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In Phil's backyard

Mickelson will be on familiar turf at the U.S. Open, not far from where he developed a passion for the game.

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SAN DIEGO | Phil Mickelson Sr. and his wife, Mary, sit across from each other at the kitchen table after a long day. They are talking about their son, Phil, who left this house 20 years ago with the intention of taking the golf world by storm.

That world is coming to the Mickelsons' front door today as the 108th U.S. Open tees off just down the road at Torrey Pines Golf Course. And, if Mary Mickelson could, she would invite everybody into her home for chocolate chip cookies and spend the whole weekend telling her favorite Phil stories. Mary is half-Italian, a former nurse and a mother of three, a nurturer by nature.

It was in this kitchen that Mary once heard a young Phil shouting from the living room, "Hurry up, hurry up, come here!" as the final round of the Masters was being played. Mary rushed down to him.

"Someone was walking up the 18th at the Masters," Mary recalls. "He had a 2- or a 3-shot lead, and Philip said, 'Look Mom, look, he's going to win it! That's me! That's going to be me someday!' I said, 'Honey, that's great. You can do it. You can certainly win the Masters.' "

Phil always was a dreamer, and his parents were happy to have their heads in the clouds along with him. Phil Sr. and Mary moved into this house a month before Phil was born, and, in the last 38 years, the interior has changed greatly. The backyard, however, hasn't. It has always been a place where dreams could live and flourish.

Outside, it is pitch black when Phil Sr. opens the screen door and flips on a couple of light switches. *Boom, boom, boom!* Suddenly, the backyard is illuminated – and illuminating. This is where Phil Mickelson starts to make sense.

III

When Phil Mickelson was in the first grade, his parents enrolled in a seminar entitled, "How to raise a strong-willed child without breaking the spirit." Already, they knew what they were up against.

Mary provides an example of an early conversation with Phil.

"Philip, put the napkin on your lap for dinner."

"Why?"

"So food won't "

"I'll be careful."

Phil wouldn't just do it like his older sister, Tina, would. From the seminar, the Mickelsons got an idea. They would make it into a game. The rules were simple: If you didn't put your napkin on your lap before you took your first bite and someone caught you, you'd have to leave the room and count to 10 out loud, no matter where you were.

The plan worked, and nobody had gotten caught until the family went out for dinner at a restaurant. The kids, led by Phil, slyly moved their napkins onto their laps. They watched intently as Phil Sr. took his first bite - without his napkin - and Phil spoke up.

"Dad," he said, "is your napkin in your lap?"

Phil Sr. knew he'd been caught.

"Dad," Phil said, "you have to go outside, and you have to count so that we can hear you."

Phil Sr. went outside the restaurant and peered through the window, counting.

"A little louder Dad," Phil said, "we can't hear you."

They had turned it into a game, and Phil had beaten them. He excelled at games, but he would play them his way. Heck, the moment he first picked up a club at nearly 2 years old, he took a stand.

Once Phil was 18 months old, he would stand across from Phil Sr. as he practiced his right-handed golf swing in the backyard. When time came for Phil to take his first cut, Phil Sr. brought him over to hit right-handed. The boy, after all, was a righty. But Phil ran over to the other side, regripped the club and hit the ball left-handed. For the rest of his life, he would do everything right-handed except swing a golf club or a bat.

Phil played his first 18 holes with his dad when he was 3 1/2 years old.

"My fondest memories of the game are when he'd pick me up from school and go to courses and get the day rate after 3 o'clock and play until dark," Phil Jr. says. "We'd get stranded at 13 or 14 and hike through the cavern or cliff and climb down it to get back to the car."

By age 9, Phil was all set to join the PGA Tour. That made it somewhat difficult for Phil Sr. and Mary to get their strong-willed child to do anything around the house.

"Phil (Sr.) would turn to him and say, 'All right, Philip, you need to learn how to change the oil in the car, because you're going to have a car someday,' " Mary recalls. "And he'd say, 'Dad, I don't need to do that, because I'm going to hire somebody to do that. I'm going to be a professional golfer.' "

Never mind that Phil was also great at every other sport he played. He was the first kid in his Little League to master a curveball, and in the neighborhood, he'd do the coolest tricks with his BMX bike before everybody else.

But when Phil decided for certain at age 10 that golf was his passion, Phil Sr. believed him. It was time to redo the backyard.

III

The kids in the neighborhood would come and watch as the workers and their machines moved dirt around in the Mickelsons' backyard. Phil had always practiced golf back there, rifling balls into the canyon - but now he would do it on his own golf hole.

Think "Field of Dreams" for golf. No, this wasn't quite Ray Kinsella digging up his corn and building a baseball diamond, but it was close. Thing is, nobody was that surprised, knowing Phil Sr.

Phil Sr. was a pilot in the Navy, stationed at Miramar Naval Air Station in San Diego, and he flew F-8s, some of the fastest, most dangerous jet fighters of the time.

"You're super-trained, and you think you're infallible," Phil Sr. says, "and later, when you look back on it, you wonder how you ever survived some of the things you went through."

Good men died up there. Phil Sr. lived his life in the air and never was one to gloss over a detail. So, in 1980, when he retired after 15 years as a commercial airline pilot and it was time to get that backyard fixed up for his boy, Phil Sr. would make sure it was perfect.

He went to the USGA to ask for specifications on creating a green. He already had a greens mower - Phil Sr. had always kept his lawn as finely manicured as the crew cut on his head - so the toughest tasks would be forming a bunker with real sand and growing the rough around it. It took about 10 months, but finally, it was done, the final 40 yards of a hole with two different pin placements.

"We used this yard an awful lot," Phil Sr. says.

Barbara Peters, the Mickelsons' next-door neighbor, can vouch for that.

"Many balls came into the yard," Peters says, "but only one came into the house. It just came through the window. You hear a crash, and you go and look, there's a broken

window and a golf ball, and it wasn't too hard to figure out what the cause was."

Phil Jr. paid for the new window out of his allowance. Hey, it was the only way his parents would allow him to keep spending four or five hours a day in the backyard, practicing with his wedges from all different lengths and angles. Firing shots through the lemon and orange trees to the side of the bunker never seemed to get old to Mickelson.

By the time Phil was a freshman in high school, he was more than just a student of the game.

"He knew more about golf as a freshman than I did as his coach," says Dave Thoennes, Phil's coach at University of San Diego High School. "When we played practice rounds, he'd give me lessons."

Mickelson had gotten so good, so fast, but Phil Sr. continued to drive one point home.

"Phil got mad and threw a club," Thoennes recalls, "and his dad went over and picked up his ball and said, 'OK, we're going home. If you can't have fun out here, you can't play.' So Phil never threw a club again."

Manny Zerman was Phil's teammate during their senior year of high school.

"It always seemed that when he was over a shot, there wasn't a shot he couldn't hit," Zerman says. "He felt like he could pull it off, and you felt like he could pull it off as well."

Odds were, Mickelson had pulled off the shot many times, out there in that backyard, where anything seemed possible.

III

The lessons learned in the backyard of the house on Wenrich Drive have led Phil Mickelson to a No. 2 ranking in the world, three major championship victories and riches beyond his parents' wildest dreams.

Still, when Mickelson drives the 15 miles this morning from his estate in Rancho Santa Fe to Torrey Pines, he will be looking for his first U.S. Open championship. He has finished second a remarkable four times.

"I love it," Mickelson says. "I just haven't gotten the love back."

This time, though, his entire family, his entire city, will be rooting for him.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Mickelson says, "for me to compete in the U.S. Open on the course I grew up on in the prime of my career. Winning this tournament would be something that would help define my career."

Phil Sr. and Mary would love that, of course. But ultimately, they just want Phil to keep having fun, to win the championship his way - the unconventional way.

"Why is he doing that shot, he's crazy, doesn't he know all he has to do is chip out?" Mary says, mimicking her son's critics. "No. He's going to make it fun. He's going to create the shot. He might win, but why would you want to come in second? You're there to win, and you go for it. That's Philip."