

Sterne expects stiff opposition at 2010 Africa Open

Five-time European Tour winner Richard Sterne knows the going will be tough but still hopes for a clean sweep when he tees it up at the 2010 Africa Open at East London Golf Club from 7-10 January.

In 2008 Sterne accomplished an unprecedented feat in South African golf when he won the Joburg Open in January and, in two straight weeks spanning December, captured the Alfred Dunhill Championship and the South African Open Championship.

Now the diminutive 27-year-old hopes to write another chapter in South African golfing history by adding another prestigious title to his haul of silverware in New Year.

“That would be quite something, wouldn’t it,” said Sterne. “What would you call that, I wonder? A Quadruple Crown?”

“I think most people would think that it’s unfeasible, but I think it is a real possibility. To win all four European Tour co-sanctioned events would be an incredible achievement but before we start speculating, I had better sort my swing out.”

Plagued by a wrist injury, Sterne suffered a mid-season lapse in form but hopes to turn this around as the 2009 season draws to a close. He certainly has the pedigree to pull off the impossible. In addition to five victories on the European Tour, he also counts the 2005 Nashua Masters and 2007 Vodacom Championship and returns to East London Golf Club with fond memories.

In round three of the 2009 event, Sterne bettered reigning Masters Champion, Angel Cabrera’s course record 62 with a 61 that included 11 birdies – this at the same course where, during the Pro-Am round, he was doubtful of breaking 80. With rounds of 72-67-61, Sterne was one of the favourites going into the last round but let himself down with a 73 to tie for eighth and finish six shots off the pace from winner Retief Goosen.

“I dropped two shots and made just one birdie on the front nine, but on the back nine the putter went completely cold,” explained Sterne. “I just couldn’t get anything going. If the putter stayed hot, who knows how it could have ended.”

Winning the Africa Open is certainly high on his list of priorities, but Sterne admits that he will face stiff competition in the Eastern Cape.

“If you look at the entry list, it reads like a Who’s Who of tournament winners in South Africa and on the European Tour. It’s dusted with winners and they are all going to challenge for the title,” he said.

“On the European Tour side there is at Gregory Bourdy, James (Kingston), Danny Lee and Nick Dougherty. And don’t forget about Darren Clarke. He won the KLM Open and the BWM Asia Open last year and he was in raging form at the Africa Open, almost beat the Goose to it.”

Bourdy won the UBS Hong Kong Open, Kingston the Mercedes-Benz Championship, Dougherty the BMW International Open and Lee the Johnnie Walker Classic.

“Then there are all the guys who won on the Sunshine Tour this year – Hennie Otto, Darren Fichardt. Brandon Pieters and Jaco van Zyl both won three times. These guys are all going to be tough to beat and I’m not taking anything for granted.”

For the first time in its three year history, the Africa Open will be jointly-sanctioned by the Sunshine Tour and the European Tour and the field of 156 players – split equally between the two Tours, will compete for a purse of €1-million.

Tickets are available at the gate and entry for pensioners and children under 18 is free for all tournament days. Adults enter for free on Thursday, 7 and Friday, 8 January and tickets cost R20,00 per day on the weekend.