

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

Unorthodox in every aspect of his professional life, Spain's Miguel Angel Jiménez is the life and soul of the party — wherever it happens to be kicking off. And while he has recently turned 50, his golf seems blissfully unaware of the fact. **John Hopkins** talked to him

On another planet: in the beige world of professional golf Jiménez marches to his own funky, irrepressible beat

Miguel Angel Jiménez is the professional golfer's golfer, the spectators' golfer, the caddies' golfer. Is there a more liked figure in golf than the marmalade-haired and marmalade-complexioned Spaniard? Some people have few friends; Jiménez has few enemies. He competes more often than most of his peers and is a better golfer than many of them. A few months past his 50th birthday he is playing better golf than he was in his 40s, when he was playing better than when he was in his 30s.

He is almost certain to be at Gleneagles this autumn either as the oldest man to represent Europe in the Ryder Cup or as one of Paul McGinley's assistant captains, just as he was one of José María Olazábal's at Medinah in 2012 and Severiano Ballesteros's at Valderrama in 1997. "He was great in the team room [at Celtic Manor], very popular, very upbeat, very strong mentally" Colin Montgomerie, who captained Jiménez in the 2010 Ryder Cup, said. "To have somebody positive in the team room as opposed to someone negative is a real advantage." If Jiménez's spoken English was better, he'd be a nailed down certainty to captain the Ryder Cup. Here, then, is Miguel Angel Jiménez, the most interesting man in golf.

Jiménez is grounded in character, proud of his heritage. He is a photographer's dream for his colourful clothes, the way his hair is tied in a ponytail or a bun, a man who knows he is often the centre of attraction and plays up to it. He has made his brief warm-up routine on the 1st tee into a music hall turn designed to engage the spectators. First a gentle swish this way, then one that way. A few knee bends, a few shoulder turns, a few attempts at touching the ground while keeping his legs straight and a few shakes of the hips with his hands resting on the end of a driver and he's ready. After all this, which follows a much more intensive loosening-up session first in the gym and then on the practice ground, he takes off his cap, makes a theatrical bow to the spectators and sets about his work with a smile on his face and a gleam in his eye.

Precious little is conventional about the Spaniard. From top to toe, Jiménez is a one-off, a man who loves rioja wine and is not afraid to drink it. He loves espresso coffee and Cuban cigars, too. In a world of similarly dressed men who are increasingly devoted to physical fitness and suppleness, who swear off alcohol, caffeine and nicotine, Jiménez stands out as clearly as Ailsa Craig off the coast of Ayrshire.

He has been one of the steadiest golfers in Europe for some years, making the most of a long, flowing swing that repeats itself time and again. "I think he has the God-given talent that Monty also had to be repetitious" Tim Barter, the Sky Sports commentator and analyst, said. "Miguel has that repetitive gene in his body, which means that whatever it is that he does he can do it over and over and over again. He has the flexibility of a guy in his 30s even though he is in his 50s. That helps him to stay lithe and supple and that is why he is able to make a full turn and create a reasonable amount of power."

In an age when swings with lots of moving parts are fading fast in popularity to be replaced by shorter, firmer swings, Jiménez and his long, fluid and somewhat unconventional swing are doing strikingly well and give every sign of continuing for some time yet. Whereas most players can't wait to join the Senior Tour, Jiménez can't bear to leave the regular tour and is playing well enough to remain on it. In fact, just as this issue went to press, the man who successfully defended his Hong Kong Open title in December, his fourth victory in the event, was announced as the 2014 Race to Dubai Player of the Month.

"His swing is incredibly on plane on the downswing" Paul McGinley, the Europe captain in the forthcoming Ryder Cup and a friend of Jiménez's, said. "OK, his backswing has a few moving parts but on his downswing he keeps getting the club right on plane. If you can get it out there 280 to 300 you can be competitive on tour if you have a strong mind and a strong short game and Miguel has both."

(Clockwise from right): Displaying the artistry that is his greatest asset, Jiménez made a run at a sun-baked Muirfield Open last summer; four times a Ryder Cup player, Jimenez celebrates at Celtic Manor in 2010; the early days – different hair style, same fabulous shoes; that unmistakable warm-up routine; enjoying life with a trademark Cuban Cohiba



Pete Cowen, the coach, is another who doesn't think Jiménez's swing is so idiosyncratic. "It's always been my favourite swing because he moves the club into perfect positions" Cowen said. "It looks a bit funky but it's not. I've told him how good I think it is. I've told him that I've got photos of him stuck up on the walls of the bays at my range but he thinks I'm taking the mickey. I'm not. It's technically brilliant."

Jiménez has won 20 tournaments on the European Tour, the first in 1992 and the last in December 2013 when he was 49 years and eleven months old, making him the oldest winner in the history of the European Tour. He has won in Europe and



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Asia. He led the 2013 Open after 36 holes, before finishing 13th, four places higher than the year before.

Can he still win a major championship? It's a fair question and the answer is it's a tall order. "Obviously I would love to have a major in my career" Jiménez said at the Open last July. "I would love to have one of these. I don't know how much longer I am on the Tour. I'm 49, I don't know. I will keep competing here as far as I can be competitive with all the young people."

He has had little success in the US Open and the USPGA of that country. In the Open he has had his two best finishes in the past two years, 9th in 2012 and 13th in 2013. But the Masters at

Augusta National, with its requirement for a brilliantly imaginative short game and pinpoint precision with the irons, would seem to be Jiménez's best chance. Big hitters often win at Augusta but not always. Look at Zach Johnson in 2007 and Mike Weir in 2003.

In his 14 appearances in the game's first major championship Jiménez has been getting better and better. The first six times he competed he failed to last more than two rounds on three occasions. Since then, since 2003, he has played all four rounds every time and had five top-12 finishes in his past 11 appearances.



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Pete Cowen

"Augusta [he pronounces it 'Ow - goost -ah'] has a very special mystique," he said. "You notice it the moment you travel down Magnolia Lane. It is beautifully presented, a special, a unique place. I've been so lucky to have played so many practice rounds with Seve and Olazábal, the masters of the Masters, showing me how to do it."

Jiménez said that his two favourite holes are the 12th and the 16th. It is significant that both are short holes where Jiménez's sharp iron play can help him compete with any of his rivals and beat most of them. At nearly 7500 yards at its longest and sometimes quite wet, Augusta National is more than a handful for the Spaniard except that he has a striking mental strength. "It is very long for me but of course I can win," he said earlier this year, the air of defiance cowing the questioner. "I have 14 clubs in my bag, the same as everyone else."

Jiménez being Jiménez, however, he doesn't always follow convention at Augusta. In 2012, for example, he cocked a snook in the first round as only he could. In that year's Masters annual, a writer noted "there are things you don't do in golf. You don't run at Augusta National. You don't play the Old Course on a Sunday. You don't whistle on your partner's backswing. Experience says that what you also don't do at Augusta National is to use a friend to caddy for you."

"Then again" this writer continued "if you're Miguel Angel Jiménez, you are not as everyone else. You drink espresso coffee the way some people gulp water. You tie your hair in a ponytail. You are rarely seen without a missile-sized cigar...you cook a mean paella. You have a house full of friends to stay with you in Augusta and...you ask one of them to caddy for you."

It worked for Jiménez. "With Pascual Jiménez. No relation, alongside him on Thursday, Miguel Angel Jiménez navigated the hazards of Augusta National in the manner of a man crossing a muddy road while wearing lizard skin shoes, delicately stepping over the obstacles that were causing so much trouble to others... Jiménez the player wore a broad smile on his face after his 69. "Come," Miguel Angel Jiménez said to Pascual Jiménez. "Yesterday we ate a big, big rib. Tonight we have sal-mon."

Jiménez has been a regular figure on the European Tour since 1988, six years after he turned pro. He is so colourful and charismatic that the mention of his name generally produces a knowing smile and a comment such as: "Jiménez? Ah yes, The Mechanic." Everyone knows him or so it seems. In fact, few know him.

You know he likes bright coloured clothes, was 50 in January

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and will make his debut in the Senior Open Championship at Royal Porthcawl this summer. You know that he has played in the Ryder Cup in 1999, 2004, 2008, 2010 and was an assistant captain in 1997 and again in 2012, both of which Europe won. You know he is one of seven brothers and that he took up golf at the age of 15 before moving into caddying.

But do you know the make of his favourite cigars? The answer is Siglo VI Cohiba cigars made in Cuba. Do you know Jiménez buys half a dozen pairs of golf shoes annually, some made from crocodile skin, most from leather. They come in two tones of brown or patent black and white. They are made specially for him by a small family firm outside Milan, a business started by Gigi Nebuloni and carried on to this day by his son. The shoes take six weeks to be made and cost an average of 300 euro a pair.

He is known as 'The Mechanic' because of his love for cars. "All my family love gasoline" he said, smiling, by way of explanation. But his peers don't call him 'The Mechanic'. To them he is known as Coco after Coco the clown because of the colour of his hair. It is not a nickname Jiménez favours himself any more than he welcomes discussions about Montserrat, his first wife. Before their divorce they lived in a house near Malaga, a house that had a three-foot high and two-foot wide humididor with glass doors to house his beloved cigars. Jiménez has an Austrian girlfriend, Susanne. Now he lives in an apartment in Belalmadena on the Costa del Sol.

Do you know that his favourite restaurant in Dubai is The Meat Company, where he is such a gilded client that he has his own steak knife engraved with his name? Jiménez makes an annual pilgrimage to Crans, where he won the Omega European Masters in 2010 and had a round of 61, ten under par. He always used to eat at La Marquise until it closed down and moved premises. Now he eats at El Rey de las Gambas and if you want to see how to carve ham then make sure you're there when Jiménez arrives. It's a party turn of his, to carve slice after

slice of paper-thin ham.

During the Open at Muirfield last summer, Jiménez, his sons and some friends and business associates often ate at the same Italian restaurant in North Berwick. The ritual was similar. The Jiménez party, having arrived to take the same corner table night after night, received an increasingly warm welcome, a nod at first, a smile the next night, applause the next and a standing ovation when he was leading the Open on Friday night.

Jiménez's secret is that he does what makes him content and not what others do or what might make others content. The French have a phrase for it: "heureux dans votre propre peau", meaning happy in your own skin. Jiménez certainly is. "A lot of people could take a leaf out of his book" McGinley said. "He enjoys his life but he knows when it is time to be serious. He is diligent about his practice, going about in a very professional way. He doesn't just enjoy playing golf. He enjoys the lifestyle, travelling the world, seeing different cultures. The highlight of his day is not the game of golf, it's the dinner at night. You should see him when he goes out to dinner. He doesn't just put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He dresses for dinner, always looks smart."

Robert Lusetich of Fox Sports wrote this about Jiménez during last year's Open. "Chomping on a cigar, the ponytailed Miguel Angel Jiménez strolled down the Muirfield range, wear-



(Left): Pictured here with girlfriend Suzanne Styblo, Jiménez broke his own record as the oldest winner on the European Tour at the Hong Kong Open last December; (Below): Five top-12 finishes in his last eleven appearances at Augusta suggest Jiménez has the game – and the knowledge – to fulfil dreams of winning a major

ing aviator sunglasses, clutching a bottle of his beloved rioja wine. His beautiful blonde girlfriend followed: "Maybe the coolest man alive" Keegan Bradley marvelled in a tweet." There was some journalistic licence there. A bottle of rioja on the practice ground? Hmm. Aviator sunglasses? Don't think so. Blonde girl-friend? Not when we last looked. What is undeniably true however is Bradley's tribute. "May be the coolest man alive." Now you're talking.

"Some of the best and funniest things we have done on Sky Sports have been with Miguel," Barter said. "During Ryder Cups we sometimes do funny segments to liven things up and show the players' personalities. We ask them silly questions to see what their answers are. You say to Miguel: "Who would you rather be, Batman or Superman?" and he replied: "I'd be Miguel." I said to him "You have to choose between Batman and Superman" and he said: "No, no. I want to be Miguel. I much prefer being Miguel than either of these people."

"You ask him another daft question: "What colour are your favourite pyjamas" Barter continued. He replies with mock scorn in his voice. "I no wear py-yamas. Why you wear py-yamas.?" "He is just priceless. Yes, his sense of humour does come across despite his broken English. That is why he's the people's champion. He loves them. They love him."

Jiménez hits the ball a reasonable distance, no more or less. He is just about long enough. "It is fairways and greens for Miguel Angel" Henrik Stenson said. "He has very good control of his technique. He is in charge of his swing, which makes him very consistent. It never gets stuck behind him. He has never

been a long hitter. It is fairways and greens for him. He has a very good short game. He spent a lot of time with Seve and the other Spaniards and he has a great touch. He is the whole package in terms of technique, short game, touch and mentally he is strong. He is very good at playing to his strengths."

Stenson was asked what would be the one thing he would like to have from Jiménez? Would it be Jiménez's character, his sense of humour, his short game? "If I could have as much hair when I'm 50 I'd be pretty happy" the Swede replied, typically mischievously. "I probably wouldn't take his English because that is still a little bit on the short side. He is a lovely pitcher. My pitching is pretty good when it is on but if I were to take one thing it would be his pitching. I always rate that very highly."

Jiménez is unusual in that he has been on a winning and a losing Ryder Cup as a player and only a winning team as a captain's assistant or vice captain. At Valderrama in 1997 he remembers being woken up in the middle of the night on the Wednesday of Ryder Cup week. "Miguel, Miguel, you must come to my room now" Ballesteros said. "It's the middle of the night, Seve" he replied sleepily. "No, no. You must come. We have to do the pairings ready for tomorrow." Jiménez dragged himself out of bed and stumbled along to Ballesteros's room. When he got there Ballesteros smiled at him and said: "It's OK Miguel. I have done the pairings. I don't need you. Go back to bed."

Montgomerie remembers Jiménez's performance at Celtic Manor in 2010 with some affection. "He was one of the guys who was instrumental in our victory by winning his singles despite being out-driven by 40 yards [by Bubba Watson the Masters champion]. He knew what his job as and he got it done. All credit to him." 

