

# BY BENNY TEO & WITH ERNIE ELS



Ernie Els with His Excellency Yasir bin Othman Al-Rumayyan during the Grand Opening Ceremonial Tee Shot.

Four-time Major winner Ernie Els recently opened his latest Troon-managed golf course called Royal Green Golf & Country Club, in Saudi Arabia, and tells what it takes to win at the US and British Open.

**Royal Green has only just opened and yet, there is already a European Tour event planned for next year. How significant is that, in terms of growing the sport in countries like Saudi Arabia?**

**ERNIE ELS:** We need places where we can grow the game, where we can start from grass root levels and introduce the game to new markets, and this is an absolutely untouched market.

This will be the inaugural event and to bring world class players here (Dustin Johnson, Patrick Reed, Paul Casey and Thomas Bjorn has confirmed their participation), to Royal Greens in Saudi Arabia, is just going to be a game-changer.

This facility is wonderful and they are going to be building schools here, they're going to be building housing facilities, hotels, it's going to be an absolutely unbelievable city and to have golf as your main sport here, for the kids to grow up around the game, is going to be so important.

**How does what you see here compare to when you played your first event in the Middle East?**

There are many similarities. My first event in the Middle East was in 1993. I had a wonderful time in Dubai. If you told me in 1993 what I would be looking at now in 2018 in Dubai, I would say you're crazy.

So, I have seen what people can do here in the Middle East. They really can make changes very quickly and I can see the same here.

The infrastructure is in, the roads and the power in this place is ready to explode. In only a few years' time, you are going to see a very different environment and they've done their homework, so I really feel very positive for the region.

**The weeks ahead are obviously important to the world of golf. Let's talk about the upcoming US and British Open in June and July respectively. What do you think is going to take to win this year's events?**

Let's take Shinnecock Hills, the venue for the US Open in June. It can be blustery, conditions can change quite rapidly. Long Island goes out there about 80 miles from the city, so you're basically in the ocean with a great golf course. A linky style of golf will be required there.

Then obviously with the USGA, they set them up the hardest of any of the Majors, so you have to bring your all-round game and then you have to have a little bit of luck here and there.

You could play a British Open there or a US Open there, you can play any type of event out there in Shinnecock; it is one of the great classic courses so it will deliver a great champion.

**And Carnoustie?**

Carnoustie is the toughest course on the Open rota. I can't think of any other tougher links I have ever played. If the weather gets tough, you saw what happened in 1999 (with Jean van de Velde's final hole collapse), over par wins very easily around Carnoustie.

The bunkering is incredible, the course was built whenever it was and those bunkers are still in play.

It has got everything you need for a major championship venue – length, strategic bunkering, weather, a great history, and a list of great champions.

**We're bound to hear criticism about the courses being too hard but what about equipment making golf too easy?**

The golf ball, the clubs and the athletes we see these days are all just getting better. I don't see any reason to change. They are swinging the club a lot faster than we did in our day and I think that is just a generational change that is happening.

You'll see when we get to a tough condition golf course, when the course is playing firm, the rough is up, and we have a bit of wind. I don't care if you have supersonic equipment, the game of golf is a pretty tough game.

**In your opinion, is the US Open truly set up as the most difficult of all?**

Normally, in the US Open, The Open, or any Major, at the end of four days, you are going to get the player who has played the best golf. I don't think you can fluke yourself into winning a Major anywhere, especially the US Open.

A US Open is set up the hardest of all the Majors and if you haven't shown any weakness, you deserve to win. You are going to get young winners who haven't won a lot, but normally after winning the US Open, you set yourself up for a very good career. You don't fluke one of these tournaments.

**Growing up, was The Open the one you stand on the practice green thinking, 'this putt is for the Claret Jug'?**

The Open has always been my favourite, largely because there is virtually no time change from Great Britain down to South Africa, so you could actually sit on your couch and watch the golf live during the day.

I remember the days when Tom Watson was dominating, Seve's win in '88, my wonderful win in Lytham and so many wonderful champions.

I grew up in Johannesburg which is very parklandish and you have to put the ball in the air and obviously links is totally different, but for some reason I was very comfortable and always just loved playing on links land. In 2012 (at Royal Lytham and St Annes), we were working hard on the swing but it's incredible

the journey that it takes you through.

My good friend, Scotty (Adam Scott), obviously had a terrible finish and basically handed me the trophy but then, as the golfing gods will be, he won the Masters the very next year, which was really wonderful. I think I celebrated more for that one than he did himself.

**We are looking at a shift happening, with a lot of young players doing very well, whereas, for a time, we'd been struggling to find young talent.**

Absolutely. It seems like our generation has been around a long time. There was a middle generation with Sergio Garcia and Adam Scott and some of those guys but they had to contend in the Tiger era and Tiger was such a dominating player.

So, for 20 years there wasn't really a change over. And I feel now there are 10 young guys who are really going to dominate the game going forward and they're going to have a lot of fun doing that.

They seem like they're good friends, which I don't always agree with. I feel like you have got to be very competitive, which they are, but it's very friendly at the moment. Besides that, they are a talented group and they are separating themselves from the rest. That group is going to take the game forward.

**Is there anyone in particular that you want to pick out?**

Obviously, Justin Thomas. Last year was a career year right there. Winning the FedEx Cup, shooting 59, winning a Major, winning some other tournaments. Then, obviously Jordan Spieth, winning three Majors, becoming number one in the world already, and he's only 24 years old. You have Rickie Fowler, Jon Rahm, and Rory McIlroy, who's the elder statesman at 28, my goodness.

**You mentioned Tiger, what do you think of his return this time?**

I'm happy with what I'm seeing. I can see the joy in his eyes again. He went through a very tough time for a long time, on and off the course. To see him happy and to see him swing the club how he wants to after all these injuries, I am really happy for him.

And I believe he has a Major in him. No doubt in my mind he is capable of it. He has the talent, he just has to find the right venue and he can do it. He's 42. I think that's the magic number in your 40s to start winning Majors again.

Ben Hogan, Mark O'Meara, Phil Mickelson, myself, Darren Clarke, I think Ray Floyd was 42, Payne Stewart was 41, so if we can do it, he can do it too.

**How about you? Do you still look forward to competitive golf?**

I still want to play. I'm starting to play a little better myself, I feel physically a lot better than I have in the last 18 months. I got an invite to the US Open, which is great. Obviously the Open championship and we will see where it goes. I want try and feel like I'm competitive and take my game into the Champions Tour.