



The European Tour's shooting star speaks to us about his Sun City exploits, why he's a good bet for the Masters and the wonders of Cape Town's aquarium. . . . Words: Richard Asher

Believe it or not, even Golf Punk doesn't always find it easy to spend quality time with the world's best golfers. No names mentioned, but some of those in the top ten can be particularly sticky when it comes to sitting down for an interview.

The Swedes, though, seem to be the exception. They're cool, relaxed, happy to have a laugh and refreshingly normal. Just a month or two after Robert Karlsson obliged us with an excruciating photo shoot and a full-length interview – and did so with an excess of charm and grace – we've got Henrik Stenson strolling in for a deep chat after his third round at the South African Open late last year. He's got all the time in the world for us – and it turns out he does that charm and grace thing pretty well too. He's

not in contention for the Pearl Valley showpiece, but hey, it's his last assignment in what's been a blinding 2008. He's not all that bothered.

And why should he be? It's just two weeks since the 32-year-old's awesome display at Sun City. Yes, his metronomic golf made the 2008 Nedbank Golf Challenge 'one for the purist', and it was miles from being riveting theatre.

"Sorry I made it so boring," he apologizes, before Golf Punk tells him to stop being silly. "No, but I know you guys would have enjoyed a better show..."

He's actually being sincere in asking forgiveness for his nine-stroke demolition job at Sun City. That's being ridiculously nice: Henrik Stenson earned the right to bore us by playing genius golf. He may not have won a Major just yet, but his showing in 'Africa's Major' suggests that a win in one of the big four is not far away.

His recent form gives plenty of other hints in that direction – you don't need to be a soothsayer to pencil him in as one of the most likely first-time winners at the Masters this year. His

last two Majors, at Royal Birkdale and Oakland Hills, both yielded top-five finishes. Without Pdraig Harrington's late brilliance at the Open, Stenson might even have made it a play-off in the foul conditions Birkdale served up. After a pretty ordinary first few years as a pro, the man from Gothenburg suddenly seems to be homing in golf's biggest prizes.

It's not just the 2008 Majors (not to mention his real name-making breakthrough in the 2007 WGC-Accenture Match Play Championship) that suggest this. A week before Sun City, for example, he paired up with Karlsson to take the World Cup of Golf for Sweden. And although he may not have actually won a regular stroke play tournament in '08 until the NGC, his top-ten ranking and finishing a fourth straight year in Europe's top ten prove that he's going to be around the upper reaches of golf for some time yet.

If you're wondering where to put your money this year, it's worth knowing that Stenson himself reckons Augusta could be his best chance. Not least because the man who relinquished the Sun City title to Stenson went on to win that rather important green garment last year...

"Trevor [Immelman] congratulated me after I won at Sun City," chuckles Stenson. "I told him I was just trying to keep up with him...and reminded him that he went on to win a green jacket!"

"Seriously, I've learned a lot about Augusta, and I feel it's a course I can play really well now. It's the one course we keep coming back to, so you have a much better chance when you've played it a few times and got the hang of it.

"I've made my mistakes there now, I know where to be and not to be, so I'd say I should have a pretty good chance at Augusta."

It's a point well made, particularly when you learn that Stenson hasn't seen any of the venues for the year's three other Majors: Bethpage State Park, Turnberry and Hazeltine

HENRIK STENSON

Sweden's unassuming assassin



HENRIK STENSON



Another silky-swinging Swede.



Henrik's now comfortably among golf's big names.



Stenson celebrates with wife, Emma, and daughter, Lisa.

the captain's role in the twilight of his playing days?

"If I have a long and successful career I wouldn't mind it," he smiles. "It's a great honour – you don't apply for it, you get chosen. If the guys think I'd be suitable as captain in future then I'd love that. And if we could get Ryder Cup in Sweden that would be perfect!"

That spot of conjecture lies in the very distant future, of course. More pressing matters for Stenson include ticking that 'Major' box and, perhaps, becoming the first winner of the Dubai World Championship. After all, the desert-domiciled star does have home ground advantage!

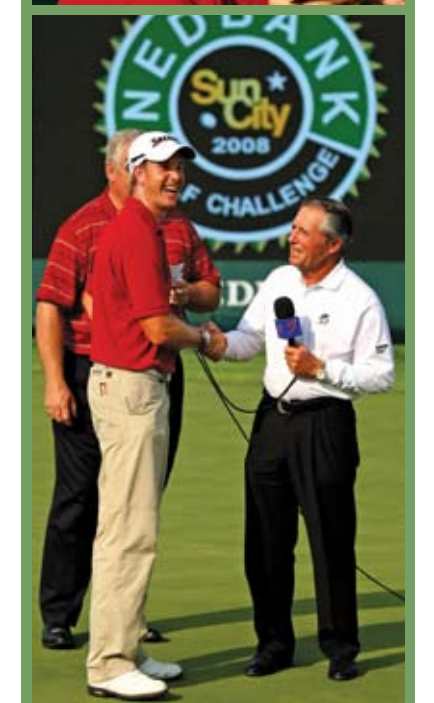
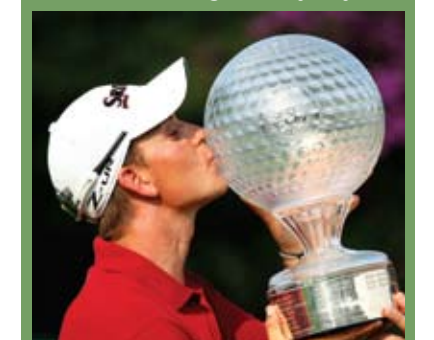
"I've been up and seen the [Jumeirah Estates] course. Maybe the home advantage will help me get a chance for a bit of a sneak preview on that one. I haven't played a lot of Greg Norman courses, so I'll be interested to see what it's like."

"The Race to Dubai is a big boost for the tour in terms of money, and something that can really compete with the Fedex Cup in America. Personally I prefer the Dubai set-up to the one in the States."

Being a highly-ranked 'world player' in the mould of Ernie Els, Stenson is lucky in that he can pick and choose to play on both sides of the Atlantic. But we sense Europe's where his heart lies, and Dubai would be his biggest prize outside the Majors this year. Whatever happens in the Dubai Dollar dish-out, though, it's a safe bet Stenson will be back in SA for the NGC at the end of this year. He's promised us. We couldn't get him to swear he won't make it dull though... **C**

HITTING THE JACKPOT AT SUN CITY

Stenson on mauling the Gary Player CC



"Scoring-wise the 2008 NGC was the best I've ever played. Sometimes you can strike the ball better without getting the same results, but in terms of numbers this was definitely up there. It was my biggest margin too: I've never won by anything close to double figures like that. "I wasn't really thinking about records on the final day though. It takes a bit to go out and shoot eight-under, which is what I needed to tie Ernie's scoring record from 1999. What I really needed was a stronger second day...but anyway, the course was different when that record was set. It's hard to compare different years, although journalists like to do it! "One of the things I did right was working hard on getting my distance perfect at the altitude this year, actually measuring my irons out properly at the range. The year before I'd used a ten percent rule for the altitude, but I found I had some issues – it didn't quite work across the board. This time I didn't feel like I was estimating and I could commit to the numbers."

"I THINK LESS PEOPLE RECOGNISE ME IN STOCKHOLM THAN IN CAPE TOWN!"

National. Then again, his confidence probably doesn't know any limits after his strong runs in the big ones last year.

"I almost had a chance to win the Open and got a fourth in the PGA, and it was important for me to get those two strong Major finishes," he explains. "Even better is the fact that I did it without playing at my absolute best. Before, I would always put myself under pressure to play my very best golf, but those tournaments taught me that, hey, maybe I can still be up there even if I'm only playing at 85%. You've just got to be able to hang in there in the Majors."

"I seem to like it when it's tough. The Open conditions were brutal, and the PGA was on a tough course with thick rough. That kind of situation suits my game, because I can play to my strength of being good with the long irons. I can control the ball nicely with the three-wood from the tee, and having a five or a six-iron into the greens rather than an eight or nine doesn't affect me as much as some of the other players..."

Does anything affect Henrik Stenson? That's a vexing question...if he was bothered you'd never be able to spot it behind those shades. He's not one for breaking clubs on the course, nor for showing too much excitement. But it's not like he never horses around now and then. He's even been known to crack a joke with the crowd when he hits it wayward. And rest assured that if he doesn't, his silence is born of confidence rather than shyness.

That confidence is well-founded. He's over six foot tall, he's a new(ish) father and life's good right now. The golf's going great and he's nicely settled in his Dubai base, a perfect spot for him to indulge in year-round practice. And his good mood at Pearl Valley probably also had something to do with the fact that he'd just had a few days off in Cape Town with wife Emma and one-year-old daughter Lisa.

"I must admit I didn't see a lot of the sights, because I just didn't have the energy to do too much. The first two days were too windy anyway, so we just went to the aquarium. Lisa loved the fish – that's a very nice aquarium you guys have!"

Having been splashed over the nation's newspapers a week earlier had clearly also elevated Stenson to new levels of fame in South Africa. "We were walking around in the mall

and four or five people came over and congratulated me on the Sun City win, which was nice. By the looks of it, less people recognise me in Stockholm than in Cape Town!"

While Stenson still doesn't have the public profile of Annika Sorenstam or good old fashion icon Jesper Parnevik in his home country – and is perfectly happy for things to stay that way – that's likely to change as he plays in more and more Ryder Cups. He's already a veteran of two trans-Atlantic battles, tasting victory in 2006 and an underwhelming defeat last time around.

"The Americans just putted better than us," recalls Karlsson of the failed Valhalla mission of 2008. "They had home soil advantage, the crowd was behind them and knew the course well – that adds up to something for sure. But we as a team just didn't play as well as they did."

"If one or two of the singles matches had swung, maybe Lee Westwood and Padraig Harrington might have charged in the closing holes knowing that the Cup was actually on the line. But we got behind early, and couldn't come back into it."

And what of the more juicy matters in the Ryder Cup, like the evergreen issue of Yank loudmouths in the crowd and Nick Faldo's unhappy outing as captain?

"I didn't have too much bad experience with the crowds, although you're always going to find the odd bad egg in a big basket like that! The only thing that can annoy you a bit as a player is if they start clapping when you hit it in the water or something like that."

"The one amazing thing was that there were only about 10 percent Europeans in the crowd, but they had so many great songs! It was unbelievable, and the Americans didn't have much for them in return. They were just like, USA, USA! I think Wales is gonna be good."

"On the captaincy question, maybe there are one or two things Nick would have liked to do differently, just as we players would have liked to play a little better..."

Golf Punk loves the idea of the Ryder Cup going to Sweden one day. The nation deserves to play host for its contribution to European golf, and the crowds would come in droves...oh, and how about Stenson playing

HENRIK STENSON

AGE: 32

TURNED PRO: 1998

CV: Six European Tour wins, 2008 Nedbank Golf Challenge winner and 2008 World Cup of Golf winner for Sweden. In 2008 he finished third at the Open and fourth in the PGA Championship. Has played in two Ryder Cups, winning one (2006) and losing one (2008).