

The next Faldo?

Tom Lewis marked and replaced his ball, took a moment to compose himself, then stroked the foot-long putt into the hole and with it strode into the pages of history.

Removing his hat and waving to the crowd, the young man from Welwyn Garden City in England had, with a calmness belying his years, unwittingly and serenely entered into the pantheon of great golfing performances on a perfect day in Portugal that culminated with Chief Executive of The European Tour, George O'Grady, memorably telling Lewis, "Welcome to The European Tour".

Exactly 34 years after the most illustrious product of Welwyn Garden City golf club, Sir Nick Faldo, won his maiden European Tour title at the scarcely memorable Skol Lager Individual event at Gleneagles, Scotland, the latest golfing product of this Hertfordshire town won the Portugal Masters in what was only his third professional appearance, having only joined the paid ranks after bidding a triumphant farewell to the amateur ranks in Great Britain and Ireland's Walker Cup victory in September.

Faldo was 20 years and 20 days old when he first tasted professional victory in 1977, and yesterday, on the 16th October 2011, Lewis claimed the €416,660 first prize when just 264 days older than the man who went on to win six Major Championships over the course of his own stellar career.

And while Lewis is only in the embryonic stages of what has all the portents of an equally glittering career of his own, the comparisons that have been elicited following his famous first win on the Iberian Peninsula pay testament to the quality of the Englishman's play and the potential stardom that beckons for the 20 year old.

Former World Number One and 14-time Major winner Tiger Woods took five events to secure his maiden professional title, while closer to home Spaniard Sergio Garcia – himself a European Tour winner at the tender age of 19 – played in three events before winning the 1999 Irish Open in his fourth professional appearance, as did Graeme McDowell before winning the 2002 Scandinavian Masters.

Indeed, McDowell's close friend and compatriot, Rory McIlroy, who this year joined the elite group of European US Open champions at Congressional, took until his 38th professional appearance to collect his first winner's cheque at the 2009 Omega Dubai Desert Classic.

In more recent times we have, of course, been treated to the extraordinary exploits of a continental prodigy, Italian Matteo Manassero, who eclipsed Danny Lee as the youngest-ever winner on The European Tour when he won the 2010 Castelló Masters at just 17 years and 188 days in his tenth professional start, and in Manassero and Lewis Europe unquestionably possesses two of the brightest prospects in golf.

The fact that Lewis is already being mentioned alongside such luminaries of the golfing world is symptomatic of his staggering achievement in Vilamoura, coming from four shots back to win with a closing seven under par 65 that included birdies on five of the last seven holes, becoming only the 12th Affiliate Member to win on The European Tour, and the first since Manassero in 2010.

There was an unmistakable sense of anticipation from the instant this fresh-faced, blonde-locked upstart burst onto the scene so unforgettably at July's Open Championship at Royal St. George's in Sandwich.

The omens were glaring from the very outset of Lewis' Open adventure, having been paired in Thursday's opening round with the very man he had been named after, American legend Tom Watson, and anyone could have forgiven the then-amateur if he had felt somewhat daunted by the magnitude of the occasion.

Lewis, however, was anything but overawed, seemingly revelling in the occasion and attention to post a scintillating first-round 65, the lowest round by an amateur in Open history, leaving him tied for the early lead with a man twice his age, Denmark's Thomas Björn, and even his namesake was left impressed by the performance.

"Tom Lewis, how about that, he could be my grandson," Watson enthused following their opening encounter.

"He's quite a refined player at age 20. We certainly have a new young breed out here, don't we? We've got the McIlroys

and the Ishikawas and now the Lewises. We have a lot of young players playing very good golf and I just had to smile inside to watch him play.”

Lewis went on, of course, to win the Silver Medal as the leading amateur after finishing tied for 30th and the feeling is that victory last week in Portugal is confirmation that the potential exuded at Sandwich is set to be realised over the coming weeks, months and years.

A long-held desire to play in the Walker Cup meant Lewis delayed his step up from the amateur sphere until after the 43rd staging of the contest in September, and he duly helped the GB & I team to victory with a contribution of one and a half points, before making his professional bow at the Austrian Open presented by Lyoness on September 22nd where he finished tied for tenth place, collecting a maiden pay-day of €19,925.

Money, though, doesn't appear to be a driving force behind Lewis' career aims, and when facing the inevitable questions about how a young man such as himself would go about spending the sizeable winner's fee from Portugal, his answer radiated magnanimity and revealed a much older head resides on his young shoulders.

He said: “My Mum and Dad built up a debt in helping fund my amateur career so I will sort them out first.”

Lewis will need some of those funds, nonetheless, to finance his blossoming schedule.

With his card secure, and his stunning victory having propelled Lewis from 621st to 166th in the Official World Golf Ranking and a staggering 182 places in The Race to Dubai, from 235th to 53rd place, the son of a driving-range professional will be now playing in his debut World Golf Championship at the WGC-HSBC Champions in Shanghai in November, and retains an excellent chance of making the season-ending climax at the Dubai World Championship in December.

And so, like William Shakespeare's *Passionate Pilgrim*, Tom Lewis prepares to spread his boyish wings and broaden his worldly golfing horizons on the back of a fearless final stretch in Portugal, indicative of the nerves only accessible in the greenness of youth.

Shakespeare said, in the aforementioned madrigal, “Youth is full of pleasure, age full of care”, and Lewis' namesake – who himself came so close to realising an incredible story as a 59 year old at the 2009 Open Championship before falling just short after a careful putt in a fourth play-off hole – praised the aggression and instinct of youth that he had seen in his Open rounds with Messrs Manassero and Lewis, and smiled fondly at the memories they evoked of his own fledgling career.

Watson said in July: “Both Matteo and Tom hit the ball where they were looking almost all the time, and their putting strokes are beautiful and aggressive. I remember those aggressive putting strokes when I was 20.”

And so, on the 18th hole of the Oceânico Victoria Golf Course in Vilamoura, Portugal, Lewis' Open promise reached fruition and a star was born; with the smallest of putts, Tom Lewis secured the biggest of futures.

Welcome to The European Tour.