

# A Leap of Faith

With a new swing and some old beliefs,  
Ben Crane has arrived as a force on tour.

By Tim Rosaforte

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DARREN CARROLL

**AT A FELLOWSHIP OF CHRISTIAN ATHLETES** breakfast in Atlanta before the Tour Championship, Ben Crane stood nervously before a packed ballroom, not knowing what to say. His anxiety and his uncertainty were similar to what he faced most of the year standing over a shot. The PGA Tour poster boy for slow play wanted to open with something funny; he just didn't know what. Then he had a vision, not only of what he wanted to do, but how he wanted to do it. If you can laugh at yourself, he thought, people can laugh with you. So he started with long pauses between his words, "I'm ... Ben ... Crane ... and ... I ... would ... really ... like ... to ..."



A nervous silence was broken when Crane smiled and told the audience he was kidding—that he was talking as slowly as he plays. “They started howling,” Crane said. “It was beautiful.”

So was the irony of Crane’s breakout year. He didn’t become famous for rebuilding his swing and winning the U.S. Bank Championship, for coming back from nine weeks off with a back injury to produce a win, two seconds and a third or for being the best putter on the PGA Tour. Instead, his reputation was carved from an incident at the Booz Allen Classic in June that brought attention to his unnerving problem.

Crane’s deliberateness on the greens and his nervous hesitation over shots boiled over in a nationally televised altercation on the 17th green at Congressional CC with the high-strung and fast-playing South African, Rory Sabbatini. Eventually fined \$20,000 for being on the clock more than 10 times in 2005, Crane responded with self-deprecation, apologies and promises to improve his pace of play. He took the high road with Sabbatini—who broke protocol by walking ahead to the 18th tee while Crane was putting out—and holds no hard feelings. “We’re very cool,” Crane says. “Everything’s fine, totally fine.”

The approach makes him a hard man not to like. As Scott Verplank said after finishing four strokes behind Crane at Milwaukee, “It’s a good thing he’s a great guy because if he wasn’t, he would probably have a lot of trouble with all the players.”

Brad Faxon is a friend and one of his ardent supporters—and not because of the talent they share for putting. In his acceptance speech for the Payne Stewart Award, Faxon mentioned Crane as “a guy that will win this award some day.” The endorsement from such a solid citizen will go a long way toward flipping Crane’s reputation and molding his image with the public and the corporate world. In an interview with *Golf World*, Faxon acknowledged, “I’ve played with fast guys who bother me as much as guys who play slow. I overlook things like that. It’s not that big a deal. If we had 100 Ben Cranes, we’d be better off than [if we had a] bunch of hooligans who play fast.”

So who is Ben Crane, where did he come from and—pardon the pun—why did it take him this long to make it? The answer is he is a deeply religious, highly competitive, well-conditioned and infectiously enthusiastic 29-year-old from the Pacific Northwest who started shaving his head when it wasn’t cool, who married his college sweetheart and who spends one week a year doing mission work.

“Of all the guys I teach, he’s probably the greatest overachiever,” says swing instructor Butch Harmon. “Look at what he accomplished before he came on tour and how he’s progressed. He’s an extremely hard worker and being a great putter is a great equalizer. Plus, he knows how to compete. He has the intangibles you can’t teach. And he loves being on the tour.”

Standing over his approach shot on the first hole at East Lake GC in November, Crane realized he had finally made it. It was his first Tour Championship and he made the most of the trip to Georgia by preparing for his first Masters with five days at Augusta National GC. Crane, his father, Doug, and Andrew McQuitty, the pastor at Irving (Texas) Bible Church, were hosted by an Augusta member who is also a member, with Crane, at the Vaquero Club in suburban Dallas. They were joined for a spell by Dallas Cowboys quarterback Drew Bledsoe.

The party stayed in a cabin along the 10th fairway, gained local knowledge from a caddie who worked for three-time Masters’ champion Nick Faldo, played the Par 3 Course and used the evenings to talk about faith. Crane brought along his putting tools—a carpenter’s square and a digital level—gave them putting lessons, tips on bunker play and videotaped their swings. In his first pass around the lengthened course, he shot 68. His friends teased him about owning the new course record.

“He’s people-centered, a real servant-hearted guy,” said McQuitty, “but man, he can hit bunker shots, too.”

Growing up in Portland, Ore., Crane knew he needed a short game to fulfill his dream of playing on the PGA Tour. His father owned a multimedia development business and was a member at Portland GC, a traditional club with towering pines and fast greens that hosted the 1946 PGA Championship, won by Ben Hogan, and the 1947 Ryder Cup. Crane was the kid who wore out security guards putting under the clubhouse lights until he made 100 straight.

“That was the last drill I would do before I’d go home,” says Crane, who according to *Golf World*’s Total Putting Score, was the best putter on tour in 2005 (see page 32). “Sometimes I’d do it on right-to-left putts, left-to-right putts, and straight putts. Sometimes it was overkill. I worked extremely hard on it as a kid, not so much working on my stroke, but making putts, just making putts.”

Crane went away to Baylor, where he did not play golf, quickly grew homesick and returned home to attend the University of Oregon. “I met Ben his sophomore year of college, and he was an interesting guy who fully intended to play professional golf,” remembers close friend Brad Payne, director of the College Golf Fellowship. “He was a decent player, but not a great player. I meet thousands of these people and sometimes I don’t know what to tell them, but I encourage them. You’re going to succeed, or it’s going to beat you up, and you’ll learn some life lessons. Failure is a wonderful thing.”

The 1998 Pacific Coast Amateur and three all-Pac-10 teams were Crane’s highest honors while in school, but he qualified for the Nationwide Tour in 2000, won two events over the next two years and earned his PGA Tour card by finishing fifth in the 2001 qualifying school. He nearly won his first year out, shooting 65 on Sunday (in a pairing with Ernie Els) to finish second behind Shigeki Maruyama in the Verizon Byron Nelson Classic, jumping from 143rd to 38th on the money list. One week later he married Heather Heinze.

“It was pretty dramatic because he’d missed five straight cuts,” says Heather. “He didn’t want to go home to the wedding and be a downer. We felt like it was a God thing. It was like [Ben] won.”

In 2003 Crane had weekend rounds of 63-64 to win the BellSouth Classic. The first person he called was his pastor from Portland, Ron Mehl, who was dying of leukemia and whose last wedding ceremony was marrying Ben and Heather. With his winnings Crane was able to buy a home at Vaquero, become neighbors with Bledsoe and equip his golf room with a putting green and video system that allow him to work with Harmon without flying to Las Vegas. He was ready to take the next step up the career ladder.

“The thing I like is he’s open-minded,” says Harmon. “He works hard to get better at the things he’s not good at. Other than putting there’s nothing impressive about his game, but he does nothing badly.”

## “Other than putting there’s nothing impressive about [Crane’s] game, but he does nothing badly.” BUTCH HARMON

Crane’s ascent was derailed by a bad back. It started to give him problems on the Nationwide Tour and resurfaced at the start of 2005. Tom Boers, the noted physical therapist, provided treatment, but Crane reached a point where he couldn’t swing anymore. Rather than face surgery, Crane left the tour after the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic and worked with Harmon and Dr. Greg Rose at the Titleist Performance Institute in Oceanside, Calif., to develop a swing that didn’t cause him as much pain. “Ben had one of the classic swing faults,” says Rose, a board-certified chiropractor. “On his downswing, his lower body was moving closer to the ball—and that put excessive load on his lumbar.” Attaching Crane to 3-D sensors, Rose moved Crane closer to the ball, started working on the range of motion in his hips and limited him to 20 practice balls a day.

When Crane, who had a reputation for being slow before the swing change, returned at the MCI Heritage in April, he was agonizingly occupied over shots—wiggling, looking at the target, unable to pull the trigger. In his sixth tournament back, Crane shot 67 Sunday at Congressional to finish T-2 amid the Sabbatini con-

troversy. He followed that with a missed cut and a withdrawal. “The Rory Sabbatini thing was a setback for him,” says Rose. “He was already going through physical changes and mental changes to his golf game. There’s only so much the brain can handle.”

The first step to correct the mental problems was working with Dr. Preston Waddington of Fort Lauderdale. Waddington helped Jason Gore overcome insecurity issues by having him watch tapes of Fred Astaire dancing. With Crane, he talked about the painter Matisse unconsciously brushing the canvas, letting the painting come to him. By mid-July, it did. He shot 64 in the final round of the B.C. Open to finish T-6 and followed up the next week with a win at Milwaukee.

The irony is that Friday at Brown Deer Park GC, rushing to complete play before darkness, Crane and playing partners Corey Pavin and Kenny Perry were running between shots. Crane finished that day with a 65, but overall, he was still living up to his reputation. David Feherty was working the event for CBS and sidled up to the wife of a player who drew Crane on the weekend. “She looks up from a book she was reading and says, ‘I picked this one up at the turn,’” says Feherty. “I’ve already finished one.”

In August Crane denied rumors he was fined for a second time, telling *Golf World*, “I can honestly say by the end of the year, it won’t be an issue.” At the Bell Canadian Open, where he finished T-2, Crane had caddie Brett Waldman time him over shots. At last month’s Tommy Bahama Challenge, he consistently required less than 20 seconds on every tee ball and approach, closing out the year with a victory against Kevin Na, and won Heather an SUV in a closest-to-the-pin contest with his last shot of 2005.

As Waddington told him, he was now becoming one with the painting. “I don’t want to think where I’m going with it, the consequences of it. I just want to make strokes,” says Crane. “On the second tee at Las Vegas, Brett looked at me and said, ‘Just paint.’ I looked at him and said, ‘You’re right. I can paint and put it on the canvas, but it’s up to God to turn it into something.’ Brett looked at me and said, ‘Did that really come out of your mouth?’ I’m like, ‘That was kind of money, huh?’ That was a moment.”

Crane has been busy this off-season. He spent a week in New Orleans with Heather, his parents, his brother and sister-in-law, a nephew and a cousin, on a mission trip to clean up after

Hurricane Katrina. “There was more devastation than you can ever imagine,” he says. “It was overwhelming. We were gutting houses and nothing could be saved. I took a photo album out of one of the houses, handed it to the [owner] and said, ‘I’m sorry.’ It just rips your heart out to think everything they have is gone. I think our group got more out of it than the people we were helping. We were so blessed to be doing the work.”

After that trip, Crane traveled to Belize in Central America; went on a fishing vacation on the Klamath River in southern Oregon with Payne, Jonathan Byrd and tour rookie Jason Allred; spent five days at the Titleist Performance Institute; and hosted a retreat at his home that is sponsored by the College Golf Fellowship. The participants played paint ball, WhirlyBall, Texas Hold ’Em and 18 holes of golf, but most of the time was spent discussing the Christian lifestyle.

Crane wears well in a secular environment because, as McQuitty says, he’s not in your face with his beliefs. If you ask, though, he’ll tell you where he’s coming from. “I want to be the biggest over-achiever [ever], for sure,” Crane says. “My wife and I talk all the time. Ephesians 3:20 says that by the grace of God, you can do infinitely more than you dare to dream or ask or imagine. That’s the verse I carried in my yardage book during BellSouth. Without my relationship with God, I wouldn’t be on tour. Through my relationship with the Lord, God gives you a sense of peace, strength and courage to do things greater than we’re capable of on our own. That’s when we know we’re in the will of God, when we are doing

things that are greater than us.”

The one thing about God that Ben Crane understands: He doesn’t operate by a clock. GW

## Ben Crane on putting

THE system seems complex but it’s simple in theory: Ben Crane learned how to make putts by learning how to make putts as a kid. Under the lights at Portland (Ore.) GC, he wasn’t thinking technique. He was training himself to think about nothing. “One of the things an instructor told me once is that great players don’t know what they do,” Crane says. “I believe that.” In other words, there is no arc stroke, as Stan Uley teaches, no special grip, forward press or system taking the putter back X amount of inches depending on the length of putt.

“Putting for me is just kind of a feel thing,” he says. “When I’m taking practice strokes, I’m exhaling, just trying to relax myself and feel the proper stroke.”

Andrew McQuitty, the pastor at Crane’s church, calls it “informed feel.” To get it, Crane brings a carpenter’s square and a digital level with him to check his stroke and the pitch of the greens—sketching the contours into his yardage book. Close friend Brad Payne has seen Crane put three balls on a practice green and get so into determining the variables, that it might take 15 minutes before he strokes a putt. “He’s so driven by the process,” says Payne, “and not consumed by the result.”

In competition he reads putts from all angles. He also has caddie Brett Waldman line up behind him to make sure he’s aiming properly. But once he settles in—with an Odyssey White Hot 5 putter he has used for five

years—Crane tries to turn the science into art. “He looks comfortable over putts and to me, he doesn’t take as long to putt as he does full shots,” says Brad Faxon. “His routine is consistent. He’s got a simple-looking stroke, with nice pace and flow, a blend of mechanics and pace. But I always think guys who putt well are more fearless. They don’t worry about the three-putt or the bad putt. They don’t take that with them.” —T.R.

Buoyed by wife Heather and inspired by his faith, Crane is working to make the most of his abilities. Helping out after Katrina (left) was eye-opening.

