



THIS MUCH I KNOW

‘I wouldn’t be playing if I didn’t think I could actually win’

BERNHARD LANGER

WORDS MICHAEL CATLING IMAGES GETTY, PROVIDED

Bernhard Langer would make a very compelling Netflix series. For the last hour, he has been speaking from his home in Florida, rattling through the key points in his life which saw him find God and pushed him to the brink of death and early retirement. He is engaging company and a very polished storyteller.

Growing up in post-war Germany, he didn’t have it easy. Besides helping his dad lay bricks to build the family home, he suffered two serious illnesses before the age of five. Doctors even told his mother to prepare for the worst. He was eight by the time he was introduced to golf as a caddie at Golfclub Augsburg, which is where he got hooked on playing. For the first few years, he had to make do with a 2-wood, 3-iron, 7-iron and a putter with a bent-shaft, which he shared with the other caddies.

Despite never having a handicap, he turned pro at 15 and accepted a job offer as an assistant pro at Munich

Country Club. It would prove to be a seminal moment. A year later, he was invited to play an exhibition against Jack Nicklaus and two of the best amateurs in Germany. It didn’t go well. A shank on one hole was bad enough, but then he pull-hooked an iron shot which hit a lady member on the shoulder. After the round, Nicklaus was asked what he thought of the young German. “He’s got a lot of heart,” Nicklaus said, “but he’s got a long way to go.”

Langer likes to remind him about that comment whenever they cross paths. He isn’t bitter, but he is proud of the records he’s set. He now has 121 wins worldwide, including a record-equalling 45 on the PGA Tour Champions and two at the Masters, in 1985 and 1993. This year, he’ll attempt again to complete the hat-trick at Augusta. For most golfers aged 65 that would be an impossible dream. But Langer has made a stellar career from overturning expectations. So we start with the very obvious opening question...



‘I’m starting to lose a bit of distance, so it becomes less and less likely for me to contend, but I’ve contended before just a few years ago. I’m not going to just make up the numbers’

Do you still feel like you have the game to contend at Augusta even now?

Well, I did contend, I think it was three years ago, something like that. I can't recall exactly, but I was on the leaderboard going into Sunday and then the same thing happened two or three years prior to that. But as I'm starting to lose a little bit of distance, it becomes less and less likely for me to contend. But it still brings me a lot of joy to play the golf course and it's still a great challenge to do as well as I can. I'm not going just to make up the numbers.

Is the course better or worse than when you first started playing there?

It's different. I'm not sure if it's better or worse. First of all, it's much longer. When I first started playing there in the '80s, there was no rough. You were either in the fairway or you were in the pine needles and straw. Then, many years ago, they started bringing in the semi-cut and planting about 5,000 trees. That has made the course more difficult because the fairways are now half the size. It's a lot tighter and a lot more unforgiving.

Do you like the recent changes they've made, extending some of the holes?

Above left: Seve offers his congratulations at Augusta in 1985, the two playing alongside each other in the penultimate group.

Top: Navigating the par-3 6th in 1985, en route to that first Masters victory.

Bottom: Taking his place among Europe's Masters champions, alongside Faldo, Sandy, Woosie and Seve.

I'm not a big fan but when players are hitting driver, 9-iron into a par 5, as they do on the 13th, for example, it's obviously a farce. It's not a par 5. They had to do something and they felt to protect the course they had to lengthen it. I mean, I wasn't a big fan when they lengthened No.5 two or three years ago. I thought that was an extremely tough par 4 already. I'm hitting 3-wood or 2-hybrid in there.

That aside, what is it about the place which seems to suit your eye so well?

Well, I always thought I would win a British Open because I became a good wind player and always liked links golf. I had my chances, I just never won it. But I guess I enjoyed the wide fairways at Augusta and for most of my career I was a pretty good iron player and I had a lot of imagination around the greens. Plus, I think I was a better putter than most people thought. I had the yips four times in my career but in between those times, I think I was a pretty decent putter, sometimes very good, which you need to be at Augusta.

That was definitely the case in 1985, your first victory at Augusta. What was it like being paired with Seve on Sunday?

I was used to playing with Seve. We were actually paired in the last group at St Andrews in '84. So, just nine months later, we're at it again, playing for a Major championship. We were the second from last group out, ahead of Curtis Strange, who had the lead, and Raymond Floyd. I remember on the first tee Seve came over and said, "OK, let's play good and let's keep this trophy in European hands".

Was there a moment when you thought, hey, I could actually win this thing?

There's a couple of things that stick in my mind from that year. I was very fortunate on Saturday, I had a very good break on the 13th when I was five shots behind. I needed a 3-wood to get over Rae's Creek. It was sitting down in an older divot but I had to go for it, I wasn't playing for 20th.

I took the 3-wood out and, sure enough, I hit it a little thin and the ball never got higher than three or four feet in the air. It just went like a rocket and it landed short of the creek, hit a little knoll, bounced over the water onto the green, and I made eagle. I then birdied another hole or two after that so I was only two behind, going into the final round.

On Sunday, I played solid on the front nine but Curtis Strange played really good so I was four behind, facing the back nine. I saw the leaderboard and said to my caddie, "Look, we've got to go for every pin now. Either we play great or we blow up. It doesn't matter if we do blow

THE CV

Turned pro in 1972 and earned his first international win at the 1979 World Under-25 Championship by 17 strokes.

A two-time winner of The Masters and the oldest player to make the cut, aged 63 in 2020. No other European has appeared in more Masters tournaments than Langer (39).

Named as the inaugural World No.1 when the Official World Golf Rankings were introduced in 1986. He ranks second for all-time wins on the European Tour with 42 and holds the record for the most Senior Major title (11).

up, I want to win a Major". After that, I just went for everything and I was swinging well, holing putts. I was five-under over the next eight holes. That gave me a two-shot lead as I stood on the 18th tee.

That must be one of the greatest examples of risk taking paying off?

Well, the other thing I did is I changed my irons mid-tournament, which is very weird. I usually don't change my irons, period. But at the time I had a new set of irons with me, a back-up set, and because the practice facilities were so good at Augusta, I was testing them. I guess I wasn't totally happy with the first couple of rounds, so I threw in a new set of irons on the weekend and won my first Major.

Can you remember how you celebrated that night?

There's a funny story about that because two months earlier I was playing the Australian Masters in Melbourne. I won that and the two guys that organise it, they always treat themselves by going to the Masters at Augusta. They arrived on the Tuesday and decided to put some money on me. To cut a long story short, if I won \$100,000 for winning the Masters, it meant they would win \$150,000 or something like that. They obviously mentioned that to me and when I won, they invited my wife and me to an Aussie barbecue at their house.

So, we went from the members dinner at 11pm to their house for a couple hours and celebrated their victory in a sense.

Above: Fred Couples helps Langer into his second Green Jacket following his four-stroke victory in 1993.



When you won for a second time in 1993, did it feel even more special because of what had happened at the Ryder Cup two years earlier?

It was different and special for several reasons. First of all, this time I had a four-shot lead going into Sunday so I didn't come from behind. I was clearly the best player for the first three days, beating the field by four and more. There was more pressure in a sense because you almost expect to win, even though four shots can dissipate fast at Augusta.

The other thing was some people thought Langer got lucky in '85 because Curtis Strange messed up, even though I won by two in the end and clearly I was the best player that week. But the biggest thing for me personally is that I became a believer in Jesus Christ after my '85 Masters win. This time, eight years later, I won on Easter Sunday. The second win was more meaningful for me because of that reason.

How does it compare to everything else you've achieved in your career, because you've broken a lot of records since then as well?

Yeah, it's hard to say how it compares. I've been blessed to have had a long and good career. I've had very few bad years, really. When you look at some of the stats, 121 professional wins is quite a number. Not many people get anywhere near that. Eleven senior Majors as well and then I've just equalled Hale Irwin's record for the most victories on the PGA Tour Champions. I've also won the money list 11 out of the 12 years, which is difficult to do. So, basically what I'm saying is the consistency that I've had for so many years is what's really satisfying, because it's very difficult to do that in the game of golf.

How special was it to tie Hale Irwin's record of 45 wins and extend your own record as the oldest winner on the over-50s circuit?

Well, it's extremely special because we've been talking about it for so long it seems now. When I first came out here, I thought, this is never going to happen. But I'm thrilled to have gotten to the number 45, so now that talk is hopefully a little less, I can focus on other things.

How long will you keep playing The Masters?

I'll play it for as long as I feel I'm not making a fool of myself. I asked Augusta National Chairman Fred Ridley if there was an age or time limit on how long I can play. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Bernhard, you can play as long as you like! You will know when the time is right." That's good to know because I wasn't sure. Obviously, I'm not going to enjoy shooting big numbers and missing the cut by 20! That's not me. But these last few years I've made the cut most of the time and even been in contention a couple of times...

I've always said three things have to be in place for me to want to keep playing the game. I've got to be healthy so I'm able to walk and swing the way I want to swing. The second thing is I've got to enjoy the game. I don't want to be out there otherwise. Thirdly, I've got to feel like I can have some kind of success. So far those three things are in place and I'm still having a good time out there.

Have you surprised yourself by how much you've achieved in your career?

I think I have, yes. But sometimes I look back at how many seconds I've had and think, if I had been a better putter, I actually could have won a whole lot more.

How does your game compare now to how you were playing, say, 30 years ago?

For much of the last 15 years my game was really, really good. I think I've become a better ball striker and better under pressure. The only thing that's happening now is that I'm losing distance a little bit. It's not much, I still hit it close to 280 (yards) off the tee, whereas other guys are

hitting it 330 and I'm way behind. So that's become the issue and it's hard to compete at the very highest level when you're hitting a 3-iron and somebody else is hitting a 9-iron or pitching wedge.

Is golf still a job for you, or is it a passion now?

It's been both those things all my life. It's mostly a passion, but sometimes it feels like a job. Now, I'm happy to put the clubs away for a few days or a week because I have other interests. I have four kids, four grandkids, and I want to take it a little easier. When I was 20, I was focused on golf and golf alone. Now it's a little different.

But you still keep turning up at the tournaments. Are you addicted to competition?

I think that once you've had that adrenaline go through your veins and you know that feeling, it is almost addictive because you want to feel that pressure again and again. But I think there's more to it. Knowing that I'm pretty good at what I'm doing and being around some of my friends out on tour is what keeps me coming back.



To read the extended interview, scan QR code or visit todays-golfer.com

Below: Langer celebrating his record-equalling 45 wins on the PGA Tour Champions with a three-shot victory at the Chubb Classic last month.

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