

Former top amateurs aim high at Africa Open

Former South African Strokeplay champions, Branden Grace and Louis de Jager, hope the Gary Player layout at the Fish River Sun Country Club course will bare its fangs this week for the inaugural Africa Open from 7 - 10 February 2008.

Grace, the winner in 2006, and De Jager, who won the Matchplay and prestigious Strokeplay title last year, both relish playing in tough conditions.

"I love playing tough courses, it's a challenge for me," said Grace, who turned pro in May last year. "The harder the course, the better I like it. This course, especially, has a tight layout and each shot has to be precise and well planned."

The Buffelsbaai pro has proven that he has the talent and tenacity to handle the demands and pressure of major tournaments with top-10 finishes in two of the world's most prestigious amateur events, the Lytham Trophy and The Brabazon.

"I know I will make mistakes just like everybody else, but it's limiting them to the bare minimum that counts," said Grace, who carded a career best round 64 at Royal Berkshire. "I tend have more patience when I'm playing a tough course, though."

The George teenager made his professional debut in the Oceanico Developments Pro-Am Challenge on the European Challenge Tour and narrowly missed his first cut, but two starts later, underlined his growing potential with a tie for ninth at the Credit Suisse Challenge.

"Since I turned pro, it's been a steep learning curve, especially playing on invitations only in Europe. You don't know for sure where your next start is and you could find yourself teeing it up in the morning when you only got the call the night before."

But Grace, who earned his Sunshine Tour card at the Q-School in December 2007, is adjusting well to the paying circuit at home.

The Africa Open will be Grace's fourth consecutive start on the 2008 Sunshine Tour.

He tied for 63rd at the Joburg Open at Royal Johannesburg, claimed a share of 35th at the Dimension Data Pro-Am at Sun City and bagged his first top-20 finish with a tie for 18th at the wind-ravaged Nashua Masters on Sunday.

The 20-year old from Buffelsbaai near George intends to maintain his proud streak of playing in all four rounds on every occasion.

"The last time I played the Fish River Sun was the Eastern Province Strokeplay in 2005. I made a stupid error; I checked my score against the stroke of a hole instead of the par and signed for a three instead of a four. Disqualified. I guess you could say I have a score to settle this week."

After a relatively quiet start to the year, the Africa Open marks De Jager's second pro appearance. "I've been on the sidelines for three weeks, so I am looking for a solid performance this week," said De Jager, who missed the cut at the Joburg Open and failed to qualify for Sun City and the Wild Coast. "I am looking forward to playing this course. It's a great design, the course changes depending on which way the wind blows.

"You have to plan your way around every hole, a great shot-maker's course. It should be a great test of golf."

De Jager joined the pro ranks on the back of eight top-10 finishes in 12 starts, including winning the SA Amateur Strokeplay and Matchplay, the Gauteng North Etonic Open and the Boland Open and representing South Africa at the Southern Cross in Argentina and the Copa Juan Carlos Tailhade in Argentina, among others.

If he is not holding the trophy on Sunday, De Jager's immediate goal this week will be to battle his way to a top-10 finish to qualify for the Vodacom Championship at Pretoria Country Club.

"I do have some high expectations, because you need to play with some goals. But I am also just going out there with the intention to play golf, learn and gain experience and to enjoy every moment and see what comes my way," said De Jager.

Other young guns in the 20-Something Squad teeing it up this week are Louis Moolman, Oliver Bekker, Atti Schwartzel, Prinavin, last year's number one amateur, Tyrone Ferreira and Teboho Sefatsa, who challenged well at last week's Nashua Masters.

The qualifying round, scheduled for Tuesday, was cancelled and the field size which includes the two top players representatives each from 11 African countries (Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia, Lesothu, Uganda and Madagascar) for the main event was increased to 148 players.

Players from 18 countries will challenge for the R190,200 winner's share of the R1.2-million purse when the truly international Africa Open tees off from 7 - 10 February 2008.