

NOVEMBER 3-5, 2000

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# Swing Time

Matt Damon has always had drive. Now, playing a '30s golfer in "Bagger Vance," he has a driver, too. The star's thoughts on heroism, Hollywood and how to lower his handicap.

Greenville Herald Banner

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att Damon needs to get a life. He has no real home, keeps his money (several million) locked in the bank and seems

to avoid all the usual trappings of stardom. He doesn't frequent nightclubs, wear flashy jewelry or even carry a mobile. The last few years, Damon has been, as he puts it, merely "changing duffel bags." He's a man with "no attachments to anything on a material plane."

Every actor looks forward to the day he can find steady work. But Damon has been in constant demand and apparently doesn't know when to quit. The 30-year-old star shot nine films between 1996 and 1999 — without a single day off. He'll follow up his latest role, in Robert Redford's mystical drama *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, with the lead in Billy Bob Thornton's post-modern western *All the Pretty Horses* next month. (The second movie actually was filmed first.) The last time Damon paid rent was 1996, when he shared an apartment in New York's Chinatown. He stayed there three nights the entire year. When he finally took a

link and know everything about them by the end of the night. Like if they try and cheat, if they say, 'That stroke doesn't count,' they will cheat in real life. He walked through every aspect of the game."

It was just three years ago that *Good Will Hunting* put Damon on the green, as they say. The touching story of an underachieving math prodigy won Damon and co-writer Affleck the Academy Award for best screenplay. Damon, an underemployed actor relegated to obscure roles — prep school bigot in *School Ties*, heroin-addict soldier in *Courage Under Fire* — now saw offer after offer roll into the cup. He struck while the iron was hot, following his star-making performance with the title role in Steven Spielberg's WWII blockbuster *Saving Private Ryan*. Since 1997, Damon's movies have accumulated 12 Oscars and more than \$570 million in box office. He doesn't deny that diving into work has been a means for him to avoid facing the drastic changes that go with his transition from struggling actor to incredibly powerful movie star: "The important thing is not getting your entire identity wrapped up into your career, because if you do you're just running full speed at a brick wall. The brick wall's

down the lineup from the 1977 Red Sox in the time it takes to smoke a cigarette. "He's a cool dude," says *Bagger Vance* co-star Will Smith. "That dichotomy is interesting, when you see someone who's Ivy League-schooled but also knows Biggie lyrics." Between takes, the two spent hours impersonating their favorite caricatures from *In Living Color*: Smith, hoochie-mama Wanda; Damon, Fire Marshall Bill. It got pretty loud, and "we almost got kicked off a few courses."

It shouldn't surprise anyone that Damon's two new movies are based on admired best sellers. Recently, he's torn through six books in one week — two in one day. He's been reading a lot of James Ellroy lately. It's been years since Damon picked up a book simply for pleasure and not because he was working on it or the film rights had been sold. Who knows how much Damon's workload has affected his relationships? Linked in the past with Winona Ryder, Claire Danes and Minnie Driver, he's now rumored to be single. Outside his career, Damon makes few waves. He keeps a tight circle of friends, many actors he started out with. They go to movies, bars, shoot pool. "He's still a kid," says Robin Williams, who won a best sup-

*He may have mastered golf for this week's "Bagger Vance," but still hasn't gotten into the swing of being a Hollywood hotshot.*

break from acting last January, Damon crashed at his best friend Ben Affleck's Spanish-style villa in the Hollywood Hills, and he's been there ever since. "Two days ago, one of my buddies went back to film school," Damon says. "I got back from the gym and nothing is in my room. The bed's gone, the couch, the television..." He's grinning now. "I realized all this stuff belonged to my buddy. He was just staying in one of Ben's guest rooms and he needs it now in Boston. That's the way things kind of come in and out of my life."

We are having lunch on a patio at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills. Damon is dressed, as usual, in clunky casual attire, something he scooped off the floor rolling out of bed. "I thought I was gonna finish out *Pretty Horses* and take the rest of the year off," he says, when asked about putting everything in his life on hold. "I was exhausted. Then I get a phone call: Can I meet Robert Redford on Tuesday?"

*Bagger Vance*, set during the Depression, is the story of a war-traumatized amateur golfer who connects with a mysterious caddie for instruction on getting his life out of the rough. Originally, Redford was to play the burned-out Southern golden boy, but he decided to cast it younger. It's a film about "redemption," according to Damon, "about a guy who's totally given up, but then, through his interaction with this very spiritual caddie, starts caring again."

Damon is a serious sports fan, but he "had no idea how to even hold a golf club" when he signed on. "An interesting thing I learned from the guy who taught me," says Damon, is that "I can take anyone out on a



Damon's burned-out Southern golfer finds redemption through a mysterious caddie played by Will Smith, rear.

gonna be there at some point. It might be in 10 steps or it might be in a mile, but you're gonna hit it."

His work in movies has made him rich and famous, though hanging out with him you'd never know it. When he needs to get around town, Damon uses a "loaner" (today, a black Cadillac). But don't let his regular-guy appearance fool you. Few among us can get Tom Hanks on the phone or arrange a private batting session at Fenway Park for friends. Damon is one of those formidably intelligent people who can discuss great literature, offer a rich and philosophical take on fame, then jog

porting actor Oscar for playing Damon's therapist in *Hunting*. Surprisingly, the veteran actor never felt a need to mentor Damon. "No, I couldn't give him any clues. 'Yeah, Matt, let your hair hang down a little. Look up toward the end of the close-up,'" Williams jokes. "He'd written it so it was more like looking to him like: 'Is that all right? Is that what you wrote?'"

**D**amon grew up in a "six-family community house" in racially mixed Cambridge, Mass. His parents, who divorced when he was 2, were liberal intellectuals. His mom is a professor of early-childhood development; her longtime boyfriend, a bus driver who helped desegregate Boston's schools in the mid-'70s. In 1988, Damon entered Harvard, where he concentrated on drama, performing at the prestigious American Repertory Theatre, before dropping out 11 credits shy of graduation to pursue his acting career.

Last March, Damon returned to Harvard with Affleck, whose father mopped floors there (the basis for Damon's role in *Hunting*), to organize a rally for the school's custodians. A small gesture, but it represents a greater sense of commitment. "The more time I have in the future, the more involved I'd like to get in causes I really believe in." Damon leans forward slightly when talking, in a direct but not overbearing manner. "It's a great gift to have a name that might mean something to people. I talked to my parents, and they both said, 'If you waste this on yourself, it would be not only embarrassing to us, but really pain-

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Photography by Andrew Eccles

# Ace of Clubs

Matt Damon

By Craig Barboza

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ful.' They tried to educate me about the world, about things that are going on, injustices, and if I turned around and made everything about myself, I'd be wasting what I have."

One day this past summer, I went with Damon to Pearl Street Productions in L.A. The company named for the street adjoining his and Affleck's childhood homes is developing a miniseries based on Howard Zinn's contrarian book *A People's History of the United States*. To reach Damon's office, you must go through Affleck's, which is orderly. Damon's is a wreck. It is dark and narrow. Scripts litter the floor. On a shelf is Damon's "prized collection," the video set of the American Film Institute's 100 best movies of the 20th century, a Christmas gift from

**Damon has never played it safe. "If you're gonna fall," he says, "fall hard and break your nose."**

Paramount. The offices soon will be used by *Greenlight*, a reality-based HBO series that will follow the ups and downs of a total unknown making a first movie. The director will be chosen through an online screenplay contest (see details at [projectgreenlight.com](http://projectgreenlight.com)). Miramax will release the movie at the end of HBO's 13 episodes in 2001. "I think Matt and Ben feel very lucky about what happened to them and want to give back," says producer Chris Moore.

Success hasn't changed the actors' friendship. They still root for each other and carry on as they did back when they held "business lunches" in the high school cafeteria. "They play off each other really well," says Charlize Theron, Affleck's co-star in 1999's *Reindeer Games* and Damon's fireball Southern belle in *Bigger Vance*. "The most fun I've had with them was just sitting around Ben's house, drinking beer. They would tell the stupidest story ever and you'd be lying on the floor, cracking up. You can see there's a true admiration

and respect and love between them.”

But they're on different career paths. Affleck, who played, as Damon put it, “the bronzed God” in *Armageddon*, seems drawn toward gold-plated studio movies. Next summer, he'll splash across screens in the \$135 million epic *Pearl Harbor*. Damon, on the other hand, chooses textured, character-driven stories. He was last seen as a sexually ambiguous imposter in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, a dazzling murder story from Anthony Minghella. *Ripley*, which spoke keenly to the current era of booming economy and constant self-reinvention, suffered from backlash over what many saw as a loathsome central character. (The same was said 25 years ago about Robert De Niro's *Taxi Driver* character.) “Some people liked it; some hated it,” Damon says of *Ripley*, “but that should probably be the goal of any movie. If you're gonna fall, fall on your face and fall hard and break your nose.”

Damon approaches his work with an intensity rarely seen in big stars, preparing sometimes three months in advance. For *The Bourne Identity*—a thriller, now shooting, about a man with amnesia pulled from the water after a murder attempt—Damon studied martial arts, boxing, weight lifting, firearms and two languages. His career is, he says, in excellent shape, but it's come “at the expense of everything else.”

It's taken a while, but Damon finally has realized the importance of having a life outside his career. Working on *All the Pretty Horses* was a “huge lesson.” The movie, in which a dispossessed cowboy learns to let go of the past, taught Damon to loosen up and think about life less rigidly. During filming, director Billy Bob Thornton would “go out bowling a few times a week with the whole crew.” Thornton was relaxed on the set and greatly enjoyed the work. “I need to do that,” Damon says with a laugh. “Take the blinders off for a minute. Life can be fun, and that's my goal: to make it all fit into my life organically.” **TV**

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