

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

LOCAL HERO

Louis Oosthuizen's path to Open glory began in a humble community in rural South Africa. Friends and family show us where his extraordinary journey started.

WORDS BY RICHARD ASHER PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE REID; ODENDAAL KOEN

Drive east down South Africa's N2 highway, from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth, and you'll soon find yourself in a golf wonderland. First up is the seaside marvel at Pinnacle Point, where guests routinely arrive by helicopter. Then comes Oubaai, home of a manicured Ernie Els signature course. Up the road is Fancourt, immortalised as the scene of the dusky 2003 Presidents Cup.

All these places are synonymous with executive spas, five-star hotels, gourmet restaurants and heavy security.

Half an hour west, in a brown and relatively featureless stretch of countryside, is the sleepy town of Albertinia, a farming town just off the highway. It's a dusty little place, dominated by the inevitable Dutch Reform Church steeple. Tourists ignore it as they speed down the dead-straight drag to the first view of the sea at Mossel Bay. You only stop in Albertinia if your business is thatch or aloes. Or if your car breaks down.

You'd never even notice Albertinia's nine-hole course unless you took the turnoff and went looking for it. Mostly deserted on weekdays, the fairways are little more than clearings in the shrubbery, which the farmers among the 40-odd members keep trimmed. The black, cruddy greens are of oil and sand; you have to rake them before you putt. Who'd give this place a second glance when there's a string of big-name championship designs just up the highway?

And yet, amazingly, Albertinia has something none of these golf palaces can boast. It has an Open champion. This is where the Louis Oosthuizen story began.

The new champion of Britain grew up in Albertinia, where his family ran a milk transport business. At first he was a tennis player, until the day he walked past Oom Piet Fourie's place on his way to the courts. Oom literally means 'uncle' but is an endearing term of respect for any man significantly older than oneself. His father's great friend, who'd watched Louis grow up, was practising his chipping outside his house, and hailed the boy, encouraging him to give it a try.

"This little nine-year-old took my 9-iron, gripped it like a grown-up and immediately started chipping them spot-on, straight into the box I was aiming at," says Fourie. "When I saw his father I told him, 'Let that boy play golf. Watch him. He's got a natural talent.'"

And so Louis played golf. He'd play with his brother Rikus (six years his senior), quickly learning his way around the rough local course. Oom Piet and Louis' father (also Piet) became partners of the gifted youngster, who was playing senior club matches by his early teens. He was fiercely competitive and wasn't always good at accepting defeat.

"I remember a round with him when he was about a 10 handicap," recounts Oom Piet. "Louis hit it into the bush and found there was a little tree behind his ball. Then he pulled the tree out of the ground!"

"I had to say to him 'Louis, it doesn't work like that' and told him it was a two-stroke penalty. He didn't want to accept it. But much later he said to me, 'Oom, that taught me a lesson.' I still feel bad about that incident, but it was something I had to do."

Louis' dad, who had a tennis background and was reluctant to see his boy switch codes, eventually relented and gave Louis great support. So much so that Oosthuizen Senior used some of the land at the family's nearby farm to build tees and a green for the future Open champion to practise on. The 1996 floods washed the home driving range away when Louis was 14, but by then there was no turning back.

"There was never a second choice with him," says his father. "When he got near the end of high school I tried to discuss his university subject choices with him, telling him there had to be a Plan B."

"But all Louis would say was 'Dad, there's no Plan B. I'm going to play golf.' So I took that university money I'd saved and used it for the petrol to drive him to amateur tournaments all over the country."

That steadfast certainty that he would succeed also struck Louis' first coach, Vaughn Taylor, who was then pro at George and 'discovered' Louis when the Southern Cape Golf Foundation ran a clinic at Albertinia.

"Louis would always be the guy drinking coke," recalls Taylor. "The other boys all wanted beer, but he was always different. He'd say 'No, I'm going to be a pro golfer.'"

"It's amazing that someone can come from oil-and-sand greens and go all the way to St Andrews and win the Open. But a lot of South Africa's top players come from small towns and sometimes they're more hungry because of it. When you're from a small town you want to go out and achieve something."

For Louis, that something was always going to be golf success. And as his best friend Odendaal Koen recounts, Louis knew it long before anyone else.

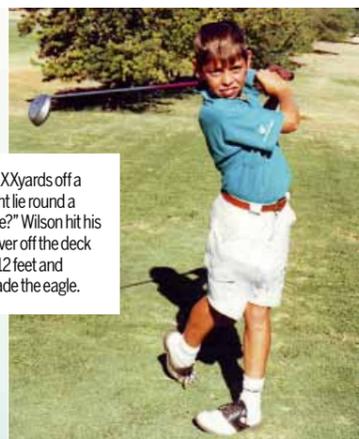
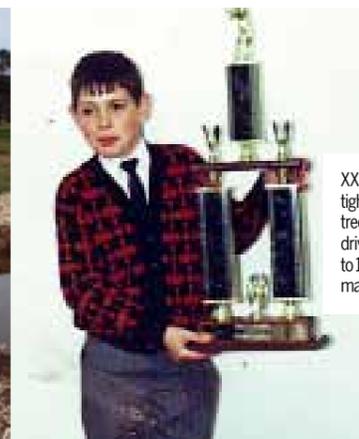
"The first time we went for a sleepover at his house, I noticed above his bed he'd stuck up a piece of paper reading 'The Greatest Golfer the World has Ever Seen.' He wanted it to be the first thing he saw every morning."

That mantra wouldn't have been hard for Louis to believe as he started to explore some of the area's other affordable golf clubs. After all, shooting in the 50s twice will do great things for a man's confidence. When Louis fired a ridiculous 57 in a social round at Mossel Bay aged 20 in 2002, the world learnt that when the man goes low, he goes really low. As he proved again two years later with a

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“I’ve never broken 66 there and I absolutely have to do it one of these days,” says Louis. “Those greens are definitely tougher than grass, so it’s not an easy place to score. The problem is that I’m always so relaxed when I go back... I need to pick a day and take it seriously!”

Oosthuizen reckons his best chance will be at the club’s annual Sand Classic, where the winner gets a whole cow and second place wins a couple of lambs. The December date might just fit the Oosthuizen schedule and there’s a good chance he’ll pair up with the 32-handicap Nel-Maré. The prize would make quite a change from the Claret Jug (which Louis kept clean after the Open, if you’re wondering), but it would be far more appropriate for a man who bought a farm tractor with his Open proceeds.

Louis had a predictably busy five days when he popped back to SA a couple of weeks after the Open, with receptions at both Mossel Bay (where Els made a surprise appearance to congratulate his own foundation’s first Major champion) and Albertinia (where they’ve named the new bridge on the ninth in his honour) visibly tiring him. His plan to relax at the family farm probably didn’t work out as expected, but he did his bit for the locals without complaint.

Meantime, the proud folks at Albertinia are planning to erect a “Home of Louis Oosthuizen” sign on the N2. But until then, don’t forget this place when you’re on the way to your golf-holiday-of-a-lifetime on the Garden Route.

Oosthuizen might have bought the club a new mower, but the course is unlikely to change much. Just like Louis. And nor should they. ▀

59 on the same course, this time in competition.

But the competitive will to achieve was never limited to golf, it was in Louis’ blood. Never a one-track man, he learnt to love hunting and fishing when he was a boy. Even there, he wants victory.

“He might have the edge on me in golf,” says Oom Piet, “but I’d say he’s at least a 24 handicap when it comes to fishing. Even so, he never wants me to do things for him. He wants to do his own bait, cast for himself and reel in his own fish. That’s the kind of person he is.”

Hunting is an even more serious affair, as it so often is for an Afrikaans boy from rural South Africa. The annual shoot is a must for Oosthuizen, Open champion or otherwise. He’ll be out tracking kudu and eland with Oom Piet and the boys later this month.

“His competitive nature comes out on the hunts too. He always wants the buck with the longest horns! But you also see his discipline. He knows his weapons, how to do things safely. He’s always helpful to his fellow hunters, and pleasant to compete with – like he was with Paul Casey at St Andrews.

“He’s in charge of the food when we hunt and always has something special for us. He doesn’t believe in heavy drinking though; he’d rather polish his rifle while the other guys have a few. Louis is far more grown up than most guys of his age.”

Ever the humble small-town boy, Louis never forgot his roots as he moved up the ladder to stardom. Last year, just a week after playing in his first Masters, he held a fundraising event at Albertinia. Not only did he and his down-to-earth wife Nel-Maré both play, but Louis and Odendaal were out at the crack of dawn to set out the tees and pins themselves. He ran prize-giving in person, handing out piles of meat (de rigueur competition prize in SA) to his old friends in the ramshackle clubhouse.

Although he is strongly linked with Mossel Bay GC and established an academy for young golfers there earlier this year – it has grass greens, after all! – Albertinia is where it all began. And he still hasn’t gone so low there as he did at St Andrews – something he intends to put right.

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