

Els, Schwartzel and Grace lead S. African charge



File photo of Ernie Els with the 2005 Qatar Masters trophy. Els will be aiming to win the tournament for the second time this month in Doha.

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By Sports Reporter/Doha

Four-time major winner Ernie Els, 2011 Masters champion Charl Schwartzel and rising star Branden Grace will lead the South African charge in the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters, which will be held at Doha Golf Club from January 21-24.

Defending champion Sergio Garcia and Ryder Cup teammates Henrik Stenson, Justin Rose, Thomas Bjorn and Stephen Gallacher are among the stars previously confirmed for the 18th edition of the event.

Els, 45, lifted the Mother of Pearl Trophy on his tournament debut in 2005, and 'The Big Easy' is still bidding to add to that title after returning to Doha in 2006, 2007, 2009, 2013 and 2014. Retief Goosen (2007) and Darren Fichardt (2003) are the only other South Africans to have won the title.

One of the greats of the modern game, Els captured his fourth major at the 2012 Open Championship and has won 28 European Tour titles, putting him just one trophy behind sixth-placed Ian Woosnam on the all-time list. Els won his first Open Championship title in 2002, having won the US Open in 1994 and 1997.

His seventh-place finish at the PGA Championship last August was his 35th top-10 finish in the majors and Els is now hoping to again raise his game in Doha and join Australian Adam Scott (2002, 2008) and Scotland's Paul Lawrie (1999, 2012) as a two-time champion.

"It's always fun playing on courses where you've won and played well. I feel like I'm due a good result at the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters and the Doha Golf Club is a great venue, a top golf course and attracts nice crowds," said Els, who finished third in 2007.

"It's nice to start the year in the Middle East and I always get a good reception in Qatar. I know there's a very strong field this year with many of Europe's Ryder Cup players, so Charl, Branden and myself will do our best to provide another South African champion."

Schwartzel, who tied for seventh at last year's Open Championship, has won nine times on The European Tour and is the circuit's third-most successful South African behind Els and Goosen.

Schwartzel is currently his country's top-ranked player and will compete at the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters for the eighth time, but the first since 2010. The 30-year-old has finished in the top-25 in his past six attempts, including a third in 2008, and is looking forward to tackling the Peter Harradine-designed layout.

"I remember the Doha Golf Club well and also how the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters has got bigger and better over the years since I first played in 2003," said Schwartzel, who recorded one victory and four other top-10s on the 2014 European Tour.

"It'll be fun to compete there again with my compatriots and in a really strong field. It's one of the big tournaments at the beginning of the year and always held in nice conditions, so I hope I can play well."

Grace, 26, is one of his country's rising stars and last month won his fifth European Tour title at the Alfred Dunhill Championship in South Africa, having finished the 2014 season with a joint-ninth finish at November's DP World Tour Championship, Dubai.

Grace, who won four times on the 2012 European Tour, will compete at the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters for a fourth straight year and is looking to build on finishing sixth and 13th in his last two appearances.

"I'm a big fan of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters and I've had a couple of good performances in the last two years, so I want to improve on that after winning again in South Africa," Grace said.

"Golf is all about confidence and obviously lifting a trophy again will kick-start another good season on The European Tour, so I'll be wanting to get off to a fast start in Qatar against a very strong field. I'm happy that Ernie and Charl will be among the South Africans and hopefully one of us can lift the trophy."

Hassan al-Nuaimi, President of the Qatar Golf Association, welcomed the three South Africans to a star-studded field that already included five of Europe's Ryder Cup-winning team.

"Ernie Els is always one of the most popular players at the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters, so we're proud to welcome back one of the great players in world golf," al-Nuaimi said.

"Charl Schwartzel is another great major champion and Branden Grace is one of the exciting talents in world golf, so we can expect a strong challenge from these three great golfers from South Africa as well as our five recent Ryder Cup heroes." Commercial Bank is marking its 10th year as title sponsor of the event, which has grown in stature and prize money to become a prized fixture on The European Tour calendar.

Abdulla Saleh al-Raisi, CEO of Commercial Bank, added: "As Commercial Bank marks a decade as title sponsor of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters, the return of four-time major winner Ernie Els is another highlight in what is already one of the strongest fields in the tournament's history. We have a cast of legends competing in Qatar and golf and sports fans in Doha are privileged to be able to see these stars up close."

Commercial Bank Qatar Masters tickets are available to purchase now at Virgin Megastores (in stores in Doha and online), Doha Golf Club, and the Doha Rugby F.C. Each ticket purchased entitles the holder to one free return drive to the event at Doha Golf Club by event partner UBER. Commercial Bank Qatar Masters tickets for adults are priced as follows:

Wednesday 21 January – QAR150

Thursday 22 January – QAR150

Friday 23 January – QAR250 (includes evening entertainment – UB40 featuring Ali Campbell, Astro and Mickey)

Saturday 24 January – QAR200

Season Pass – QAR450 (includes event entry on all four days and evening entertainment)

Entry is free for children under 14 years of age. For those looking for an extra-special experience, hospitality packages are available through the tournament's official website, qatar-masters.com