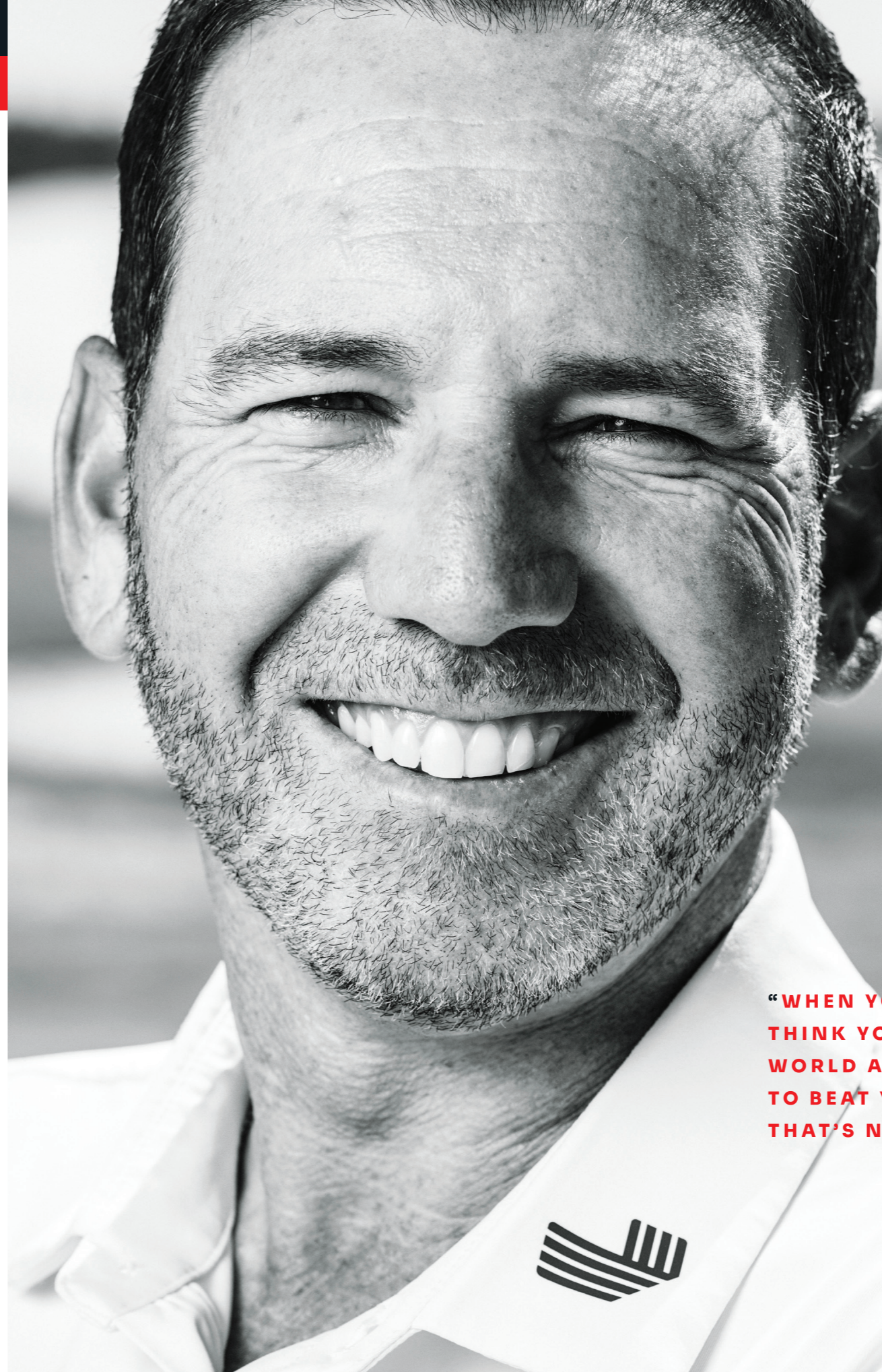


But let’s turn to some of his achievements, of which there are many. It’s easy to forget, given his long quest to claim that first Major, that he came perilously close to winning the second one he contested as a professional, losing by a stroke to Tiger in the 1999 USPGA at Medinah. On that occasion, his youthfulness presented as a real positive, with the 19-year-old famously shutting his eyes to cut an audacious iron shot on to the green from near the base of a tree in the final round before bounding down the fairway like an overly excited puppy.

● IN PURSUIT OF THE MAJORS

As we sit perched on two high stools by the 12th green of his first golf course design, I ask if the 44-year-old Garcia would still take that shot on. “For sure he would,” he smiles. “I don’t know if he’d be able to pull it off but I hope he would. But yeah, it’s amazing that it’s been 25 years. It’s been a great journey. A lot of great weeks and things that we’ve gone through.”

Among those “things that we’ve gone through” was having to wait 18 years to finally enter the Major winner’s circle despite that early



promise. There would be 21 more Major top tens before he finally got one over the line, including three more runner-up finishes, most famously the play-off loss to Pádraig Harrington in the 2007 Open at Carnoustie.

We chat about how many Majors he thought he might go on to pick off when he arrived on tour. “When you’re young, you have no fears and you think that you can take on the world and nobody’s going to beat you, but unfortunately that’s not the truth,” he tells me. “I would probably have thought that I’d win between five and ten, I would have hoped, but it hasn’t happened as many as I would have liked. I had my chances.”

He did indeed, but is there still any hope of adding to the tally? When we posted a question on our social media channels asking if people thought Garcia could still win another Major, there was a lot of chat about him living in a dream world in the same way that many now feel Tiger is when he talks about believing he can still win. We know how Tiger reacted to Monty’s suggestion that he thought it was time for him to call it a day before this year’s Open. But Garcia’s body is a lot healthier than Tiger’s and he’s still only 44, an age where it’s no longer

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considered almost impossible to still contend in golf’s biggest events. Other golfers regularly do.

Some observers feel the older golfers who signed up for LIV have effectively been given a chance to earn huge sums on a tour that is tantamount to



A lip-out away from a maiden Major at Carnoustie in 2007

being put out to pasture. LIV isn't where it's at, they say, but regardless of whether it is or it isn't, that hasn't stopped two, admittedly younger, LIV golfers winning Majors over the past two seasons – Brooks Koepka and Bryson DeChambeau. Does Garcia think he could join them and edge slightly closer to his original Major prediction?

"I think so, without a doubt," he replies without hesitation. "The way that I've played over these last few years, but mostly this year, it definitely shows me that I can. I played very well at the US Open without too much stuff really going my way. I finished 12th, so I felt like I had a little bit of an outside chance there. The way I've been playing, it gives me the feeling that I'm not done in that respect. I will give myself chances, and then it comes down to little things here and there. But I still feel like I can give myself chances."

● FUTURE AMBITIONS

Of course, to win it you've got to be in it and that's a harder task for LIV golfers, with their events not being eligible for world ranking points. Garcia has only played in The Masters and US Open for the past two years, and, while his 2017 Green Jacket entitles him to a lifetime exemption in that tournament, the other three are going to be tougher to tee it up in as things currently stand.

He was one of several big names who attempted to make it to Royal Troon via Final Qualifying this year, but despite playing well, he just missed out



"I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT MORE ABOUT THE TEAM. I WOULD RATHER GO 0-5 AND EUROPE WINS THE RYDER CUP THAN ME GOING 5-0 AND WE LOSE"

at West Lancs. Is that an avenue he will continue to pursue if all other potential pathways to entry fail? "Yes, until I feel like I can't do it any more or I don't have a chance to do it," he says. "I really enjoyed it. Obviously it is a little disappointing when you're so close to making it and you end up not making it, but to be there competing against so many other guys and have 2,000 people following an Open qualifier is very unique. I would love to not have to

qualify, but if it comes to that, then I'm always willing to. I love The Open, I always have, and I would love to be able to play it many more times."

If the Major tally hasn't, thus far, been quite what Garcia had wished for, it's a different story in the Ryder Cup where he has emulated his Spanish predecessors and then some to become top points scorer of all time for either side on 28.5 points from ten appearances. "I think that, first and foremost, to be able to play as many Ryder Cups as I have and be able to help Europe win as many as we did, that's the most important thing," he says when I ask what that record means to him. "Then to be able to become the highest points scorer in Ryder Cup history, that's the icing on top of the cake, I guess. It's something that I probably don't give enough credit because I've always thought more about the team. I've always said I'd rather go 0-5 and Europe wins the Ryder Cup than me going 5-0 and we lose the Cup."

At the time of our interview, there appeared little chance of him adding to that tally, but that may have changed with November's announcement that he was rejoining the DP World Tour. "I definitely hope so," he responded back in September when I asked if he thought he could yet add to his points record. "I hope that things get better and I feel like my game's still good enough to play at least two or three Ryder Cups. So if I can keep that level going, hopefully

everything gets sorted and we can get to that point."

A future Ryder Cup captaincy had seemed a nailed-on certainty for Garcia, but as Henrik Stenson has already discovered, signing on the dotted line for LIV has put that in considerable jeopardy. Garcia is still hopeful... although not just yet. "It's going to depend on how things end up," he reflects. "I think if we all come to an agreement, I definitely see a possibility of it. Personally, I don't want it very soon because I still feel like I can bring more to the team as a player, but in the future that's something that it would obviously be nice to have the chance to do."

● THE LIV EFFECT

All these things have, of course, been hugely influenced by his decision to switch to LIV. Clearly, money must have played a role, but Garcia refers to other factors when I ask how easy a decision it was given all the disruption it was bound to cause.

"People might think it was an easy decision – it wasn't," he tells me. "When you've played the European Tour for 24 years and the PGA Tour for the same amount, it's not easy to leave those tours because they've given me so much although I had to do well to achieve all that I achieved. But at the end of the day it came down more to future, family, being more settled and having more time to spend with my wife and kids – they're four and six now. With LIV, we knew the schedule, we knew how much time off we'd get towards the end of the season and that was a big factor to make the move."

My final question – do you regret anything that's been said or done by anyone in the LIV era – is asked in a general way but with

room for self-reflection if he wants to take it. He doesn't, instead asking what sort of things I have in mind. I mention the X exchange between Lee Westwood and Eddie Pepperell at one point as an example. "Probably. I don't know," he replies. "It would come down to those people who said it. I think everybody was trying to protect and support their side and maybe it got a little bit out of hand. I think you live and learn – that's the most important thing."

With much talk about deals and a pressing need for equilibrium to be restored in men's professional golf, I ask if he'd hoped things would have settled down more quickly. "Yes, I would have loved it to. But, at the end of the day, it doesn't come down to us," he says. "There are other people making those decisions and they're the people who have to agree to all the terms and everything. I think everyone would love it to be settled much quicker. Unfortunately, things are not that simple sometimes." Indeed not, as all of us who follow men's professional golf have now discovered.

Garcia has designed the new Torre course at Comporta



Sergio the architect

Garcia's Torre course at Terras da Comporta is set to open in summer 2025

How and why did you get into course design?

I've always enjoyed golf course design. I waited until much, much later in my career. I had chances to do it earlier, but I feel like you need to put a lot of time and effort into building good golf courses. I wanted to wait until I had a bit more time, like I do now. It's great to be able to come and see the land and see how it develops and changes as you start clearing and shaping and grassing it.



Enjoying more Ryder Cup success at Gleneagles in 2014

How hard is it to see golf holes where there are only trees and scrubland when you start?

There are always some spots where you can see them and you have a good idea what the terrain is doing and what fits here and there. But it's nice to stand on a little mound and say, 'I can see a hole going this way or that way.' It's something not a lot of people get the opportunity to do, and it's not easy to do it right, so I'm very happy about the way this course is looking and excited to play it as soon as it opens.

If I play a Sergio Garcia course will I spot any signature design features?

I think you'll see small greens, for the most part. Valderrama is my favourite golf course – small targets. It helps you to focus better when you hit your shots into the greens. There's less water needed, too, than if you have super-big greens where you have to use more water, more chemicals, more machines. Sustainability is important for us, too, so I guess they go hand in hand.



Garcia's LIV Golf Andalusia victory in July was his first win anywhere for nearly four years