

TOP OF THE CLASS

A memorable national Open was won by a South African, whose every shot was cheered by a passionate home crowd

BY MGARY LEMKE



As Casey Jarvis stood over a tricky par putt on the 18th hole of the third round of the Investec SA Open, the increasingly common sight of a 'predictor' flashed up and told the world that he had a 24 percent chance of making the putt. In other words, a one in four chance to sink it from 23 feet away, in front of a deliciously noisy crowd which had turned the closing hole at Stellenbosch Golf Club into an intimate amphitheatre.

No one told Jarvis that his odds were just 24 percent. His putt never looked like missing, sparking scenes of unbridled joy as the 22-year-old made his way through the crowds to sign for a round of 64 and a one-shot lead heading into the final round.

Of all his 266 shots along the way – returns of 67, 68, 64, 67 meant only he and Haydn Porteous went under-par in every round – it was that closing putt on the Saturday which set things up and ensured he would be ready for Sunday, where he completed a tap-in for the win on the same green.

'My greatest putt in front of my home crowd,' said Jarvis, who had broken his DP World Tour duck the week before by becoming the fifth youngest South African to ever win on that tour, at the Kenya Open.

Armed with a one-stroke lead heading into the final round, and dressed all in black for the cooler conditions, Jarvis smoked his opening drive right down the middle of the 1st fairway. What followed was a masterclass in front-running. That 1st hole was birdied and the lead was stretched out to two strokes with 17 holes to go.

He never looked back.

TOP SA FINISHERS

1st

Casey Jarvis (-14)

2nd

Hennie du Plessis (-11)

T6th

Daniel van Tonder (-8)

Haydn Porteous (-8)

T9th

Wilco Nienaber (-7)

T14th

Kieron van Wyk (-6)

T20th

Branden Grace (-5)

Dean Burmester (-5)

T29th

Xander Basson (-3)

Jayden Schaper (-3)

Herman Loubser (-3)

Louis Albertse (-3)

T43rd

Darren Fichardt (-2) Hennie

Otto (-2)

T50th

Shaun Norris (-1)

Brandon Stone (-1)



The crowds which followed Jarvis and his playing partners Hennie du Plessis and Francesco Laporta (pictured above) knew they were watching something special. In fact, the crowds at this Investec SA Open played a full part in the success of this 115th Investec SA Open. The 'sold out' signs were up long before Altin van der Merwe had struck the first shot of the tournament and, especially on the Thursday and Friday, they clung to Masters champions Ernie Els, Patrick Reed (below) and Charl Schwartzel like Velcro.

Els and Schwartzel fell away at the 36-hole cut line, and it was as if there was a handing over of the torch. The student town of Stellenbosch flocked to the golf course and over the weekend Jarvis had become the Pied Piper, with hordes of people following his every twitch – and twitch he did, as the pressure ramped up.

What was noticeable though, was the role played by his caddie, Conrad Loubser.

While golf is considered an individual sport, there's a team behind every champion, and Loubser was part of that winning team. He noticeably kept things light-hearted, helping to guide the former GolfRSA amateur standout around the Sunday mayhem. Don't underestimate the role the bagman played on the final day.

By the time the group had got to the statistically easiest hole on the course, the 535m par-five 5th, Jarvis had extended his lead and he was three-under for the round after those first five holes. Not





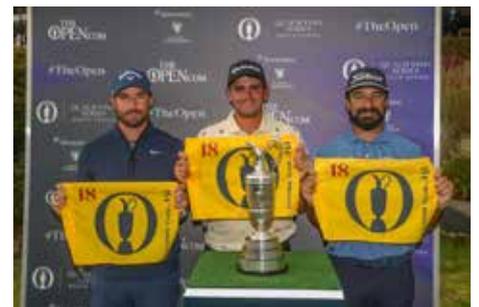
once did any of his challengers get to within striking distance of the South African, who plotted his way around a Stellenbosch Golf Club layout that had been toughened up for the onslaught of the modern professional.

‘When I started playing this golf course it was a par 74,’ mused Els. ‘Now it’s a par 70.’ And when it last hosted a SA Open, in 1999, David Frost won on a course rated 71.

Up in hospitality areas the sponsors and organisers would have been delighted by what they saw. Without being able to rely on anything other than memory, the impression this writer gained is that the last time we saw golf crowds follow this tournament was at Glendower in 2017, when Rory McIlroy was the big attraction. Here, in Stellenbosch, things seemed to take a step forward and the four-day galleries were a pleasing mix of young and old, which is what we all want to see from the sport.

After a short weather-enforced wait with the last hole to play, Jarvis had broken the back of Sunday’s final round, and he was left with a tap-in par for a closing 67 and a three-shot win over his two playing partners and France’s Frederick Lacroix, who had snuck into a tie for second after a closing 65 that included a double-bogey.

Jarvis’ win came with an automatic spot in this year’s Open Championship at Royal Birkdale, as well as the Masters in April. The unlucky player of the trio who finished tie second was Du Plessis, who missed out on an automatic entry into The Open because his world ranking was not as high as Laporta and Lacroix.





For Jarvis, a historic Big Four in the amateurs has now become a career Big Five. In 2020, he had joined an elite club of two when he matched Bobby Locke and Neville Clarke in winning the SA Amateur, the SA Stroke Play Championship and the Freddie Tait Cup in a single year. He then became the first amateur to complete the Big Four by adding the Africa Amateur Championship and in Stellenbosch he levelled up again, capturing South Africa's national Open.

This was a week to celebrate the success of golf in the Winelands and the arrival at the top table of the game of Jarvis. 'As South African golfers we all dream of winning our home Open and to have done it feels amazing. I just can't wait to go to Augusta. It's so cool. I've got no words to describe the feeling. Hopefully Tiger Woods is playing because he's my role model. And to play The Open with all of its history is unreal. I can't wait.'

Nor can the rest of us.

