

PASSING THE TEST

The SA Amateur champion has mastered the balancing act between studies and golf – and now he's set for take-off

BY CLINTON VAN DER BERG

In the high-stakes world of elite golf, the path to glory is usually paved with singular focus – a mono-maniacal devotion to the perfect swing that leaves little room for anything else.

Then there is Judd Sundelson.

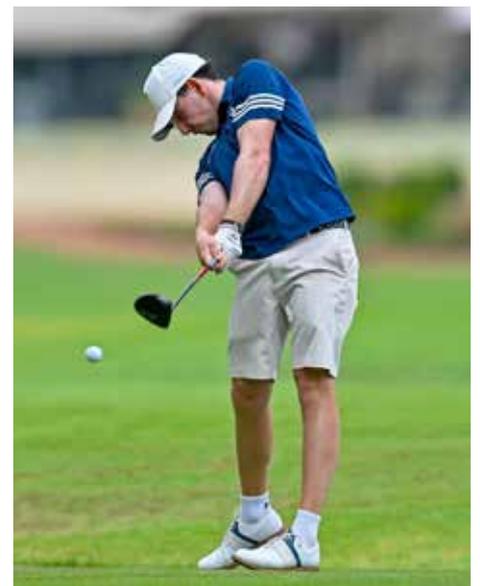
Currently based at the historic University of St Andrews, the 23-year-old Sundelson is a rare breed: A golfer who can navigate a rain-swept Scottish links course with the same precision he applies to a Master's thesis in International Relations.

Fresh off a historic victory at the South African Amateur Championship, Sundelson represents a fascinating intersection of deep family legacy and modern grit. He isn't just carrying a famous name; he is redefining what it means to be a student-athlete at the highest level of the game.

Golf is in Sundelson's DNA. His grandfather Neville was one of South Africa's premier amateurs, his uncles played, and his father Barry was a formidable golfer in his own right.

Growing up, Sundelson felt the inevitable nudge of expectation. 'I always wanted to keep the name high,' he admits, noting that as a 15-year-old, his friends would joke that he was merely 'average' compared to the legends in his family tree.

However, rather than buckling under the pressure, Sundelson found a sanctuary of support within his family. They offered a simple but powerful mantra: play as much as you want, but the drive must come from within. This internal fire was stoked on the driving range, where



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he spent weekends with his grandfather, absorbing lessons between the elder Sundelson's coaching sessions.

Perhaps the most poignant moment of his young career came during his SA Amateur win. He closed out the match with a 3&2 margin, the exact same score his grandfather recorded to win the same title in 1972. Remarkably, Sundelson was so locked into the 'zone' that he didn't realise the historical symmetry until after the final putt dropped. 'I kind of blocked it all from my mind,' he says.

If his early years in South Africa provided the foundation, Scotland has provided the forge. Living and playing in St Andrews has fundamentally altered Sundelson's approach to the game.

Comparing the 'perfect' conditions of Johannesburg – minimal wind and pristine fairways – to the biting rain and unpredictable gusts of the UK has turned him into a versatile shot-maker.

'In Scotland, you have to be so focused and concentrate and use the course to your advantage,' he explains. This Links education has given him a psychological edge. When he returns to South Africa, the conditions feel like a luxury, allowing his game to flourish.

But life in St Andrews isn't just about golf. Sundelson is currently pursuing his second Master's degree, this time in International Relations and Political Science, following a previous Master's in Finance and Banking. The balance is, by his own admission, 'gruelling'. St Andrews maintains a strict attendance policy; even a national champion can fail a course for missing too many classes.



SHORT PUTTS

Pretoria Country Club or the Old Course at Saint Andrews? Which one is harder to close out a win on? St Andrews, due to the elements factor. And there's something about being in contention at the home of golf. You feel this presence.

Who's the first person you called besides your family when you realised you were the SA amateur champ? My girlfriend, who is also at the university.

What do you miss most about SA when you are in the UK? The warmth of the people. It's just different.

Favourite course? Leopard Creek.

The last book you read? A political book about the state of South Africa.

Growing up, who were your sporting heroes? Always my dad and my uncle and my grandfather. I used to think they were the most incredible golfers when I was young. And Gary Player was good friends with my uncles, and my grandfather. I played golf with him once, and he was a huge idol for me.

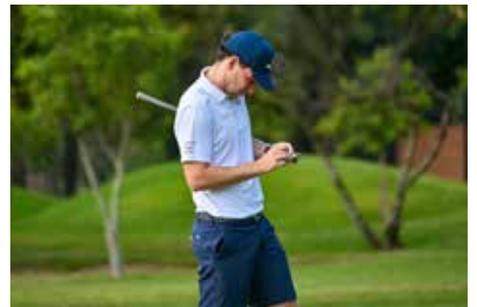


'I can't just be focused on golf,' Sundelson says. 'I have papers due and work that I have to go over'. This intellectual rigour seems to feed his performance on the course, providing a mental discipline that keeps him grounded when the pressure mounts.

Sundelson's mental fortitude was on full display during the SA Amateur final in Pretoria. Falling four holes down after just four holes, many players would have panicked. Sundelson did the opposite. Drawing on his experience playing match play for St Andrews, where he once overturned a 4-down deficit with eight holes to play, he stayed calm.

'I just trusted my ability,' he says simply. This self-belief is a relatively new acquisition. Sundelson is refreshingly honest about his past struggles, admitting to moments where he 'completely choked' and let nerves get the better of him. Working with mentors like Neil Homann from GolfRSA and his coach Ian Muir, he has transformed that anxiety into a quiet, lethal confidence.

The 'forgotten man' of South African golf – so-called because he doesn't appear on the local rankings while playing abroad – is forgotten no more. His recent string of performances, including a Student Tour Series win and competing against Sunshine Tour pros like Haydn Porteous, has proved that he belongs on the global stage.





As he looks toward the end of his academic tenure in May, Sundelson's sights are set on the professional ranks. There is the UK tour to complete, followed by the potential of DP World Tour school or a return to the Sunshine Tour.

'I started to realise that I'm just as good as anyone here, if not better,' he says of his time on the UK tour. It's a bold statement, but one backed by the silver trophies on his mantle and the Master's degrees on his resumé.

Sundelson is not your average golfer. He is a tactician, a scholar, and a fighter who has learned that the best way to handle pressure is to embrace it, whether it's a 15-foot putt for the win or a final exam in political science. The rest of the golfing world is finally starting to see what his grandfather knew all those years ago on the range: the Sundelson name is in very good hands.