



Grace has already made a splash on the European Tour

There was just something about the way his name galloped up the leaderboard in the latter stages of December's SA Open that made you sit up and jot down his name. If you're an unknown – and let's face it, he was – you've got to play some spectacular golf to get people to notice you. Branden Grace did, and they noticed.

Barely a month later, Grace did it again, following up his sixth at Pearl Valley with a great second place at the Africa Open. Only double US Open champion Retief Goosen could get the better of the 20-year-old from Buffelsbaai, who put the likes of Richard Sterne, Darren Clarke and Angel Cabrera into the shade. It looks rather like Grace had better get used to appearing on the big stage.

And he'll get plenty of chances to do so in 2009 - he's not one of those Sunshine Tour journeyman who lucked into form in a couple of the big events. In fact, he's barely played any Sunshine Tour golf at all. Having slugged it out on the Challenge Tour for a couple of years immediately after turning pro, Grace earned himself a European Tour card at Qualifying School late last year. Which means he's about to embark on the biggest adventure of his life...

Starting your European Tour career at home in South Africa... an ideal way to kick off?

Ja, I had a lot of support here. Plenty of family and friends came out for my first couple of events. It helped to keep me relaxed. Also, I had nothing to lose!

Hence the outstanding performances at the SA Open and Africa Open...

Over the last year or so I've played really nicely from tee to green but

just struggled with the putter. People said it would be easier coming home, and it just fell into place! Things came together at the SA Open and Africa Open; the putts just started going in. I played nicely at the Joburg Open too actually, only nothing went in!

That dream start must give you a lot of confidence...

The weekends at Pearl Valley and East London were amazing. It was nice to play four good rounds in those tournaments; previously I'd always thrown things away with a bad round. At East London I was under par in all four rounds and beating a guy like Cabrera was a huge boost; it showed me that I could really do it at that level.

Going back to when you first took up the game, did you really make your debut at Sun City?

Yes, my first round of golf was at the Gary Player Country Club! A mate of mine took a bunch of us down there for his birthday. I can't remember what I shot, but it was quite intimidating to have my first round there...I'd heard so much about it!

And then your family moved?

I grew up in Pretoria, and all I did golf-wise was just mess around at the range. When I was about ten we moved down to the Southern Cape, though. That's when I started playing the game properly and I never stopped. I just fell in love with it.

Any idea where we can stock up on groceries in Buffelsbaai?

Of course...my family runs a shop and a seafood restaurant there! It's just outside Knysna, and mainly a spot for holidaymakers.

Ever served behind the till yourself?

No, I've not been too involved in the business. It keeps my parents busy though!

Speaking of family, your clan is now flooded with touring pros, isn't it?

Michiel Bothma and Natasha Richardt (wife of Darren) are both cousins on my mom's side. So yes, pro golf does run a bit in the family!

And yet...it's your dad who's the golfer!

Well, he tries! He can't get away from the shop that often, but he aims for a game every week. He's off about a 15 at the moment, but with practice he could be a single-figure player.

Why does your name sound a little bit like that of a Zimbo cricketer?

Alright, my dad was born in Zimbabwe! My mom's Afrikaans-speaking, so I'm pretty much bilingual although we talk more Afrikaans at home.

Buffelsbaai to Britain is a big move...how's Manchester?

Pretty good. Most of the other South African ISM guys are over there: Charl (Schwartzel), Richard (Sterne), Louis (Oosthuizen), plus the Challenge Tour guys like Tyrone Ferreira. So there's good company.

Are you another one of those Manchester United fans?

I've always been a Manchester United supporter but I've got into it a lot more since I've been in England. I mean, they're football mad over there - everything is just football, football, football.

Isn't it going to be tough to plan your schedule this year?

DON'T TALK TO ME ABOUT... Branden Grace

Meet Branden Grace, one of the summer's revelations and (we hope) South Africa's next European Tour winner... Words: Richard Asher



Grace shared the trophies with Ernie at '07 SA Open



BRANDEN GRACE

Age: 20
Residence: Buffelsbaai, Western Cape and Manchester, England
CV: Won 2006 SA Amateur Stroke Play, Won Freddie Tait Trophy for top amateur at 2007 SA Open, 35th on the European Challenge Tour Order of Merit in 2008 after a second place at the Ypsilon Golf Challenge. Earned 2009 European Tour card at Q-School. Sixth at 2008 SA Open. Second at 2009 Africa Open.



Grace has his sights set on a win this year

Yes, but it helps that I've had a good start. There's a re-rank coming up in Europe so that should help me get into a few more events. It could be the same as last year on the Challenge Tour though - all a bit last minute!

But we'll see you in these parts again soon enough, right?

I'm not sure when I'll be back but I'd imagine I'd come and play a couple of events here when there's a break in my schedule. On the other hand, I might get a few more entries over the summer in Europe, because they say a lot of top players are filling up the fields early in the year trying to get a head start for Dubai. Either way, I'll definitely aim to be back for the big ones at the end of the year.

Going back to your amateur days, you were with the Ernie Els & Fancourt Foundation for a couple of years and then suddenly you weren't. What happened?

Nobody really knows why it ended - I played well for them but there was a lot going on and things just headed in the wrong direction. It was their decision, but we still have no answer or reason as to why. But that's just the way it is.

You won the SA Amateur Stroke Play in 2006, defeating your new European Tour rival Oli Fisher by a stroke, but it was over a year before you turned pro. What made you wait?

Before the tournament my dad and I had spoken about going pro, but it was really his decision at that stage - he was supporting me. We made a deal that if I won the SA Amateur it would be my choice when to turn pro. But I was still a junior that year, so I was happy to achieve a bit more at that level. I went to Germany and won a big junior tournament over there, and eventually went pro in May 2007.

You didn't try and cut your teeth on the Sunshine Tour, rather going straight to Europe and slugging it out on the Challenge Tour in 2007...

It was tough having to qualify for events that year, especially as I don't perform at my best over a single round. But I managed to get a full card for 2008 and finish in the top 35 on the money list, which made things much easier because it put me straight into the final stage of European Tour qualifying.

And you never looked back...

In the end Q-School was quite close, but fortunately I had a good start. Playing six rounds was very tiring and I dropped back towards the end. But I finished 24th and the top 30 get cards,

so I did enough to make it for 2009!

You must have had a few adventures on the Challenge Tour. What was the Kazakhstan Open like?

Kazakhstan was really nice. The people were all fine and wanted to do everything for you, although the hotel wasn't great! The course was fine too, and I had good fun with the mates I was travelling with.

A few Borat impressions, perhaps?

Oh, a couple! And we met some real Borats too, which was pretty funny for us!

What was it like travelling around with Tyrone Ferreira on the Challenge Tour?

It was nice to travel with Tyrone and not be alone. It's good to be with another South African, or it can get lonely at times. We're very similar in many ways - we both play and practice a lot but we enjoy our time off. We've got similar likes and dislikes too.

Now that you've moved on, who will be your mates on the European Tour this year?

David Horsey, who won the Challenge Tour Order of Merit last year, is a good friend. So I'll probably travel to a couple of events with him if we get into the same tournaments. There are a lot of South Africans on Tour too and I'm good friends with some of them: Louis, Charl, Anton Haig and so on. But I can manage on my own if I need to. I travelled a lot representing SA in my junior days, and I was often alone. A lot of SA guys get homesick, but I know what to do and I hope that will be an advantage.

You've made it into the big league now - are you going to be buying yourself rich man's trappings?

I don't need much right now - and I'm not old enough to be kicked out

of home yet! When I'm a bit more settled I'll probably try to get my own place, my own car and so on. The main thing for this year is to try and get a win and to keep my card.

Would you look at America in the long term?

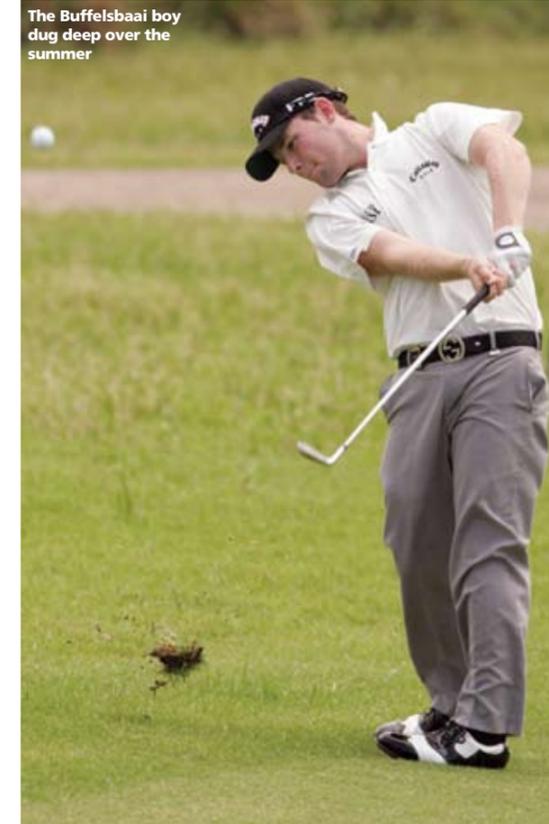
I'm taking it step by step. Last year was a big jump and I achieved a lot of goals. I never thought I'd get my European Tour card after one full season on the Challenge Tour, it was a dream come true. If you get into the top 50 you'll get invited to some events in the US and you don't say no to those! I'll just take it as it comes.

If you could win one Major, which would it be?

The Masters. It's the Major of all Majors - all the best golfers in the world competing for one jacket.

Augusta's probably unlikely for you this year, but we guess you might have a go at the Open?

Ja, I'll try and qualify for the Open in Europe - that makes it a bit easier. There are only a couple of spots available in the South African qualifying tournament. I just need to stay in the top 500 in the world and play my best golf - if it's your day anything can happen! 🍀



The Buffelsbaai boy dug deep over the summer

"I NEVER THOUGHT I'D GET MY EUROPEAN TOUR CARD AFTER ONE SEASON ON THE CHALLENGE TOUR - IT WAS A DREAM COME TRUE."

