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ERNIE ELS yesterday opened his new Golf Club in Dubai Sports City and then laid down the challenge to world No.1 Tiger Woods - on and off the course.

The world No.5 officially opened the course at The Els Club when he launched a drive 290 yards into a breeze from the tee on the 445-yard, par-four first. Els was joined by tennis great Martina Navratilova, South Africa's Rugby World Cup-winning captain John Smit, former Manchester United goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel and England cricket ace Andrew Flintoff for the formalities.

Having signed the driver and handed it over to Dubai Sports City chiefs to mark the customary official drive-in, he then had another go, with his own club. And you would think designing the course



by
BARRY KING

may give you course knowledge. But the powerful South American only succeeded in finding the fairway bunker on the left of the generous first fairway, some 280 yards away. Back to the design board Ernie? But I can't see the big man making any changes just yet if his demeanour yesterday was anything to go by. Having arrived in style by helicopter, the three-time Major winner was clearly delighted to see his desert dream come true. After more than three years in the making, the course looked absolutely stunning, with the 25,000 seater cricket stadium,

which is rapidly nearing construction, providing a stunning backdrop. Els has had a hands-on role in the golf design and construction.

And while he may be behind Tiger Woods in the world golf rankings, the 38-year-old, who last year set himself a three-year plan to get to world No.1, is ready for a Tiger hunt on the course, while keeping him at bay off the course.

Woods is also designing a course in Dubailand, which is due to be ready in the latter part of 2009. But 'The Big Easy' says the fact that he and his team already have a finished product gives them the upper hand in the design battle, allowing him time to focus on the fairway fight.

"I've been coming here since 1993 when there was nothing but a hotel by the airport and we would get bussed to the

course and back for the Dubai Desert Classic. When I came here three years ago there was nothing. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be opening an Els Club in Dubai," he beamed yesterday.

"It's just wonderful to see the idea we had finally come true.

"This course is something very special. I think you can make a course challenging for the best players in the world, but at the same time enjoyable for the rest of the world's golfers. We've done that here.

"Working with sand, this has been one course you can almost design on paper and then bring the paper out and move things around to create the golf holes you want.

"It seems all the top players have become designers now," added Els.

"A lot of people will buy into



GAME ON: At The Els Club

the Tiger Woods course because of his name.

"But we have something they don't. We have something that is complete, they still have to build their course. It's good to be in there first."

And what about the battle on the course with the world

No.1, one year into his three-year plan?

"As a golfer and a businessman you need to keep your motivation and I will keep pushing myself and making big strides forward," he added.

"I signed up with Callaway in March and I'm really comfortable with my equipment now, using the square-headed driver which I really like.

"I've changed my schedule, a bit less on the jet fuel. I'll be in the States for a bit longer.

"I'll be in Florida from March getting ready for the Masters, and I've built my schedule around the Majors really, for the first time in a couple of years.

"Tiger's obviously in the zone, but I'm moving in the right direction."

The Els Club is set to open to the public in March, with details to follow in due course.