

Leopard Creek Times

Alfred Dunhill Championship Daily News

ROUND 1, THURSDAY 26 NOVEMBER, 2020



Pablo Larrazabal always feels at home at Leopard Creek, where he will aim to defend his Alfred Dunhill Championship title this week.

PABLO HAPPY TO BE BACK IN PARADISE

It is with a sense of immense gratitude that Pablo Larrazabal has arrived at a Leopard Creek course he calls paradise to defend his Alfred Dunhill Championship title.

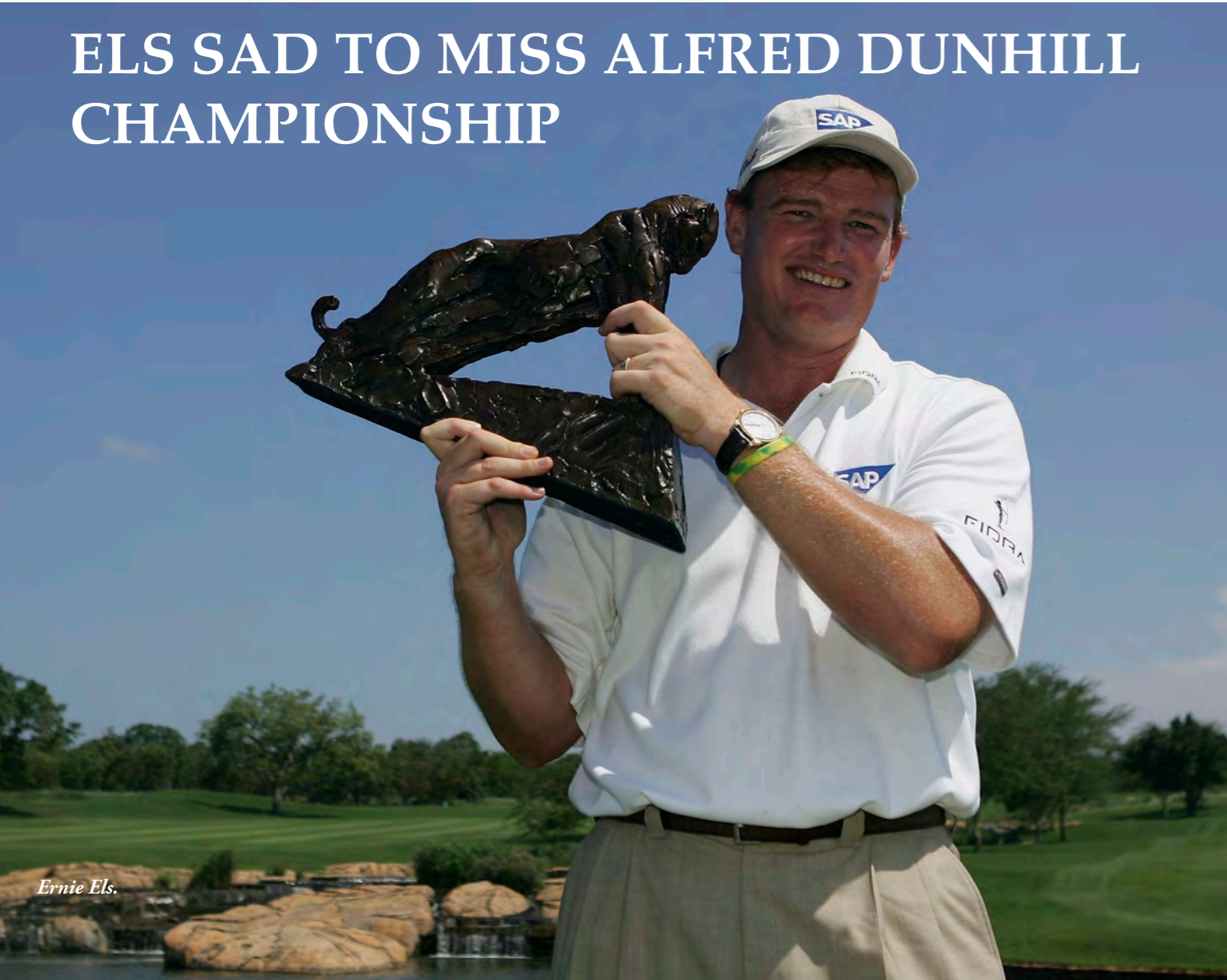
Last year, the Spaniard battled through a final round of intense heat and severe blisters on his way to victory in this European Tour and Sunshine Tour co-sanctioned tournament. This year, he's well aware of the greater challenge out there, and that to simply be able to play tournament golf in this spectacular setting is a victory in itself. "We are fortunate as golfers to be able to come to places such as this at the end of this year. We are so lucky. It doesn't matter how well we play this week, it's still the best week of the year. It's a dream to come here and play the game of golf," he said. "It was special the way everything happened last year in this place that I call paradise. Everything I love in

life is here. The best in nature and the best golf course makes Leopard Creek a dream place for me." Larrazabal is hoping to become the third back-to-back winner of this championship after fellow Spaniard Pablo Martin and South Africa's Charl Schwartzel. But he faces a field equally in awe of this iconic golf course that shares this environment with the untamed wilderness of the Kruger National Park, and equally determined to make the most of it. Denmark's Lucas Bjerregaard is seeking a place in Alfred Dunhill golf history as only the second player after Branden Grace to possibly do the double of winning the Alfred Dunhill Links Championship and the Alfred Dunhill Championship.

"It's a privilege to be here. I think any golfer that has played here realises how special it is to be back. I'm very happy to be back and hopefully I can join Branden in that elite group," he said. The South African challenge is a strong one, including Joburg Open runner-up Wilco Nienaber, recent European Tour winners Garrick Higgo and George Coetzee, 2020 Masters debutant Christiaan Bezuidenhout, and former Alfred Dunhill Championship winner Brandon Stone. "You know, you drive through the gates here and arrive at what feels like the cradle of golf. You're just filled with awe and inspiration for the week ahead," said Stone. The Leopard Creek course is certainly set to provide exactly the

challenge many in the field are looking for. "The golf course is in great condition and I'm looking forward to it," said Scotland's most recent European Tour champion, Robert MacIntyre. "It's a tough test of golf. That's one of the reasons I travelled out here to play in this event. This is just a great golf course, and it's one of those weeks that if you knuckle down and if you play well you're going to be right in there."





Ernie Els.



Ernie Els has expressed his deep regret at not being able to make it back to South Africa to play in the Alfred Dunhill Championship at a Leopard Creek golf course he says has no equal in the world of golf. “There is just nothing like Leopard Creek in the whole world of golf,” said Els, a former winner of the Alfred Dunhill Championship. The four-time Major champion said the challenges around international travel at present and his playing commitments in America have made it difficult for him to return to South Africa for this year’s tournament. “I wish I could be there, but my next event on the PGA Tour Champions and on the PGA Tour will be in Hawaii and if I can’t get back to America I’ll be stuck for some time,” Els said. “I’m really going to miss the Alfred Dunhill Championship, especially

having been a member at Leopard Creek for so many years. Everything about that place is just so special. “We’ve got unbelievable scenery in the game of golf worldwide. You can go to Pebble Beach and Cypress Point, Long Island, Montana, St Andrews in Scotland, England and the Dover coast, you can go anywhere in the world and find beautiful golf scenery. But there’s only one Africa. “Leopard Creek on the banks of the Crocodile River and overlooking the Kruger National Park – just thinking about it I get this image in my mind of how beautiful it is with the views and the animals. The golf course, the practice facilities and everything about the place is world class. Then you go to the Recreation Centre there and you don’t want to leave. You just want to sit there all day and watch the river and the animals. It’s just a phenomenal place.”

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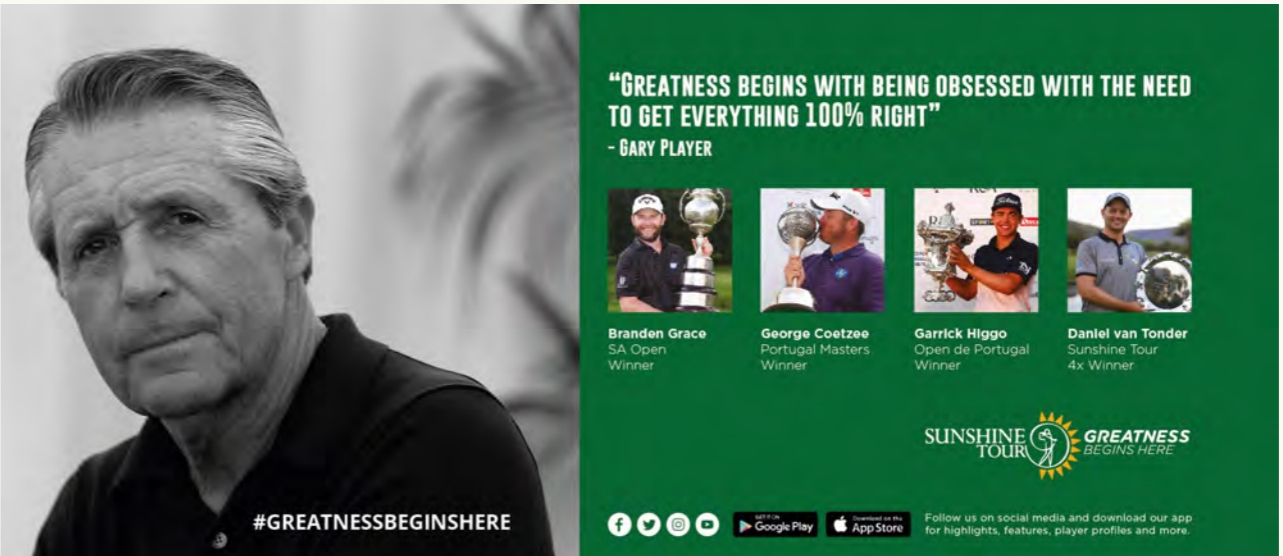
Lucas Bjerregaard.

Denmark’s Lucas Bjerregaard will seek to become only the second golfer in history to win both the Alfred Dunhill Links Championship and its sister tournament the Alfred Dunhill Championship. Bjerregaard won the Alfred Dunhill Links Championship in St Andrews in Scotland in 2018 to claim his second European Tour title. A win at Leopard Creek will see him join South Africa’s Branden Grace as the only players

to have ever won both of these titles. Grace achieved this in 2012 and 2014. “They are two very special events in their own way, and played on very special courses. So of course I’m really excited about going to Leopard Creek, and hopefully I can join Branden in winning both of them,” said Bjerregaard. The professionals’ appreciation for Leopard Creek as one of the most special tournament venues in world golf is universal, and Bjerregaard is

no exception. “Leopard Creek is so unique. I’ve never played a course quite like it. I’m always amazed when I’m there as to how Gary Player and Johann Rupert could even imagine a golf course like that in those surroundings. I think anyone that has ever had the privilege of playing Leopard Creek has been amazed standing on the 13th green (which overlooks the Kruger National Park). It’s pretty special putting with rhinos, elephants and

crocodiles in the background.” A victory at Leopard Creek would also be a first for Danish golf. Bjerregaard was the second Danish golfer to win the Alfred Dunhill Links Championship, but a Danish golfer has yet to triumph in the Alfred Dunhill Championship. The closest they have come is two runner-up finishes by Anders Hansen and Thorbjørn Olesen. “Any win at Leopard Creek would be special. We’re so blessed to play such a unique course so it would



obviously mean a lot to me,” said Bjerregaard. Apart from a place in golf history, Bjerregaard has another incentive to come to South Africa. “I can’t lie. I love the food in South Africa. We always get treated so well in South Africa and I’ve met a lot of great people while being there. I’ve been on a few amazing safaris there and I try to go as much as I can. It’s always amazing seeing all these animals.”



A new tournament week brings with it new challenges for the professionals.



Justin Walters with a few chip shots in front of the most unique gallery in golf.



A few interesting fans sometimes listen in on the player interviews at Leopard Creek.



Alvaro Quiros: From his victory here in 2006 to this year's tournament, Alvaro Quiros always enjoys his time at Leopard Creek.



A pro-am pause to take in the beauty of the Kruger National Park.



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OPTIMA



Christiaan Bezuidenhout.

‘I’D LOVE TO WIN AT LEOPARD CREEK,’ SAYS BEZUIDENHOUT

It’s been a watershed year for Christiaan Bezuidenhout, and one he hopes will culminate in a long-held dream for his career.



“Leopard Creek is one of my favourite courses worldwide, and the Alfred Dunhill Championship is one of the tournaments I’d love to win just because it’s played at such a special course,” says Bezuidenhout. The young star of South African golf comes into this year’s tournament on the back of a memorable debut in The Masters where he made it through to the weekend and finished tied 38th at Augusta National Golf Club.

It’s been a highly successful last two years for Bezuidenhout. He made his European Tour breakthrough with a victory in the 2019 Estrella Damm N.A. Andalucía Masters, and where he gained invaluable self-belief in beating Jon Rahm on a tough golf course such as Valderrama. “I always believed that I can play with the best in the world and compete on tour, but to pull it off at such an iconic venue such as Valderrama, which is a tight course and a mentally-draining course where every shot takes so much concentration and energy, is amazing,” says Bezuidenhout. He started this year with a victory in the Sunshine Tour’s Dimension Data Pro-Am in February, and then enjoyed an impressive showing on the PGA Tour and broke into the top 50 on the Official World Golf Rankings for the first time in his career.

“I’m getting more comfortable with where my game is at and my swing, and the whole environment of playing on the European Tour and PGA Tour and playing with the best players in the world. That’s been the biggest change in my game since my first European Tour victory last year,” he says. It’s been a year of some incredible experiences for Bezuidenhout, and adding his name to the famous leopard trophy would be a fine way to cap it off.

THE “BIG 5” CHAMPS ARE BACK

The Alfred Dunhill Championship will have its own “Big 5” in the field this year with five of the former champions of this prestigious Sunshine Tour and European Tour co-sanctioned tournament in the field. Defending champion Pablo Larrazabal of Spain returns following his dramatic 2019 victory in which he battled the intense heat and blisters and birdied the treacherous 18th to win. He will be joined by 2016 champion Brandon Stone, who won the title in what was a breakout season for him in which he also won the South

African Open to launch his European Tour career. Richard Sterne returns as the 2008 champion and also the runner-up in 2016. A victory for him would make him only the third player after Charl Schwartzel and Pablo Martin to have won the Alfred Dunhill Championship multiple times. Alvaro Quiros is back as the 2006 champion and as also the third Spaniard to have won this title alongside Larrazabal and Martin. And Germany’s Marcel Siem returns to Leopard

Creek as the winner of the 2004 Alfred Dunhill Championship in January of that year, and following what is also still the longest playoff in the history of the tournament as he battled for three extra holes against the French duo of Gregory Havret and Raphael Jacquelin. This year’s Alfred Dunhill Championship boasts the biggest purse on the Sunshine Tour of R29 million and it anchors a strong run of three European Tour co-sanctioned tournaments in South Africa also including the Joburg Open and the South African Open.



Pablo Larrazabal.



Brandon Stone.

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