



# NEW HEIGHTS

This versatile Sunshine Tour pro is relishing the chance to make the most of what feels like a second career opportunity

BY MICHAEL VLISMAS

MJ Viljoen sits in the shade of the trees at Royal Cape Golf Club looking more at peace than he's ever been, and a few days after the biggest victory of his career. But wins aside, Viljoen is chasing something far bigger in his life.

His triumph in the SDC Open at Zebula this February was the fourth Sunshine Tour title of his career, but his first on the HotelPlanner Tour.

'It was a big win for me. I once had a card in Asia and that was an eye-opener for me in terms of playing international golf. So this win on the HotelPlanner Tour has given me another sense that this is a shot at international golf again,' he says.

And it's this exposure to the bigger stage in the game that Viljoen is chasing, but not for the obvious reasons.

'I am very interested in what it means to be successful, and not in the sense of trophies or money. That success in life. I believe it's a mental focus and how your brain communicates with your body. If you get that connection right, then you're on the right path.

'I would love to become a top-50 golfer in the world and compete in the Majors. Not for the fame and fortune, but for the life skills. I think what those top players experience and go through brings life skills on a whole different level. That's what I'm chasing.'

Viljoen is certainly used to chasing highs in life – in a literal sense as well. Growing up in Bloemfontein, before golf became the focus, his



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dream was to be a pilot and fly fighter jets for Britain's Royal Air Force.

'There was a time in my life when I wanted to be a pilot for a living. I am a qualified pilot. My dad got his pilot's licence at the age of 50, and we fly together now. But as the golf started to show itself and I made certain teams, I put the flying to one side.'

Rugby and cricket also started to fall by the wayside as Viljoen narrowed his focus on golf.

'I played a bit of rugby in Grade 1 and 2. I also tried cricket. But I always just seemed to come back to the golf course. After school my dad and I would go to the golf course and I'd be there with him until as late as 9pm, and then we'd go home.'

And it all seems to have aligned to bring him to this point in his life and career where, perhaps for the first time, he has the most clarity about what he wants from the game.

'About three years ago I just didn't enjoy the game. My mom advised me to go and see a sports psychologist. We grew up around sport, but not at that level where you had access to or thought about things like sports psychologists. So at first I thought it was nonsense. But then I was really starting to lose my love for the game. I met sports psychologist Shaun Landsberg, and he put me on a path that actually shocked me when I look at where I was before that. It just made me a whole lot calmer about the game. Then you have a child and you also realise you worry about so many unnecessary things on the golf course. There is a lot more off the course to worry about.

'Hendrik Buhmann is also a big mentor of mine and he's very clued up about the mental side of the game. I've learnt a lot from both of



## BEST PERFORMANCES

### 2017

Sun Fish River Challenge (1st), SA PGA Championship (T5th)

### 2019

Vodacom Origins Final (2nd), Alfred Dunhill Championship (T7th), Karen Masters (T6th)

### 2020

Investec Royal Swazi Open (3rd), Vodacom Championship Unlocked (2nd), SA PGA Championship (T7th), Tour Championship (T8th)

### 2021

Serengeti Pro-Am Invitational (T3rd), Gauteng Championship (T4th), Limpopo Championship (T5th)

### 2022

KitKat Group Pro-Am (T2nd), SunBet Challenge (1st)

### 2026

SDC Open (1st)



them about how the brain affects performance. And it becomes this recipe that you can follow and you will get results. That's brought me a lot of peace in the game. You're inclined to think way too much on the golf course. But during that victory at Zebula, there was a point where I was so clear-minded that I actually thought: 'Jeepers, shouldn't you maybe start thinking about something.' It was like I was on cruise control. Everything just felt easy.'

It's exactly this approach he wants to take into his second attempt at international golf on the HotelPlanner Tour this season.

'I will change a lot in terms of my approach. In Asia there was a time when I was really struggling with my game. I looked around at some of the superstars playing over there and really made a point of studying what they do. They make it look so easy. They know what they're doing. I think I'll be a bit more open-minded and follow routines a lot more. I'll also focus more on my mental game this time around.'

'When I saw Jayden Schaper win back-to-back like he did at the end of 2025, I immediately thought that there is never a coincidence to performance. I'd love to know what steps he followed to get in that position to win those two tournaments like he did in playoffs, and with those shots. There's an approach to that mentality that I'm very interested in.'

And that's what he hopes to unlock this season.

'There are so many opportunities through the Sunshine Tour. My plan is to just keep doing what I'm doing, and hopefully those doors will open for me.'

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#### BY THE NUMBERS

**2** Holes-In-One he has achieved on the Sunshine Tour

**4** Wins on the Sunshine Tour and one on the HotelPlanner Tour

**14** Most consecutive cuts he has recorded on the Sunshine Tour

**19** The age at which he turned professional; he is now 30

**63** Lowest round he has scored on the Sunshine Tour

**256** Highest world ranking he has reached

