

EVENT

SHARJAH SENIOR GOLF MASTERS PRESENTED BY SHUROOQ

DATE

MARCH 16-18, 2017

SHARJAH SET TO SHOWCASE



MARTIN DUFF is the innovative Director of Golf at Sharjah Golf and Shooting Club. He introduced the hugely popular Golf Society League which has brought the members of the Club and the companies who contest the leagues closer together in a friendly yet competitive atmosphere. Here he talks to Worldwide Golf about the Sharjah Senior Golf Masters Presented by Shurooq (SSGM) ahead of the forthcoming European Senior Tour event on March 16-18. With the legendary golfer, Jack Nicklaus, advocating the benefits of nine-hole golf, it's highly appropriate that Sharjah Golf and Shooting Club will be able to showcase their Peter Harradine-designed course to the world.

WWG: This is the first time the European Senior Tour has played in Sharjah and the first time the Tour has taken an event to a nine-hole course. Why did the Club opt for a Senior Tour event?

☛ **Martin Duff:** Being a nine-hole course it would be difficult to accommodate a regular Tour event but it's great to see a European Senior Tour (EST) event in the region, which shows that we are offering something different. We have many truly great men's and ladies' events in the UAE but the EST offers a much more personable and up-close experience than some of the other events. There won't be anything like a 'them and us' feel to the SSGM. I believe that people enjoy watching a style of golf they can relate to and most of us know we'll never hit the ball 350 yards, but the seniors make the game look easy in a different sort of way. The spectators and the amateurs playing in the Pro-Ams can relate to the Senior pros and they play to enjoy the game.

WWG: What sets Sharjah Golf and Shooting Club and the tournament apart from other clubs in the region?

☛ **MD:** Without doubt I can say that the diversity in facilities are unparalleled, certainly at any other golf clubs in the UAE. Golfing wise the playability of the course, its outstanding value and being a floodlit facility, which allows 40 percent more playing hours per year with play until 11:30pm daily, is something we are proud of. The Pro-Am's on the Tuesday and Wednesday will start at 3:00pm and the last hour or so of play will be under lights, which will be a unique experience for the Pros and one that will be proudly featured in the daily TV highlight packages.

WWG: What changes have been made to the course in preparation for the Senior Tour players?

☛ **MD:** Orient Irrigation have committed to SSGM sponsorship in the form of barter towards course improvements. Year one we've

concentrated mainly on cart paths and irrigation work, as well as some additional machinery and ongoing practices to improve the general condition of the golf course leading up to, during and after the event. Year one hasn't been about new tees, bunkers or redesigning greens, it's been about getting things done that needed doing and improving further what we already have. We have reshaped a few fairways and rough lines around greens but the fundamental layout changes, if any, will be made once we get feedback from the players after year one.

WWG: Which holes will provide the biggest challenge and why?

☛ **MD:** The closing stretch, 14 – 18 makes up the teeth of the course. The EST won't play all the holes from the back tees but the closing five holes will play very tough and ensure a worthy champion emerges on Sunday. If I were to pick out one hole to watch it would be the par 5, 15th. It is stroke index one for the members but the Pros will be playing from one of the forward tees so it measures just over 500 yards. This will be very reachable, but a brave tee shot is required as the lateral water very much comes into play. The tighter you are to the water the shorter and easier the second shot is. I have a feeling on the final day we'll see some bogeys and a few eagles on the 15th and, considering where in the round it comes, it could prove pivotal to the outcome of the event.

WWG: What's the secret to mastering the course?

☛ **MD:** The player who makes the fewest mistakes on the closing five holes will probably be crowned champion. The course is fairly forgiving from the tee but there are a few must-make shots with few bail out areas over those closing holes. I would imagine anyone who can play those 10 holes (over the two loops) in maybe four or five under the card over the three days of the tournament will be well positioned to take

advantage of the other eight. Ronan Rafferty, at the event's launch last March, said he reckoned 13 – 14 under par would win. It will be interesting to see if he's right!

WWG: How do you see the exposure of the event benefiting the club in the long term?

☛ **MD:** The local and international coverage is certain to lift the profile of the Club worldwide. Previously we've haven't focused much on international rounds but hosting an event of this stature will give us a genuine foothold in that market and help us achieve some of our other long-term goals which I'll go into a little more later.

WWG: Are there any plans to make the course 18 holes?

☛ **MD:** There are no plans. Interestingly, our Managing Director Sheikh Mohammed Al Thani got all the club's managers together recently and asked us to list five and 20 year goals for our respective facilities. To be an established international venue was my five year goal but to be the most famous nine hole golf course in the world was what I put down as our 20 year goal.



9 HOLE GOLF TO THE WORLD



This, as the SSGM grows and establishes itself, I believe is achievable. To be the most famous 18-hole course realistically could never be achieved, so we're happy working with what we have and, hopefully, making these realistic goals. The upsurge in popularity of 9-hole rounds, endorsed by Jack Nicklaus, should also help us gain further stature.

WWG: How is the club looking to attract new golfers?

● **MD:** This is something we've always committed time to, be it through our junior programmes, free bi-weekly TryGolf clinics or our very popular Learn Golf in a Week classes. We've introduced thousands of people to the game in the 9 years we've been open. Many are still members and many I know are still golfing in other parts of the world or on other courses in the UAE, which is really great to know.

WWG: Do you have any comical memories of playing with any of the Senior Tour players?

● **MD:** Last year the four guys we had present for the launch for the event were brilliant hosts. Paul Broadhurst, Ronan Rafferty, Des Smyth

and Malcolm MacKenzie we're all great fun and definitely not short of a story or two. When you've played on Tour for over 20 years, played in Ryder Cups, Major golf championships you sure to have a tale or two – and there were plenty of very entertaining ones here last March!

WWG: What does it mean both locally and internationally to have Peter Harradine associated with the course?

● **MD:** Peter's name is synonymous with the now famous Middle East Desert Swing with his courses at Abu Dhabi and Qatar hosting two of the three events. The Challenge Tour event in Ras Al Khaimah is also on one of Peter's courses and this makes four, which really is quite incredible considering the number of signature architects that have courses here. Peter is a personal friend of mine and I know he's delighted, both for the club and for the emirate of Sharjah, that we are holding the event. I'm sure he'll be here with us most of the week.

WWG: How has the tournament been received by the members?

● **MD:** They are genuinely excited, especially

our low handicap members aged over 50 who are going to try and qualify on February 12th. Apart from having the honour of witnessing some of the best players ever to play the game and plot their way around our course, hopefully setting a few new records along the way, the course will remain open until the Saturday (11th) before the tournament week and will open to them (and the public) the Sunday (19th) after – it won't close either side of the tournament week unlike a lot of other tour venues. The only difference for them will be that we are taking the carts off, midweek, from February 12th which they all seem to be looking forward to.

WWG: Have many of the society league teams got involved with the event?

● **MD:** As Worldwide Golf knows we host a lot of society golf at SGSC, be it their own private visits or through the Golf Society League. Many have circulated tournament promotional material within their databases and many are all set to volunteer as marshals, scorers or caddies, which is great as we require around 80 per day.