

## Africa Open a life changing victory for Goose

When Retief Goosen sits on his *stoep* one day and boasts to his grandchildren of his golfing exploits, professional victory No37 might feature surprisingly prominently.

The Africa Open may not yet hold its own against any given US PGA Tour or European Tour event in terms of stature and history, and may seem almost insignificant compared with Goosen's two US Open titles, yet this victory at the East London Golf and Country Club will be the one that showed he had lost neither his magnificent talents nor his winning temperament.

And many who were beginning to wonder if he could win again will now be convinced that there will be victories number 38, 39, 40 ...

Other great golfers who went into premature decline could not make it back. David Duval is one; the American's game mysteriously went missing at the age of 30 and he still can't find it.

Another is the magnificent Spaniard Seve Ballesteros, who when in his early 40s suddenly couldn't find the green even if it were the size of a football field.

Goosen turns 40 in February, the age once considered — in the pre-Tiger Woods era — to be the prime golfing years. He has been working hard on his fitness and says he is fitter now than he has been for five years, and is looking forward to the season ahead and so are we. Whatever the stature of the tournament, the Africa Open presented a delightful spectacle. As with the Joburg Open the previous week, any one of at least six players could have won it with three holes to play.

The big guns from overseas played their part, with Argentinean Angel Cabrera making the early running before Northern Ireland's Darren Clarke hit top gear. He was challenging for the lead right up to the 18th hole on Sunday.

Charl Schwartzel, always a favourite in SA, would have felt he'd under-performed in the December tournaments but posted his second consecutive top 10 finish in East London to justify the high regard in which he is held. His Sunshine Tour earnings have topped up his winnings from his sixth-place finish in the HSBC Champions tournament in November, so he is sitting nicely in 12th place in the Race to Dubai.

Richard Sterne, with his stunning 11-under-par 61 in the third round of the Africa Open, put the stamp on an incredible Sunshine Tour season in which he won the SA Open and the Dunhill Championship.

A disappointing 73 on Sunday saw him finish eighth, but he has become the man to beat when playing on home soil. However, to become a major player on the global stage, Sterne needs to carry that kind of form over to Europe and the US. He failed to do so after winning last season's Joburg Open, but this year he heads overseas in third place in the Race to Dubai and with bucket loads of confidence.

"I think one of the reasons I'm playing well is that I'm enjoying my golf more," he said after his SA Open victory. "I'm a bit healthier than I've been in a while (he had been suffering from back problems) and I've come to realise this is what I'm meant to do. "I think all people go through patches when they wonder if they have made the right career choice. It's great if what you do doesn't feel like work and, right now, golf doesn't feel like work to me."

The Africa Open also confirmed young Branden Grace as a potential future star. The 20-year-old from Pretoria was playing only his 13th professional tournament yet he shot four sub-70 rounds to finish one stroke behind Goosen, showing that his sixth-place finish at the SA Open last month was no fluke.

"They say life begins at 40 and I'm inclined to believe it," said Goosen after hoisting the trophy aloft at the end of the final round that could have seen any of six players take the spoils. This year, I feel I am a little more prepared for the game than over the last couple of years and I hope that this is just the start of greater things to come."