

My 15 minutes

*For one glorious day,
Richard Asher supped at the
cup of professional playing at
The Diners Club Pro-Am
Classic regional qualifier*

THIS WAS IT: THE MOMENT OF MY WORKING LIFE. THE 10TH TEE AT STEENBERG GOLF Club was mine. A small but enthusiastic crowd of three, plus one photographer, stood aside as I pulled out my hybrid and eyed the fairway. We were all witnessing something big. For me, there was no turning back: in a few seconds I would strike my first shot as a professional golfer.

I hit it well and the ball flew sharp and clean through the autumn sky. But, like many a rebellious little beast with a mind of its own, it proved to be completely misguided, making a beeline for the stream to the right of the fairway, where it stayed. Professional golf, it seemed, was going to be tough.

Some may argue that a 21-handicapper's participation in the Cape Town qualifier for the Diners Club Pro-Am Classic at the Steenberg Golf Club does not in any manner, shape or form represent a professional sportsperson in action. I beg to differ.

This was a working assignment. I was in the competition field in order to write the story you're reading now. For that I would get paid. So, at last, I was being paid to play golf. Ergo, I was now a professional golfer.

All that remained was to get my handicap down to plus-something, bribe someone for a tour card and start raking in the big bucks. That notion, I will concede, seemed painfully distant as I salvaged my ball from the ditch next to the 10th and took a penalty drop. But then a most unusual thing happened: I showed some fight.

For some reason (probably the lure of some jolly nice prizes from Diners Club) I'd decided to actually pay attention to the Stableford scoring system for once. Normally I'm obsessed with shooting as low a score as I possibly can, and a string of blowouts sees me ending up last with about seven points. But on this occasion I started noticing how many strokes my 21 handicap would get me on particular holes. I scraped a point on the 10th – our first – and that set the tone for the day.

Perhaps it was the pleasant company that enabled me to relax. Joining me in our three-ball were Kevin Ashton and Richard Williams. It was the first time I'd ever met anyone involved in the hanger trade – that's shirts, not aeroplanes – as Kevin is. I've ignored hangers all my life. Wrongly so, it transpired, because the hanger industry is big enough business to have led to Kevin attending the Masters in 2001. I was suitably envious of this, and vowed for the umpteenth time to improve my golf sufficiently to qualify as a player one day.

Richard, being in the construction industry, shared my hanger ignorance. I warmed to him all the more when I learnt that he'd notched up a 14 on one hole at his club championships the previous weekend. We'd certainly be on the same golf wavelength.

I would get two strokes on the 13th, which meant a bogey five would suffice to get me a three-pointer. I duly made five despite my tee shot travelling all of 50m. The very same thing happened on the stroke-one 15th, where I came within a whisker of actually hitting the green in regulation with my four-iron approach.

It was all becoming a bit much. I was playing textbook handicap golf to take full advantage of Steenberg's toughest holes, but it's disconcerting for someone like me to experience golf actually going to plan. All the same, I got to the turn with 16 points and the same ball I'd started with. Hmm. And halfway house was good too: my juicy toasted chicken-mayo sandwich and sweet Fanta put me in fine humour.

Our back nine started with the par-four first hole, the last on which I'd get two strokes. Three very average shots scraped me on to the putting surface, and two putts later I had yet another three-point bogey. Three out of three on the double-stroke holes! Sheer fluke, but I could get used to this.

There are some memorable holes on the front nine. I enjoyed the downhill third, which I'd seen so often from the road and that first made me hanker for the chance to play here. The dinky fourth has so many bunkers (I counted 12) that Richard dubbed it 'Beirut'. Then came the fifth, where all manner of feathered life was wandering around. One particularly ugly bird will always remain vivid for me.

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I don't think I'll ever find out what this mutant creature was. None of us had ever seen such a fowl. The freak of nature had the beak of a pelican, the neck of an ostrich and the long legs of a heron. Whatever it was, the resident geese didn't like it, rudely shunning it whenever it came close. It was all a bit unsavoury, but, in all fairness, so was my double-bogey seven.

Then came some lucky moments that kept the scoreboard ticking, but it all fell apart on the last tee as I struck two shots out of bounds and had to give up on the hole. I managed to retrieve one ball from among the vines, but remained crestfallen at the points I'd thrown away. My total was 32: a bit marginal.

Come prize-giving, I was all the more gutted when Jane Ledger of Diners Club announced that 10th place had gone to someone else with 32 points ... on a count-out! This, I thought to myself, was going to be yet another in my long list of prize-less golf competitions.

But wait. Ninth place *also* had 32 points. It was me! I fairly sprinted up to the front to collect my bottle of Rust en Vrede Cabernet Sauvignon – last year's Diners Club champion wine, of course.

The only bad news was that being ninth meant I wasn't first and would therefore not be representing South Africa in Mauritius at the Diners Club International Pro-Am final.

That pleasure will instead go to Mike Bryant, who racked up 38 points on a typically windy Cape day. But given that the 20-handicapper earned his ticket by holing out with an eight-iron at his final hole, the par-five 18th, I won't hold it against him. It's a good tale, made better by the fact that his drive had gone into the water.

If I want to make the pro tour, and qualify for trips to Mauritius, I suppose I'll just have to pull out shots like that myself. A lot. So be it. Nobody said being a professional golfer was easy... ①

The Diners Club Pro-Am Classic regional qualifiers were played at Steenberg Golf Club, Woodhill Country Club and Zimbali County Club. The finals will be played in Mauritius in November. For more information on the event, visit <http://golf.dinersclub.co.za>.

