Clarke signs up for 2011 Africa Open

European Ryder Cup vice-captain Darren Clarke can expect a warm welcome when he returns to the Eastern Cape to compete in the €1-million Africa Open at the East London Golf Club from 6-9 January 2011.

The popular Clarke has been a regular visitor to South Africa since 1991 and is no stranger to East London.

In the 2009 Africa Open, he challenged South Africa's Retief Goosen over the closing holes of the tournament. Although he couldn't quite recapture that sizzling form at last year's event, he still attracted one of the largest crowds on the final day.

His affinity to start his season in South Africa is well documented and the Ulsterman hopes his fond memories of East London will put him back on the winning track.

"I have enjoyed starting my season with the Africa Open the last two years," said Clarke. "In 2009 I had a pretty good result and last year's Africa Open sparked a return to form for me, so I'm really looking forward to playing in East London."

"It will be fun catching up with everyone again. Hopefully this time, I will be on the winning side of the final putt."

It has been a slow climb back for the former world top 10 player after a couple of tough years, but a tie for third at the South African Open and a fourth at the Joburg Open in 2008 sparked his return to form. He went on to capture the 2008 BMW Asia International and KLM Open to end a five-year winless drought and finished the season ranked 13th in Europe.

In 2009, he missed out on the end-of-season Dubai World Championship by just one spot after finishing 61st in the inaugural Race to Dubai, but a runner-up finish at the Joburg Open in January signalled another return to form.

This time, the 12-time European Tour winner finished the season ranked 30th and recorded four top 10 finishes, including a second at the Joburg Open and Barclays Scottish Open.

Now back in the world's top 100, the Ulsterman is chasing world ranking points to return to the Majors.

"It's been two years since I won but I am determined to break back and I hope the Africa Open will give me the kind of kick start it did in 2009," he said. "It's always great to start the season with a solid result and I'm looking forward to getting on the right track in East London."

Clarke will be joined by rising European Tour star Chris Wood, double US Open champion and 2009 Africa Open champion Retief Goosen, defending champion Charl Schwartzel and reigning Open champion Louis Oosthuizen.

The field will be further boosted by 2009 European Tour champions, Ross McGowan, Michael Jonzon and Anthony Kang, as well as South Africans James Kingston and Richard Sterne.

McGowan of England captured the 2009 Madrid Masters, Sweden's Jonzon the 2009 Castello Masters while Kang from the United States won the Maybank Malaysian Open in the same year. Kingston secured his second European Tour title in a playoff triumph against Anders Hansen at the 2009 Mercedes-Benz Championship in Cologne and Sterne achieved a triple triumph by winning the Joburg Open, SA Open and Alfred Dunhill Championship in 2009.

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