

O'RILEY READY TO RUMBLE AT AFRICA OPEN QUALIFIER

Former South African Amateur Strokeplay champion Dean O'Riley is just one step away from making his pro debut alongside a stellar line-up of European and Sunshine Tour winners at the Africa Open, which tees off at East London Golf Club from 6-9 January.

"It's a huge step though," said O'Riley, who has to cross the hurdle of qualifying for the €1-million event. "There will be 63 of us fighting for 10 spots at the Fish River Sun on Tuesday. Every one of us is determined to get in, so you can bet it will be a dogfight."

Since he claimed his Sunshine Tour card in December, O'Riley has been champing at the bit to get his season going. And he didn't think he would have to play his way into his pro debut.

"I was sort of hoping I would get a sponsor's invitation after my performance at Durban Country Club," he admitted.

O'Riley joined winner Ernie Els on the podium after emerging as the leading amateur in the weather-interrupted South African Open Championship in December.

"But I always say you have to take what life dishes out. If you get lemons, make lemonade. I got a taste of the action at the South African Open, but I was still playing as an amateur.

"This time it's the real deal. Now we get serious. Now we get ready to rumble."

The 21-year-old from Benoni will tee up it with fellow rookies JJ Senekal, JG Claassen and Dean Burmeester in the qualifier at the Fish River Sun.

As the host of the inaugural event in 2008, won by Shaun Norris, the Fish River Sun has become the qualifying venue of choice and is certain to dish up a challenge to the field on Tuesday.

O'Riley said he will draw on the positive memories of his last visit to the Fish River Sun, even if it was six years ago.

"The course is exactly as I remember it when I finished fourth in the SA Boys Under-15," he said. "The fairways were pretty wet out there today, but the greens are in superb condition.

"It really does take the edge off that we are qualifying at such a terrific course. It was pretty calm today, but if the wind gets up tomorrow, it will make things very interesting. It's a great challenge.

"It's comforting to know I'll be qualifying against guys I beat on the amateur circuit but it's a little intimidating when you see names like Desvonde Botes and Nic Henning on the draw," he said.

"These guys have won on the Sunshine Tour; they have a lot of experience."

O'Riley says he is eager to sample the experience of the Sunshine Tour and, if he can get past the qualifier, he has high hopes of kicking off his 2011 season with a good result.

"I have some really good memories of the 2010 SA Amateur Match Play at East London," he explained. "I made it to the semi-final and got knocked out by Laurie Canter, who went on to win the Match Play. I really like the course; it suits my eye and I like the way it challenges you in the wind.

"If I can get through my first qualifier, the next goal will be to make my first cut."

Heading the local challenge are East London's Marius Schutte, as well as Mark Fensham, Francois van Vuuren and Lyle Rowe of Port Elizabeth.