

New Year brings new focus in Africa Open

The New Year has teed off in a water hazard for those competing in this week's Africa Open at the East London Golf Club.

But underneath the mist and intermittent showers that covered the course on Tuesday and which is expected to clear for the rest of the week lay a quality field including defending champion Charl Schwartzel, British Open champion Louis Oosthuizen, double US Open champion Retief Goosen and European Ryder Cup legend Darren Clarke.

This is undoubtedly the strongest field in the short history of an event that made its debut on the Sunshine Tour in 2008 and became a co-sanctioned tournament with the European Tour in 2009. And Schwartzel is certainly pleased to be defending a title so early in the new season.

"It was a short break but it's nice to come back and defend a title. I've got fantastic memories of this place," he said on Tuesday.

Schwartzel's victory here last year sparked arguably his most successful season as a professional in which he won twice, claimed a fourth Sunshine Tour Order of Merit title, and finished tied 30th on his debut at the Masters and then no worse than tied 18th in the remaining three Majors.

"Last year I was very consistent, and that's what my aim always is. I'd rather be consistent throughout my career than great one week and not the next."

Clarke is seeking similar consistency as he once again starts his year in East London, which in Tuesday's weather resembled more his hometown of Dungannon in Northern Ireland.

"I'm hitting the ball as well as ever but just not scoring as well as I should be. My consistency is getting better and I've got to keep working on that," said the man who has targeted a return into the top 50 on the world rankings as his goal over the next few months.

Goosen would like to take his game a step further with the hope that the consistency he displayed in 2010 starts yielding victories in 2011.

"I want to get back in the winner's circle again. I came close a couple of times but didn't win at all last year. It was a consistent year and I had a chance to win quite a few tournaments, but I struggled to put together four good rounds," said the 2009 Africa Open champion.

But as Schwartzel points out, this golf course can be anything but consistent, with wind and rain always a factor.

"This course is always full of surprises. I didn't hit any balls over the break, so I'll just see what the week has in store for me."