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Par for the Course

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NOTES FROM THE **FIELD**

Par for the Course

Matt Davidson comes home

BY VINCE MOORE

Matt Davidson '04 knew the exact moment his professional golf career was over.

It was July 2017, and he and his wife, Furman Health Sciences Professor **Natalie The '03**, had just had their second child, Graham.

"I left for a tournament when he was four days old and didn't see him again for four weeks," Davidson says. "I knew then it would be my last season playing professionally."

What he didn't know is that it would also be the first step to becoming the men's head golf coach at Furman.

Since graduating from Furman in 2004, Davidson had pursued his dream of playing professional golf, spending a full year on the PGA Tour in 2005 and another seven years on the Web.com Tour, professional golf's version of AAA baseball.

In the Sony Open, his very first tournament as a PGA Tour professional, Davidson was paired with 15-year-old female prodigy Michelle Wie. A few weeks later, he found himself hitting balls on the range beside Tiger Woods. Both involved huge galleries, bright media lights and revelatory introductions to life on the big tour. He failed to keep his PGA Tour card after that first year.

Davidson certainly had enough success over the years to keep the dream alive. He finished second in one Web.com tournament, placed among the top 10 in 16 others and, in 2016, shot a career-best round of 62 in the WinCo Foods Portland Open. He was among the tour's most accurate drivers and earned more than \$650,000 in prize money.

Still, the grind of traveling 30-35 weeks a year from one

highly competitive tournament to another had worn down Davidson long before the revelation that accompanied the birth of his second son. He had been thinking quite a while about the possibility of getting into college coaching, so when Furman head golf coach Todd Satterfield offered him a job as an assistant coach in January, he didn't hesitate to take it.

"It was something I was ready to do, and I loved the job right away," Davidson says. "I enjoyed working with the guys and helping them become better players. It just confirmed that it was what I wanted to do for a living."

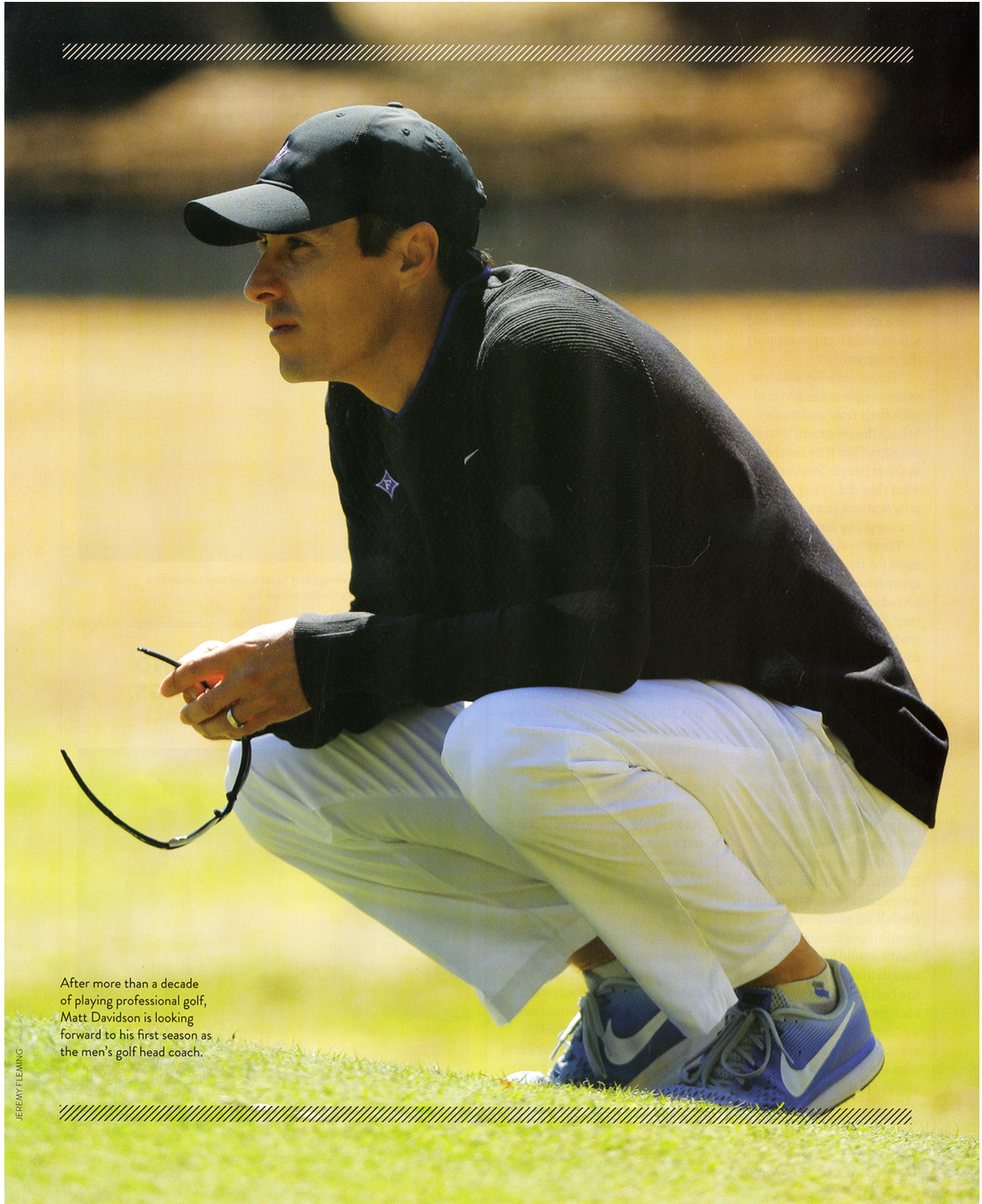
What Davidson didn't expect was to become a head coach after just one season as an assistant, but that was exactly what happened after Satterfield resigned following the 2017-18 season.

"I didn't expect that to happen, but I was definitely interested in the position when it came open," Davidson says. "I was fortunate enough to get the job."

As a former player who had remained close to the golf program, Davidson knows he is inheriting a program that has seen the best and worst of times over the past 35 years. If the high point came in 1983, when Brad Faxon was named the nation's top collegiate player, the nadir occurred in 2014 when the university announced it would eliminate the men's program.

"I was totally surprised and hadn't heard anything that suggested something like that might happen," Davidson says.

The program, of course, didn't meet its end. It got a second life a short while later when an energetic group of alumni and friends, including



After more than a decade of playing professional golf, Matt Davidson is looking forward to his first season as the men's golf head coach.

JEREMY FLEMING

Notes from the Field

Faxon, stepped in to make sure the program survived. And, oddly enough, that brush with near extinction has made the program stronger. Thanks to the financial generosity of those supporters, including a \$1 million gift from Fred and Lyn Stubblefield of Charlotte, North Carolina, there is now a \$2.7 million endowed scholarship fund to support the program.

“It was unbelievable how many people came forward with their time and money to help the program,” Davidson says. “We’ll be indebted to those people forever for what they did. They saved the program and put us on solid footing going forward.”

There’s even more good news for Davidson as he approaches his first season as a head coach: There are some very good golfers in the program. Junior Keller Harper, who came to Furman as a walk-on, was named the 2018 Southern Conference Men’s Golfer of the Year, the first Paladin to win that honor since Davidson in 2002.

Harper led the league with a stroke average of 72.24, while senior Connor Bruns joined Harper on the all-conference team and had the league’s seventh-best stroke average (73.33). The Paladins will also welcome three new recruits in the fall, all of whom have enjoyed strong amateur careers. That’s a solid foundation for a team that’s required to post the best four of its five scores each round.

“Both Connor and Keller are good, consistent players who work extremely hard and are just getting better,”



Junior Keller Harper had the league’s best stroke average last season and was named the 2018 Southern Conference Men’s Golfer of the Year.

Davidson says. “We have a lot of other good players returning, too. It’s just a matter of who steps up and rounds out the lineup.”

And then there is the addition of Davidson himself, who is looking forward to contributing in his own way. As a top player who has worked with some of the world’s best teachers and competed at the highest level, he wants to pass along what he has learned to his players.

“I enjoy teaching and helping the players with the technical side of the game,” he says. “But I also want to help them with things like course management and developing good practice habits. When you work hard and work on the right things, you’ll get better.” ●

WHEN YOU WORK HARD AND WORK ON THE RIGHT THINGS, YOU’LL GET BETTER.

