

Pieters sets pace in Africa Open

Brandon Pieters took two weeks off for the festive season, arrived only a day before the first round of the Africa Open and was still wary of a knee injury, and then produced a stretch of five consecutive birdies on his way to a 66 and the lead at East London Golf Club on Thursday.

No wonder it was enough for even Darren Clarke to send Pieters an SMS chiding him about not needing to practice.

“He’s been giving me a bit of needle saying that being a pro means getting to tournaments at least three days before to prepare. We have a great relationship and I really enjoy the banter,” Pieters said of Clarke, who has been his mentor over the past few years.

The two first met at the Joburg Open in 2007, when Pieters asked the Ryder Cup legend if he could play a practice round with him.

“He was standing alone on the tee and I took a gamble. We played 18 holes and got on really well. After the round he said he wanted to talk to me. We sat under a tree in the rain having a cup of coffee and he said, ‘I’ve played with a lot of guys in the world and you have immense talent, you just don’t know how to use it’. I asked him if he would help me on the range and he said he’d meet me there in 20 minutes. We took off from there. Ever since I asked him for help my career has turned. It’s all thanks to him.”

But on Thursday, Pieters did do at least one thing all his own with a sublime putting performance, especially in his birdie stretch where he holed everything inside of eight feet on his way to the round of seven under on this par 73 course.

“If you can get the putter hot then you can go deep on these greens. But I think I made more putts in this round than I did the whole of last year.”

Pieters is one stroke clear of countrymen Jaco van Zyl and Branden Grace, England’s Miles Tunnickliff, Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Gonnet, Elliot Saltman of Scotland and Sweden’s Fredrik Ohlsson.

Clarke made his own positive start to the year with a four under 69 including two eagles, one of which was a chip-in on the par-five 15th.

“I was a bit rusty in places and my distance control on the wedges was poor, but that’s to be expected after the break. All in all, I’m pleased with the start,” he said.

Defending champion Charl Schwartzel bogeyed the last for a 69, while Louis Oosthuizen signed for a 70 and Retief Goosen struggled to a 75.

Several players still have to complete their first rounds following a one hour and 15 minute delay to the start of the round because of poor visibility caused by mist on the course.