

by Joy Chakravarty, 24th October 2016

Stage set for Ras Al Khaimah's Challenge Tour debut with Rayhan Thomas among those in attendance



Stage is set: Thomas (c) with RAK Tourism's Haitham Mattar (l) and Tarratt.

Even though most of the top players on the European Challenge Tour's Road to Oman will try to secure their place in the season finale this week, the inaugural Ras Al Khaimah 2016 Golf Challenge will still have plenty of UAE flavour.

The \$350,000 tournament at Al Hamra Golf Club, Ras Al Khaimah, will feature a field of 105 players, which will include MENA Golf Tour's amateur star Rayhan Thomas, former UAE No. 1 amateur **Michael Harradine**, and Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club professional Cennydd Mills.

Sponsored by Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAKTDA), the field includes European Tour veteran and UAE president Johan Edfors, who won the Terre dei Consoli Open Challenge Tour at the beginning of this month and is currently ranked 33rd in Challenge Tour standings.

Almost all the top players from Road to Oman have entered the tournament, including No. 1 Alexander Knappe of Germany, No. 2 Jordan Smith of England and his compatriot and No. 3 Sam Walker.

Also getting invitation from the sponsors are two MENA Tour professional stars, UAE resident Jake Shepherd (25), a two-time MENA Golf Tour winner, and Joshua White.

Sixteen-year-old Thomas, who became the first amateur and youngest winner on the MENA Golf Tour event in September, is the only teenager in the field, is far from nervous.

“The win on the MENA Tour has made me very confident. I know that I can now play with the professionals and play well,” said Thomas. “Hopefully, the Challenge Tour is my next step and the European Tour will come after that. But I am not making any decisions on my future for another couple of years. And while I finish my school, playing events like this and gaining experience is the best thing that I can do. “

Although this is my Challenge Tour debut, I’m treating it like any other event. My iron play is on point at the moment so I’ll be looking to capitalise by hitting some good shots and holing some putts.

“It’s been about 18 months since I played the Al Hamra course but I’ll play a few practise rounds early next week to get reacquainted with it.”

Harradine qualified for his spot by winning the Emirates Amateur Open earlier this year. The 34-year-old is the son of Al Hamra Golf Club designer Peter Harradine and holds multiple Emirates Golf Federation Order of Merit titles.

Nick Tarratt, Director of the European Tour International, said: “It is an exciting time for the Challenge Tour as we prepare to embark on a new territory in Ras Al Khaimah.

“It is tremendous to be showcasing the emirate through our media platforms and the 46-minute television highlights programme which will be distributed around the world.”

The Ras Al Khaimah 2016 Golf Challenge is being supported by Al Hamra Golf Club, RAK Rock, Stevin Rock, RAK Chamber, BMW and Rivoli as event sponsors, and Waldorf Astoria, Voss Water, Wicked, icflix and Nike Golf as event partners.

Meanwhile, Marcus Armitage’s Challenge Tour victory in the bigmoney Foshan Open catapulted him from 53rd to 11th in the Road to Oman Rankings and sealed his spot amongst the top 45 in the season-ending NBO Golf Classic Grand Final, set to take place after RAK week.

The Englishman finished 19-under, one ahead of France’s Matthieu Pavon and Knappe, who moved to the top of Road to Oman rankings.