



SHARJAH SURPRISE

SOUTH AFRICAN **CHRIS WILLIAMS** OVERCAME HIMSELF TO CAPTURE A SECOND EUROPEAN SENIOR TOUR VICTORY AT SHARJAH GOLF & SHOOTING CLUB

BY KENT GRAY





AFTER EACH OF the 54 holes during the inaugural Sharjah Senior Golf Masters, Chris Williams carefully recorded his score before scribbling down a quick memo to himself on a separate piece of paper. ▶ The theory was the South African would be able to correlate the exact moment another tournament had slipped through his grasp and hopefully begin to understand why he was bottling so many winning positions on the European Senior Tour.

If it all sounds rather defeatist, rest assured there was context behind the ruthless self-examination - and a deep determination to rectify the mental glitch over-riding his undoubted physical ability under the blowtorch of the back nine Sunday (read Saturday in this part of the golfing world).

Williams had recorded 39 top-10s in eight years on the over 50s circuit - nine of them podium finishes - before arriving in Sharjah for the 2017 season-opener. Yet he'd only once converted the consistency into a trophy and that was six long years ago at the 2011 Brunei Senior Masters. It had got so bad that Williams seriously started



Williams was magical from the sand Saturday

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to doubt he had the intestinal fortitude to win again.

“You look at my record in my first few years, I had so many second and thirds,” Williams said. “You get into this mental feeling that you’re never going to win or you’re going to blow it whenever you get into a winning position. Last year as well, I was in a lot of good positions, particularly after my starts. I was leading after two rounds in Wales, doing well in Jersey but I just didn’t capitalise.”

Williams admits to some sobering heart-to-hearts with his wife as the not-so-near misses started piling up and the winless months morphed into years.

“There’s guys around me that

I felt weren’t quite as good as me and yet they were going on to win and I was going backwards. I mean, I wasn’t even finishing second or third, I was actually finishing 15th and 12th.

“There was something going wrong and I was doing it week in and week out and I was thinking, you can’t go on like this. I’ve got to break through somehow or otherwise I’m going to be kicked off [tour] one of these days.”

Enter Theo Bezuidenhout, recommended to Williams by young compatriot Brandon Stone. Stone had found an inner clam working with the South African sports psychologist before waltzing the European Tour’s Alfred Dunhill

Championship by six strokes at Leopard Creek in December.

Williams is from a generation where few professional golfers had coaches let alone sought the counsel of a “head shrink... oops, you’d better not call him that”. But he was so desperate to overcome his mental frailty, he was willing to try anything. It didn’t hurt that Bezuidenhout works just around the corner from where Williams resides in Edenvale, Gauteng.

“I’ve been working hard on a few mental exercises for weeks and weeks now, trying to implement those thoughts, writing them down even while I was playing. It’s a check of my mental state so I know where I am mentally in the round. I’m trying not to concentrate on winning the tournament, just playing golf, doing the right thinking and letting golf take care of itself.

“After every hole I’d write



England's Gary Marks putted beautifully...until the playoff

down things like 'feeling calm' or 'confident' and when I was a bit anxious I'd say 'tense' so at the end of the day, if I didn't win, I'd go back and be aware of where it started to change and alter it."

Except Williams didn't blink at Sharjah Golf & Shooting Club. The numbers he wrote down were terrific all week – a course record, seven-under 65 on Thursday backed up by rounds of 70 and 68 for a -13 total matched by Englishman Gary Marks. When Marks threw in an uncharacteristic "little weakling three putt" on the first hole of overtime, Williams seized his chance, pouring in a four-footer for par on the same hole where he'd needed a brilliant sand save moments earlier to make it into

"You'd rather somebody made a birdie...a little weakling three putt is not...I'll be thinking about that for a day or two for sure."

– GARY MARKS



James Kingston en-route to his amazing 15th hole birdie



Senior Open champion Paul Broadhurst finished four shots off the pace

Roger Chapman, [Senior] U.S. Open and PGA champion and now he's back here [to the European Senior Tour], Magnus Atlevi, tremendous golfer, long hitters...I'm working harder now than I did 30 years ago because of the standard and because I want to keep playing," Williams said.

"What was nice was there were so many guys that came up and wished me well, so many guys that are in that similar category that I've been in. You kind of feel its like us against them, the order-of-merit guys [battling to stay on tour] against the career earning guys [who have exemptions]."

The fairytale finish was just reward for Shurooq's three-year bankrolling of the event and all the hard work put in by SGSC Managing Director and Vice Chairman, H.E. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdullah Al Thani, and his team, led by the club's tireless Director of Golf, Martin Duff.

David MacLaren, the new Head of the European Senior Tour, summed it up as an "amazing week".

"We go to some amazing places and some of those places we're lucky to go back year after year. But to come somewhere so new, somewhere that feels so different, and somewhere where we've been able to do things for a first time, playing a Pro-Am under floodlights and the first time ever for the European Tour to play on a nine hole golf course, this gets our season off to a fantastic start," MacLaren said.

"For the last few years our Senior Tour players haven't been use to tournaments at the beginning of the year and I am really hopeful this will prove a catalyst for some more new tournaments in this part of the world. But even if that doesn't happen, to know we can come back here for the next three years to such a special place, and I mean that genuinely, is something that gives us great heart and fills us with great pride." **G**

the playoff.

"Words fail me," said Williams who rattled off three eagles, 11 birdies and just four bogeys in 54 holes to win two days shy of his 58th birthday.

"It's just a start. It's not going to work every single time but one can say that if I didn't do these things, would have I won?"

It was also a most impressive start for the Sharjah Senior Golf Masters. It was a gamble starting the new European Tour season on a nine-holer but Peter Harradine's design, presented so beautifully by Kiwi course superintendent Marty Brown, produced drama aplenty and a worthy champion.

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— DAVID MACLAREN

As Marks so eloquently said after his second round, you clearly don't need 18 different holes to test the best. "There's some scar tissue there the next time you're on that tee. There's the memory and you have to deal with it a couple of hours later. That's part of the game though and if you can't deal with scary golf shots, you shouldn't be a pro."

While Williams expected compatriot James Kingston, the 36-hole leader, to provide the stiffest final threesome challenge on Saturday, it was Marks who quietly snuck up on everyone with three straight birdies from the 13th. He had decent birdie looks to get it done in regulation time on 17 and 18 as well, the latter a 10-footer which burnt the left edge of the cup. It made the same hole look even smaller a few minutes later.

"It's a sad way...I mean it's not literally sad, but it's kind of a sad way to finish," Marks said after his cruel three putt in the playoff. "You'd rather somebody made a birdie...a little weakling three putt is not...I'll be thinking about that for a day or two for sure."

Kingston got to within a shot of then co-leaders Marks and Williams (who lead by as many as four in the final round) with a crazy birdie on the 15th when he hooked his tee ball into the water, snapped his driver over his knee in frustration before taking a penalty drop and a three wood swipe to the front of the par 5, from where he duly holed out. But it was his last gain in a closing 70 as Kingston was left to rue a bogey on the hole before his miraculous birdie when a putt snagged in the fringe and his longer than hoped for par save slid by.

Williams earned a 12 month exemption from the date of his victory but it was meaningless given he has full status this season anyway courtesy of his order of merit standing last season - €71, 784 for 22nd place. At least the €59, 550 win gives him a head start on a good 2017 and the promise of a return to the tour in his 59th year.

"When you are 58...I mean it is just incredible to see how good these guys are. Paul Broadhurst, [Senior] British Open champion,

LEADERBOARD

Pos	Player	Nat	Par
1	WILLIAMS, Chris	RSA	-13
2	MARKS, Gary	ENG	-13
T3	ATLEVI, Magnus P	SWE	-12
T3	KINGSTON, James	RSA	-12
5	CHAPMAN, Roger	ENG	-10
6	BROADHURST, Paul	ENG	-9
7	BOSSERT, André	SUI	-8
T8	LUNA, Santiago	ESP	-7
T8	DODD, Stephen	WAL	-7
T8	TINNING, Steen	DEN	-7