

ERNIE ELS

STILL BIG, BUT WHERE DID THE EASY GO?

Ernie Els already has a place cemented in golf history. Even if he never wins again. But we don't want it to come to that. The Big Easy has had it rough of late, but he's got a plan. With a new coach and some old allies in place, he tells us he's expecting to start collecting trophies again soon. **Words: Richard Asher**

It's funny to hear you say that. A couple of years ago, if I'd finished 14th in a Major championship, you'd have said 'what the hell happened?' Now I get a 'well done!'"

Times really have changed for Ernie Els. And the irony of a three-time Major winner being complimented for finishing outside the top ten hits him right between the eyes. But with a bottle of Heineken and good friends close at hand, he takes it well. He's had a rough year; and he's man enough to admit it.

Ernie went to the US Open at Torrey Pines with some of the worst form of his career shadowing him. Yes, he'd won an event on the PGA Tour earlier in the season, but that was like a hole in one amidst a string of bogeys. The win at the Honda Classic couldn't outweigh the hurt of his failures: four missed cuts in the next six American tournaments. And that included an unhappy Masters – Augusta spat him out early for the second straight year.

There was ignominy in Europe, too. Wentworth is a course Ernie has made his own over the years, not only thanks to his impressive World Matchplay record but also because he lives there. Missing the cut in Wentworth's BMW PGA Championship really stung. Ernie was in trouble. He

headed for Torrey Pines with his confidence drooping.

And that's why he got a "well done" for finishing 14th.

But how did things get that bad? What was going on? Was it purely technical? Was it something in Ernie's mind? Those nagging injuries?

"My swing was getting long and a bit out of sync," says Els. "I wasn't making the right contact and I lost confidence. I've not missed so many cuts in a season since turning pro – but it all makes you appreciate the good times and makes you get back on the range. It's not going to be too long before I'm winning again."

It could be as simple as that. Golf swings do take on a mind of their own sometimes. It could just be a case of fixing a few flaws. But in the case of such a consistently world-class performer, you suspect something else was going on. Something happening well above shoulder level.

One of the clues to this came the week after Torrey Pines, when Ernie suddenly announced to the world that he was getting back together with his former caddie Ricci Roberts. Given their well-publicised split 18 months earlier (one that involved flying short-irons), the reunification was a surprise. And one that hinted strongly at Ernie's desire to not only

rediscover his swing, but also surround himself with the good influences that took him to those three Majors.

Roberts knows the on-course Els better than anyone. If anyone can unlock the potential of Theodore Ernest Els, it's Roberts. They started out together when Ernie began to make it big on the Sunshine Tour in the early 90s: the relationship goes far beyond lugging a bag around a golf course.

"From what I've seen this year, it looks like Ernie's been swinging the clubs extremely well," is the unexpected Roberts assessment. "Maybe it's been a confidence thing. He's been making all those swing changes and it might have been a bit of a strain on him. So I hope I can give him the confidence he needs.

"In the past it's been my job to pick him up when he's down. If he's wrong I'll tell him though – you can't stand there and be a yes person. Speaking your mind is what makes a good caddie – if he pulls out a club and I think it's wrong then I'll tell him – not that I'm always right either!

"But equally, when he's playing well and wants confirmation he's got the right club or made the right decision, then that's where I come in. But sometimes I also need to step in and pull in the reigns if he gets ahead of himself.

"When a guy's playing well and the pressure is up on in the final nine, he

Ernie believes his
career's ready to
take off again





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“TIGER BEING AWAY GIVES THE REST OF US A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY TO GET SOME WINS AND GAIN SOME CONFIDENCE.”

He's still got that wide grin in him!

ELS IN 2008: THE STATS

The calendar year started with a promising spell, culminating in a win on the PGA Tour. But sadly for Ernie, it proved to be a false dawn.

ERNIE'S 2008 RESULTS*
Dubai Desert Classic: 3
Indian Masters: 6
Honda Classic: 1
PODS Championship: CUT
WGC CA Championship: 75
US Masters: CUT
Verizon Heritage: CUT
The Players Championship: 6
BMW PGA Championship: CUT
The Memorial: CUT
US Open: 14

*Includes strokeplay events prior to Scottish Open at Loch Lomond

just wants to attack – they only see the pins! Sometimes you have to say ‘Ernie, hold on, play the percentages here.’

“You know, we both like the same things like rugby, cricket and football. I can take his mind off things by saying ‘did you see the rugby on Saturday’ or whatever.

“I understand him and he understands me. In a way that’s probably why we’ve taken breaks twice in the past. You come to loggerheads now and then! It’s like a marriage – you have ups and downs and sometimes you just need a break.”

Ernie’s seriously pleased about the return of Roberts as well: “Ricci’s excited and so am I...although I’ve told him he’d better lose some weight! I’m glad to see him back: this will be our last song and our last dance, so we want to make it a good one.”

It’s not just in the caddie department that Els has made changes. He’s working once again with the mysterious Belgian sports mental guru Jos Vanstiphout. It’s another throwback to days gone by and another suggestion that

confidence has been his biggest issue.

Or has Ernie quite simply been distracted? There’s no doubt that the Big Easy has had plenty of reason to stay away from the practice ground of late. Earlier this year he went public with the fact that his son Ben is autistic, and since then he’s done a good deal of work to raise awareness about the condition. As a result of Ben’s problems, he’s also shifting his family’s full-time base from Wentworth to Florida. Which just happens to be Tiger’s full-time lair. Plenty to think about, then.

He’s also been keeping busy on the course design front. Although his star is burning brightly in this field, he’s also doing significantly more design work than most other top ten players in the world. Whether recent projects like Anahita in Mauritius, various ventures in the Middle East and long-term South African proposals like Lahleni Lakes and Nondela have kept him away from his day job is open to debate, but Els is happy to admit that he hasn’t spent as much time smashing balls as he might have done.

The third significant change Ernie has made is in the technical department – and this time it’s not a case of going back to what he knows. In April he ditched David Leadbetter (who had been with him for the better part of two decades) in favour of Butch Harmon – the man largely responsible for the success of that Woods fellow. And not only does Ernie reckon he’s identified the flaws, but it’s helping his work ethic too.

“I’ve had a bad few weeks but I’m getting back on track now. I’m working with Butch and actually practising for a change! I think I’ve turned the corner. I’ve really worked hard recently and I’m hitting it well.”

But as Ernie well knows, it’s around the greens that tournaments are won and lost. Which is exactly why fixing his swing won’t be enough. Those putts just haven’t been dropping – possibly a by-product of all that tinkering with his long game. But he’s working on it.

“I’ve put so much work into my swing, now I’ve got to put some work into my short game. I missed so many putts at Torrey Pines...”



A thriving course design business keeps Ernie busy



Els & Roberts: will it be like old times?

Roberts concurs, and reckons it's only a matter of time: "When he's on he's one of the best putters in the world. Again, it's a confidence thing. Once you make a couple of 15-20 footers the confidence rockets and the hole just seems to get bigger."

So, he's hitting it well and he's going to work on that putting. Will it be enough to stop Tiger Woods? We won't know that for some time, of course, thanks to Tiger's famous knee. But what does Tiger do best? Besides playing the best golf in the world, he destroys the confidence of just about everyone else. So for anyone fighting mental demons, that lengthy absence is good news. A chance to muster up that self-belief again.

Much has been said about Ernie Els being out-psyched by Woods's mere presence before he's even struck a ball. Having spent several years being touted as the only guy who could match him, that would be understandable. There may be something in the theory: even when Ernie's casually talking about his own planned return to form, he often brings Woods into the conversation. And with a touch of glee.

"Hopefully I can get something going soon, especially with Tiger gone now," he says. "He's been put back in his cage! It's unfortunate for him and he's a great champion, but I'm glad to see him away for the next few months. I had that same surgery a couple of years ago and he's got a lot of work ahead of him."

Ernie at his forgettable 2007 SA Open



"That operation is not a lot of fun. There's going to be a lot of work for him afterwards. It's just amazing what he did at the US Open...but this gives the rest of us a golden opportunity to get some wins and gain some confidence."

Ernie's army of South African fans will be hoping that confidence is fully up and running when he next appears on these shores at the end of the year. If it is, it'll be a huge contrast to his last swing around South Africa - when absolutely nothing went to plan.

"After throwing the tournament

away at the Dunhill last summer I just didn't want to be on the golf course. The SA Open wasn't good for me either. So I'm looking forward to my three tournaments this coming summer: Hopefully I can be in a better mood than I was last time!"

At Torrey Pines, Ernie was asked if he had any Majors left in him. He's getting more and more of those annoying questions. But for every doubter there's a die-hard Els fan...like Roberts.

"I most definitely believe he's got a lot of fuel left in the tank," says Ricci. "If I didn't, then I wouldn't have gone back to him. He's got quite a lot of Majors left in him, plus a lot of other tournaments too. I like to win and I still think he can win - or I simply wouldn't be doing it."

And if Els finds those questions irritating, the good news is he's quite clear on how to stop them.

"When you don't play great you're going to get some crappy questions," he shrugs. "Maybe if I play a bit better I'll get some better questions!"

Let's hope great questions are just around the corner, Ernie. We're right behind you. 🏌️

