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US PGA Championships and the US Masters firmly in Els's sights

IT'S GOING TO BE A BIG YEAR, HE SAYS AT THE ELS CLUB IN DUBAI SPORTS CITY

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KARL JEFFS/Gulf News

New club

World No 5 golfer Ernie Els plays the inaugural tee shot from the first hole of The Els Club at Dubai Sports City.

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By SARAH TREGONING
Staff Reporter

Dubai He may be cutting back his schedule this season to concentrate on winning more Majors, but Ernie Els still found time to play the first round on his new golf course yesterday.

The South African teed off against a host of famous friends including tennis legend Martina Navratilova, England cricket all-rounder Andrew Flintoff, former Manchester United goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel and South Africa rugby captain, John Smit.

The competition wasn't as stiff as it will be when he goes for his fourth Dubai Desert Classic crown over the weekend against Tiger Woods and defending champion, Henrik Stenson, but Els was keen to get to grips with his new course.

The Els Club is the first sports facility to open at the Dubai Sports City development.

Just before teeing off into a strong afternoon wind in Dubai, Els said that he was proud to be back in the emirate, a city that he has been associated with since 1993.

Great day

"It's a great day for my company," he said.

"I haven't seen the course in over a year, the last time it was all still sand."

A year has made a big difference at The Els Club. With 7,538 yards of undulating green carpet standing out in stark contrast to the desert that surrounds it, the course is as finely manicured as a lawn.

Generous fairways and short rough have been designed to tempt all standards and Els joked that even he should be able to hit the wide fairways.

And so it proved for 18 holes and the world num-

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ber five kept up a running commentary as he played his course.

With the opening of The Els Club the tall player, known as The Big Easy, may have realised a few of his design ambitions, but at the age of 38 he is planning to do a lot more in his professional career.

His CV is already impressive – seven World Match-play championship titles, the US Open twice (1994 and 1997) and the Open

Championship in 2002 as well as almost 60 Tour victories on the Europe and USA PGA tours – but Els wants the two Majors that are not yet included on his list.

The US PGA Championship and the US Masters are in his sights and Els is focused for an all-out assault.

"I think this is going to be a big year," he said. "Obviously you want to get your game right for the Majors.

My main focus was to get myself ready for all the Majors and especially the Masters."

Els has always had a gruelling schedule but now plans to concentrate on designing and winning the big events.

"I have always had a very busy schedule since 1992, which was my first full year on the European Tour and I have been travelling all my career," he explained.

"I have been talking about changing my schedule for a good ten years and now I'm finally doing what I said.

"With the golf design business going so well, perhaps it's good for me to do things a little bit differently."

On the web

Audio: Ernie Els on his new Dubai course www.gulfnews.com/sport