

PITCH MARK

"If I can hit a curve ball, why can't I hit a ball that's standing still?" One-time baseballer Larry Nelson is unlikely to get much sympathy. After all, he did win three Majors.

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"A lot of it will be going towards curtains..." Telkom PGA winner Jaco van Zyl admits that winner's cheques don't buy much excitement when you're moving into a new house.

GOLFPUNK ON THE BAG

With a patchy caddying performance at the Men's South African Amateur behind him, our resident Golf Punk caddie is at it again with the cream of SA's lady talent. **Words: Richard Asher**



Royal Cape Golf Club. This is where it all began. Not only for golf in South Africa, but also for my extremely brief career as a paid bag-carrier. Back in the days when I was a junior member here, I carried a few bags during the university holidays. It was a vac job which basically funded my habit of hacking it around the course.

And now, for the first time in over a decade, I'm back at Royal Cape with a bag on my back. I won't get paid today, but there's a lot more honour at stake than before, and it's highly unlikely I'll have to

help any octogenarians climb out of bunkers this time around.

This is the final round of the Sanlam South African Women's Amateur Championship Stroke Play event – arguably the biggest individual competition on the ladies' circuit. And I've only gone and landed myself a bag in the final group – that of joint leader and South Africa's number two, 23-year-old Gauteng North player Kim Williams. Eek.

What's more, this three-ball is one that would make any promoter drool. Kim's going head to head with SA's top-ranked

girl, Bertine Strauss, and fellow 'Springbok' Monique Smit. It's a heavyweight trio, alright – speaking figuratively, of course. They're all covered by a stroke, with a couple more likely challengers in the groups ahead. Kim's lead, shared with Smit, stands at two-over-par, largely because the wind's been howling all week. If ever there's going to be a bad day to lose a club – the thought that keeps haunting me ever since I started caddying for SA's leading players – then this is it.

It's only by a stroke of fortune that I've managed to land the job at all. Leaving

things far too late as usual, I'd only started asking around for a bag 24 hours earlier. I'd just about given up on finding a player who hadn't already committed to caddy plans when Kim's regular Cape Town caddie did me a huge favour by rocking up three hours late for work in round two. That got him fired, and opened up a vacancy which I gratefully grabbed in the third and final round. So, big thanks to the guy who overslept for making this story happen.

"He came running up to me on the eighth hole," Kim tells me. "He apologised and tried to take my bag, but I said 'sorry mate, that's not how it works' and told him to get lost. So I caddied for myself yesterday."

That eases the pressure on me somewhat; Kim's already played herself into contention without a helping hand on the greens. Just to be safe, though, I carefully explain that it's best not to ask me for any advice on reading putts. Or about the gusting Cape wind. Or which club to use. She just nods and smiles.

I meet my colleagues on the first tee. Leslie is a long-serving Royal Cape caddie and will be on Monique's bag. He gives me the sad news that his namesake Les Roman – the caddie master who helped me out with those summer jobs and made sure I never got knifed by the regulars – has passed away since I was here last. Caddying for Bertine is Gilbert, who always works for her in the Cape and has travelled in from his usual haunt at Kuils River.

Time for business, then, and I'm terrified. There's actually a crowd following us! As we head down the first fairway I start to feel like I'm part of something big. I'm getting a watered-down hint of what it must be like to caddy in the final round at Augusta. It's a privileged, front-row seat, but one that comes with plenty of responsibility. I check the bag roughly every three seconds to make sure all the clubs are still there.

I'm mostly only speaking when spoken to, but there's a fairly relaxed atmosphere. Kim and Bertine are clearly good mates, and share plenty of laughs (and the odd conspiratorial whisper) in spite of the high stakes. But the jollity disappears when we get to the fifth and Kim makes an eight after missing the fairway and ending up hitting it into a bush. I sense it's a good time to hold my tongue.

At six she strikes back with a lovely birdie, though, and things are looking up again. With Monique having a bad day at the office, it becomes clear that the title will be between Kim, Bertine and Yvette du Plessis – who was playing in the group ahead.

As I get to know Kim, I start to feel part of her quest and start craning my neck for a glimpse of leaderboards up ahead. I'm thinking in terms of 'us' winning this

thing – what a story that would be! Even though I'm not playing, I'm feeling like I'm in the battle – the competitive juices really start flowing as we get to the back nine.

I feel even more like I'm part of the team on 10, where for some reason I break my no-advice rule. I'm convinced

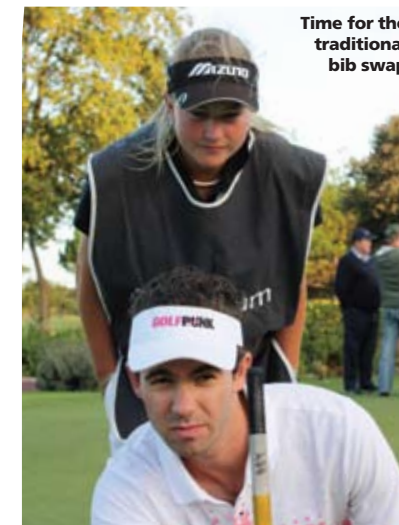
Ball unplayable: stand back and shut up...



Golf Punk shares a lighter moment with SA's top two ladies



Time for the traditional bib swap



"I've landed up in the final group, caddying for SA's number two. Eek!"

Kim's giving the headwind a little too much credit on her approach shot, and say it out loud. As she hovers over the ball, the seeds of doubt I'd sown take root – she changes her mind and takes one club less. I hold my breath and pray it won't come up short. And then watch it finish pin-high for a good birdie chance: relief like you won't believe.

I decide then and there to quit while I'm ahead and bag the advice for the rest of the day. After all, things are getting noticeably tenser as Bertine has a mini-wobble on 11 and 12, and Kim's putts keep slipping out.

But then Kim's putter starts to go awry. After no end of great par-savers, she finally misses one on 15 and then misses a tap-in for par at the must-birdie 16th. Strauss has fought back to level terms at four-over par as we head to 17, where Kim's furious response to the missed gimme is a rhythmic smash down the middle with the driver.

But birdies elude them both at the penultimate hole, and news comes in that du Plessis has finished at two-over. Bertine and Kim need an eagle two at the last to tie, and although they put themselves in prime position, neither manages to hole out from the fairway.

I'm surprisingly gutted to have been on the losing side. 'We' do come home second after Strauss bogeys the last, but Kim's not happy and neither am I. For the moment, she's so cross with herself that she's become Kimberley.

"That's what my mom always calls me when I'm in trouble," she explains with a smile. "It's not my name at all, but somehow I've started using it when swearing at myself on the golf course!"

Call her what you will, she's convinced tequila and beer in the clubhouse will help ease the pain and the memory of the triple-bogey eight that really lost it. As for me, I've got the best finish of my caddying CV to celebrate, so it's not all bad news. Next stop, the SA Open... **C**



Scowls all round after narrow loss

Photography: Gregory Simpson