

RORY MCILROY HAS GIFTED US A

NIGHT OF FANTASY AND THEATRE

WHEN SATURDAY COMES
BY ROY CURTIS

IN the bulging anthology of epic Irish sporting poems, there might never have been a verse so abundantly lyrical as Rory McIlroy spreadeagled, face-down on Augusta National's 18th green, the hot spring of his tears watering golf's sacred soil.

An ode to redemption, the sonnet-song of an often-wounded man who would not be broken, the stirring ballad of an imperishable night this most human of golfing geniuses made resilience and glory, vulnerability and grit, hope and history rhyme.

And sent the heavenly evensong of his earth-shaking accomplishment echoing through the forest of mighty loblolly pines that frame one of the planet's most storied playhouses.

Finally unchained from his doubts, Rory gifted the watching world a night of fantasy and bone-shaking theatre that seemed to stretch drama, tension and emotion beyond any previously known bandwidth.

If watching was so utterly exhausting, imagine how physically and psychologically draining it must have been to be the lead actor on the stage rising above the breathless tension to deliver that last extra-terrestrial soliloquy.

At the end – a single small, quivering and overwhelmed creature at the centre of a vast, camera-popping universe – he wore his relief and gratitude, the beautiful unvarnished euphoria of the moment, like an immaculately tailored outfit.

MOLECULE

One with a bespoke, custom-made green jacket as the most eye-catching item in the ensemble. The single garment of destiny.

There he was, after the winning putt, on his knees, forehead resting on the tightly mown grass, cap drawn over his brow, a small curtain of privacy as, a thankful supplicant at golf's most hallowed altar, he sobbed a blissful, heavenly hosanna.

Hed arrived – surviving potentially calamitous encounters with potholes on the road, and after some damaging wrong turns – at a moment of deliverance first signposted by a prodigious child chipping balls into the opened hatch of a family washing machine.

Three weeks shy of his 36th birthday, among the planet's most recognisable faces, but at this instant a boy all alone with his fulfilled dreams, every molecule of his being dissolving in the fizzing waters of ground-breaking achievement.

On a Sunday for the ages, McIlroy somehow made it through what, for a period appeared set to the most ruinous squall of a career that has known many, the dark rain of a Masters squandered threatening to drown what remained of his resolve.

At the door of Armageddon, he tunnelled his way back to the light. With the executioner's blade poised above his curled mane, he finally located the elusive coordinates to Shangri-la.

Exactly 3,889 days after his fourth major triumph, at the end of a journey that subjected the limits of a man's ability to persist in swimming against fate's cruel tides to its most searching examination, McIlroy had his fifth.

His hardest earned. The most significant. The sweetest moment of his professional life. Nothing will ever again seem so fraught or difficult. From here, he is running downhill with a powerful wind of liberating contentment at his back. When his friend Shane Lowry lifted him toward the skies, held him tight, slapped him on the back and showered him with joy, the Offaly giant might have been an ambassador for the

A tumultuous achievement... the greatest Irish sporting story ever told

Perfect moment of a haunted Irishman

“He invites the world in, pours them a cup of tea, and reveals the truth

world. He spoke and gestured and loved for all of us.

And so many millions – all those not imprisoned by their own petty prejudices – cried in communion with an essentially decent, unusually open, grounded and enormously relatable superstar.

On an April evening in Georgia that will live forever, this incandescently talented maker of magic, but also a fragile thing – a robin on a frosted winter lawn, one wing broken yet still determined to fly – became the first European to complete the career Grand Slam of golf's four great prizes.

He joins Gene Sarazen, Ben Hogan, Gary Player, Jack Nicklaus and his childhood hero turned close friend, The Tiger himself on the roof of the world. A six-pack of immortals.

It is a tumultuous achievement, very possibly the greatest Irish sporting story ever told.

A new and dizzy orbit many, even those who number themselves his most ardent supporters,

feared he might never attain. And yet even Sunday's skyscraping conclusion only hints at the way McIlroy has touched his audience on the wildest, roller-coaster ride I have known in almost 40 years of writing about sports.

Fretting about Rory has become something of national pastime. As he discovered new ways to self-immolate at majors, so both the affection for him as a person and agnosticism about his capacity to ever again get over the line grew.

His walk through life – even as he won regular tournaments by the dozen, seized the number one spot in the world rankings, accumulated dollars in unimaginable millions – seemed to assume the characteristics of a tragic Shakespearean hero, one doomed to be brought down in the four weeks that matter by some fatal flaw or mental kink.

The majors, the yardstick by which the game's giants are measured, assumed for McIlroy the characteristics of medieval torture chambers

or, in contemporary terms, an Abu Gharib where his psyche was continually water-boarded.

From Portrush to Pinehurst, major catastrophes so excruciating that they demanded the audience watch through splayed fingers or from behind the front-room couch threatened to becoming the calling card of the always hopeful but often haunted Irishman.

In frustration, cruel words were written and broadcast, his competitive courage was interrogated.

The C-word – “choker”, perhaps the most damning putdown in the sporting lexicon – stalked him through the 38 majors across the decade of his sporting prime where he was Sisyphus futilely pushing the back-breaking rock up the golfing incline.

Only to find it flattening his hopes as, yet again, gravity took over with the summit in sight. When he imploded over the



MAJOR GLORY Rory lifts up his eyes to the heavens



FEVER PITCH
Rory tastes Masters glory at last



FAMILY AFFAIR
Rory poses with four-year-old daughter Poppy and his wife Erica



LAMENT A quiet word with defeated Justin Rose



OLD PALS Getting a hug from Offaly giant Shane Lowry



ELEGANT Holding Masters trophy while wearing the Green Jacket

closing holes of last summer's US Open, it was hard to argue the case that some vital piece of the champion jigsaw had gone missing, perhaps never to be found.

I was among those who went on record to say I doubted McIlroy would ever again win another major. That analysis was born of a conviction that his mental software had been critically damaged by serial disappointment. It was never so lovely to be proved so completely wrong.

CAREER

Sunday at Augusta was McIlroy's career in microcosm. The brilliant and the bewildering. Shot-making containing more than a hint of divinity, inexplicable errors, a capacity to climb off the floor even after being hit by half a dozen concussive haymakers.

Drama from another dimension.

His face – one moment creased in misery, the next carefree and glowing like neon, then again contorted with doubt, before that final release into a kind of disbelieving rapture – was essentially a mute searchai: Eloquently relating the

story of this madcap lurch through every colour in the rainbow of emotion and doing so without speaking a word.

It is this refusal to be robotic, this hugely authentic candour at his core, that makes Rory so relatable and so hugely popular. Because he reveals himself, people are inclined to care about his journey.

In an age of aloof, fabulously-wealthy athletes who speak in empty cliché, McIlroy is a rare, refreshing outlier.

Where others have the blinds permanently pulled down and seem almost contemptuous of their audience, he offers a window to his essence. He invites the world in, pours them a cup of tea, and reveals the undistilled truth of himself. Long before Netflix documentaries, he was



TRIUMPH Celebrating with his caddy Harry Diamond

offering an access-all-areas pass to the public. That he is simultaneously intelligent, considered and more in tune with the world than the vast majority of his peers only adds to his appeal.

A line from the Irish novelist Christine Dwyer Hickey might have been summoned from her store of words with Rory exclusively in mind.

In post-round interviews, in reflective times, there he would be, to borrow from Dwyer Hickey “cutting himself with the blade of his own honesty.”

This willingness to expose his doubts, to reflect on crushing professional moments without a trace of self-pity, to decline to hide behind monosyllabic platitudes, is why, over the years, so many of us became increasingly invested in his fortunes. Here was, is, an authentic athlete, a global figure unafraid to expose his vulnerabilities and fears and to admit that he bleeds

like the rest of us.

And so to Sunday. Rory being Rory, he was genetically incapable of taking the easy road.

One moment he was a polished Jedi knight, Luke Skywalker flourishing his lightsaber. The next he was thrashing about like a moderate club golfer teeing it up on day three of a boozy stag-party weekend.

Chunking the ball into Rae's Creek at the 13th as if he had lost control of his limbs; bending it around the trees in a glorious arc at the 15th, the shot of a lifetime at the moment of most extreme pressure.

Finally arriving at another level of poise over the three play-off shots that carried him beyond Justin Rose and to a place in the firmament, outrunning his own doubts and advancing into another world of magic.

A Masters champion at last, spreadeagled on Augusta's perfectly manicured acreage, the champagne of his tears flavouring our night with the sheer thrill of being.

A poet at his perfect moment of supreme self-expression.