

READY TO ROLL

After a rocky 2025, South Africa's most recent Major champion is fresh and eager to hit the highs again in 2026

BY GARY LEMKE

With the Christmas decorations coming down and a fresh calendar unveiling a new year, Ashleigh Buhai can allow herself to reflect on a career well done as she embarks on a 19th season in the professional ranks.

And, she is still only 36 – she signed pro forms the day after she turned 18 and left behind one of the most glittering amateur CVs as she went in search of her destiny.

Those last 18 seasons have seen her win 22 times, including six times on the Ladies European Tour, twice on the LPGA Tour and one Major. Of course, as an amateur she achieved it all – twice winning the SA Open, three times the SA Amateur stroke play and match play double, and being part of the South African squad that won the Espírito Santo Trophy in 2006, the only time the country has landed the women's world amateur team championship.

Plus, twice representing Team SA at the Olympics, at Rio 2016 and Paris 2024. 'When you put it like that it is quite a lot!' she said from her base in Florida, USA, where she, husband Dave, and new family addition Pebbles – a puppy named after Pebble Beach – spent Christmas for the first time since the Covid-19 restrictions.

'My career has definitely been a journey with highs and lows, but no regrets. I am very lucky to still be competitive and playing 19 years later. I still love what I do and the desire to win is there, so that's what keeps me going,' she said.

I put to her that, having achieved everything in the sport and having played professionally for half her life, what fuels that desire to keep going.



BUHAI JOINS THE GOLF MAG

British Open winner **Ashleigh Buhai** has teamed up with The Golf Mag as a columnist where she will take you into her world as an elite professional golfer. Be sure not to miss what one of the South African greats has to say.





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'It's a great question, because as professional athletes we don't look back enough on what we have achieved. When you put it that way I don't know. I am very lucky to have won some of the biggest tournaments at every level. I just know that I keep doing this because I love it and still strive to be better, and I know when I put my best together I can still win.'

The year that we're putting a lid on, 2025, wasn't as prolific in terms of making cuts and wins as previous seasons and her world ranking slipped to No. 122. It marked the first time in the last six years that she ended the year outside the top 100. What the rankings don't show is the story of a year blighted by injury, hardship and loss of form.

'I seemed to struggle to put it all together. There were weeks where I hit it well but then my putter was cold. Then weeks I putted well but hit it poorly. There were glimpses of really good golf but there was always one round that would cost me from either making a cut or having a really good week. In January I twisted my left knee badly and ended up with a grade 1 tear in my MCL. I had to take six weeks off and missed the Asia swing in February/March. Then In April I was leading in LA, and during the third round I had an awkward lie in a bunker and my knee buckled, and I ended up aggravating it again. It didn't feel completely healed until June.'

Another setback was to follow. 'At the Walmart tournament in Arkansas I landed up in hospital for three days with a punctured lung, they had to insert a chest tube to inflate the lung back. This happened





from a physio dry needling treatment. I then wasn't allowed to fly so had to drive 18 hours back to Florida and rest for 10 days. During this time I was making my bed and put my back out really badly. I think this happened because I had been lying down and sitting for so many days, and when I tend to not keep my body moving and activated this can sometimes happen.

'I flew to Asia without touching a club for three weeks and couldn't swing at full speed. I think I actually played half decently because I had no expectations and was just happy to get through each round.'

There was also the loss of her gran in June, which hit hard.

'I knew when I left South Africa in January that could be the last time I see her. It was a busy stretch of tournaments, I was fighting my way back from my knee injury while playing with the loss of my gran on my mind, which emotionally took its toll on and off the course.'

However, Buhai is hopeful that the new year brings new beginnings. Her body is feeling good after the end of season break and Pebbles has been keeping her and Dave busy, and will continue to do so in the coming months as she'll accompany them on tour. The last week of July will see the whole family head to England for the AIG Women's Open at Royal Lytham & St Annes, which is Buhai's favourite event of the year.

'There is always a special feeling when returning to the Women's British Open. It brings back the memories of 2022 when you see posters of yourself around the venue as well as being in the champions locker room area.'

Further evidence, if needed, that when they update the gallery of great South African golfers, Ashleigh Buhai's name will be in the first chapter.

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CHIP SHOTS

What can be done to further promote the profile of women's golf in SA?

'We have come a long way since my amateur days. With GolfRSA supporting players the way they do, and then players having the Sunshine Ladies Tour once they are ready to play professionally, is the stepping stone that was needed. Unfortunately it all still comes down to sponsorship and funding.'

Would women's golf benefit from a 'LIV' scenario?

'The goal is to have the best women in the world compete together, not separately. The tours are however trying to work with Golf Saudi and not against them to benefit women's golf. They have shown this through the Aramco series on the LET and in 2026 there will be a co-sanctioned LET/LPGA event in Las Vegas with a \$4m purse.'

A message for parents of young teenage talents?

'Don't push your kids. Let them play and work hard at the game because they want to do it.'