



CHILDISH THEN, BUT GARCIA IS NOW A MATURE GOLFER

'EL NINO' IS DETERMINED TO BE IN TOP FORM FOR SINGAPORE OPEN

BY
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Given just between 2 and 4 per cent chance of winning the Race to Dubai crown, Sergio Garcia knew that it was going to be mammoth task at the Jumeirah Golf Estates course last week. And although at one point the Spanish sensation nearly pulled off the near-miracle by scorching the Earth course with eight birdies, he missed out on the honours.

At the last hole of the final stop of the European Tour last Sunday, he found the creek with his second shot and suffered a bogey for a seven-under 65 to tie for fourth, leaving Englishman Tommy Fleetwood to finish with the European crown (Jon Rahm won the DP event).

Still it was an amazing year for Garcia, who shed his "Nearly Man" image with a scintillating win at the Masters in Augusta in April for his first Slam triumph.

That victory came after his wire-to-wire victory at the Dubai Desert Classic two months earlier, just weeks following his 11th placing at the SMBC Singapore Open at Sentosa's Serapong course.

Looking back, "El Nino" said, at a teleconference from Dubai last week: "It has been a great year, especially now that I got the Major monkey off my back with the Augusta triumph."

Four times runner-up at Majors previously, he added: "I have been playing well throughout the year, and am looking forward to the new season."

The 37-year-old, who first played in

Singapore at the Tanah Merah Skins at the Garden course in 2002, has pledged to be back for the SMBC Singapore Open from Jan 18 to 21.

"I like Singapore, and love the Serapong layout, especially the greens which are relatively fast but true. Also, I like the Singapore food and the hospitality."

In 2002, as a 22 year-old, Garcia showed schoolboyish traits in his demeanour.

Playing with Vijay Singh, Retief Goosen and Padraig Harrington, he once hit a three-wood second shot on a 480-metre par-five from near a row of trees, and full of anticipation, ran up a steep slope to check on his ball.

Three years earlier during a duel with Tiger Woods, late in the final round his ball was up against a tree trunk in the right rough with the green hidden from view.

He swung a low curving fade with his eyes shut and then sprinted madly towards the target and then scissor-kick-jumped to see the result on the green.

That was at the US PGA Championship at Medinah as a 19-year-

old rookie professional, where his child-like innocence thrilled and amused the audience.

Today, Sergio Garcia is a mature, much-admired professional who displayed his new-found maturity when he played at the SMBC Singapore Open at the Serapong course last January and at last week's Dubai event.

The third Spaniard to win a Major after Seve Ballesteros and Jose Maria Olazabal, Garcia was predictable yet precise with his answers to all questions posed by the Singapore media.

Having duelled with Tiger Woods during the American former world No. 1's prime so very often, I asked: "Do you think that Tiger would return to the game?"

He replied: "Obviously having Woods for golf is great, whoever doesn't agree is not telling the truth. It's going to be interesting to see. I think at the end of the day, anything that can help the game of golf is good for us and hopefully he can make it."

And would his switch from equipment sponsor TaylorMade after 15 years to Callaway change his game and attitude? "No", he replied, adding:

"Callaway has been around for a long time, and it is a good brand. I'll be confident with its clubs and golf balls."

The boy is now a man. And with his strong iron-game, the excitable young golfer has transformed into an accomplished player who continues to give the game added impetus and status with his charismatic personality.

TICKET DETAILS FOR SINGAPORE OPEN

Tickets can be purchased by visiting: www.smbcsingaporeopen.com. Purchase before Nov 30 and enjoy an 'Early Bird' 10% discount: Thursday \$18, Friday \$18, Saturday \$27, Sunday \$27 or a season pass for \$54.

STANDARD

(General course pass — Adult)

- Thurs: \$5, Fri: \$5, Sat: \$10, Sun: \$10
- Season: \$60

(General course pass — Child)

- Thurs: \$5, Fri: \$5, Sat: \$10, Sun: \$10.
- Season: \$15

(VIP pass)

- Thurs: \$400, Fri: \$400, Sat: \$600, Sun: \$600.
- Season: \$1800

photo: AFP