

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

MATT WALLACE

'I was caught in a spiral downward but my head now feels it's in the right place'

Keeping focus: Matt Wallace lines up a putt in the final round of his momentous victory



Matt Majendie

IT begins with a wall. This wall — an imaginary one — spans the left side of the fairway at the 15th hole at Medalist Golf Club near his Florida home.

In the mind of Matt Wallace, it helps to define his golfing fortunes. The target is always the wall from which to fade it on to the fairway.

The only problem as he stood on the tee in recent years, try as he might he could not find it. Where once the ball would land flush on the fairway, instead it was met with a splash of water or a shower of bunker sand.

Recently, he returned to the same tee not long before dusk at a deserted course and lined up 15 balls. With 14 of them, he once more found his target. "I've got my wall shot back," was his takeaway as he packed up his clubs.

This wall can be relocated and rebuilt. On Sunday, it was shifted to the 18th of Corales Golf Course in the Dominican Republic for his final tee shot of the Corales Puntacana Championship.

Hitting into the wind, he shook off the nerves of being tournament leader to find the wall from which he made par for a one-stroke victory, a first on the PGA Tour and a first title of any kind for nearly five years.

The initial sensation was one of relief before a quick call home to his parents, two beers and half a cigar in celebration before a nine o'clock bedtime,

shattered by the week but also years leading up to his victorious re-emergence.

Before turning off the lights, he looked back at a video he recorded of himself at last year's Houston Open he promised to show himself if and when a victory ever came.

"In it, I was saying how disappointed and tired I was, how negative everything had been and how hard I'd been working and not seen the results," says the 32-year-old. "It made me realise how far I'd come."

He knows the bad times could come as

soon as this week when he tees off on Thursday in San Antonio. Golf can be mental torture even for the best players in the world.

Eleven tournament wins, including four on the European Tour, a top-three finish at a Major and a world ranking once on the edges of the top 20 attest to his status as that.

But he clearly remembers those times on the tee at Medalist and beyond with zero confidence in his own driving ability. Myriad missed cuts followed and he tumbled down the rankings.

"It's terrible," he says of the darker days. "You've played s*** and need to sort it out, then you're itching to get to the next tournament and opportunity."

"I hadn't been playing well for two or three years. It wasn't my golf equipment's fault but the person wielding it. It's hard once that gets in your head. I just wanted to feel comfortable with my golf again."

Prior to last week, the signs had been there that his game was going in the right direction, notably a seventh-placed finish at the £6.6million Valspar Championship in Florida.

His demise before this current rebirth was such that he got precariously close to losing his PGA Tour membership, that open to just 125 players.

He ended 126th but survived thanks to some absentees above him courtesy of the banned LIV rebels. "I feel fortunate I kept my card and still have a job," he says.

And he has worked hard to keep it. From February to August each season, he relocates to the United States for the guaranteed good weather and golfing days.

Living on his own, the weeks outside the tournaments can be incredibly

lonely. "There's no family or friends over here to shoot the breeze," says the Hillingdon-born golfer. So instead the tournaments act as his social life, and when the golf isn't going well, that's tough too.

"Golf shouldn't dictate how you feel," he says. "But I've gotten into that before, if not playing great I'm in a downward spiral and, if I'm playing well, I'm happy."

"At times, I didn't want to grind as my energy and my head were elsewhere. Then my game went to s*** because I wasn't improving."

"Now I'm in a space where I want to improve and want to play golf like I know I can and keep grinding and competing. That's what wakes me up in the morning."

Much like Wallace, golf also finds itself at a crossroads with the ongoing civil war between LIV and the PGA and DP World (formerly European) Tours.

Good friends with players such as Ian Poulter and Lee Westwood, he backs their decision to join LIV but not necessarily their desire to also continue on the DP World Tour.

"Poults and Westy have given so much to the European Tour," says Wallace. "They're stalwarts but they knew the potential consequences when they signed. When you do that, you've got to take it on the chin. You can't fight that corner and say we deserve this or that. You don't deserve anything from this game."

Where that battle finally ends, Wallace has no idea and is anyway more preoccupied with himself. While most people in sport aim to avoid hitting the proverbial wall, he is relishing his reunion with it.

Joshua tells champions to see him as a contender

Matt Majendie

ANTHONY JOSHUA insists he is still a force to be reckoned with in the heavyweight division despite back-to-back defeats by Oleksandr Usyk.

Joshua returns to the ring at the O2 on Saturday night against Jermaine Franklin in his first fight since a second successive points defeat by the Ukrainian in Saudi Arabia in September.

But the 33-year-old insisted he would still battle it out for the major belts in 2023 and beyond.

"I'm a contender to get a championship again," he said. "I'm moving in that direction again. So, I have to fight like I'm heading towards that. So, the champions have to look at me like I'm a serious contender coming up. So that's what that feels like now."

Joshua is the overwhelming favourite against the relatively unheralded Franklin, who has just one loss in 22 professional fights, that coming on points in November against Dillian Whyte, who Joshua had previously defeated.

Joshua struggled in both the Usyk fights as he attempted to go toe to toe with the former cruiserweight. Ahead of Saturday, he said he plans to "show some of my old self".

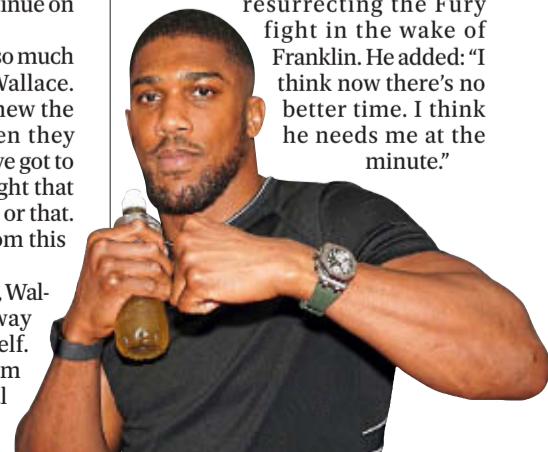
His training camp has been in Dallas, Texas, where he has been working with new trainer Derrick James, who oversees Errol Spence Jr among others.

Under James' tutelage, Londoner Joshua said he had stripped training back to the basics in preparation for his fight with the American.

"I think if Franklin possesses certain weaknesses, I'll be able to exploit them," he said. "It's been difficult over the last few fights to exploit people's weaknesses because they were very difficult to catch and pin down. So, hopefully I'll be able to exploit Franklin's weaknesses. People have high expectations. They put me in high regard. That's where the pressure comes from with me having to deliver...and I'll do my best for sure."

Joshua (*below*) had been scheduled to fight Tyson Fury after Usyk only for the talks to break down. Similar talks between Fury and Usyk also collapsed last week when the pair looked to be on the cusp of agreeing a late April fight.

But Joshua said he was hopeful at resurrecting the Fury fight in the wake of Franklin. He added: "I think now there's no better time. I think he needs me at the minute."



Back in the swing: Matt Wallace savours his Tour triumph