





THE RIGHT APPROACH

One of South Africa's shining stars is ready to embark on the next step on the journey to the top. By Gary Lemke



Brandon Stone is showing his age.

He's a three-time winner on the European Tour, a winner of the SA Open, an Olympian, a man who came within a putt of shooting the first 59 on the European Tour and a golfer who earned the equivalent of R20-million on that Tour in 2018 alone. And he is yet to turn 26.

That's the way of the modern golf world. At the end of the year, half the world's top 20-ranked men were still in their twenties, including No 1 Brooks Koepka (28). Rickie Fowler turned 30 only in December, while Jason Day is 31.

Those twentysomethings have 12 Major victories and all those who haven't won – Jon Rahm (24), Bryson DeChambeau (25), Patrick Cantlay (26), Tommy Fleetwood (28 in January) and Tony Finau (29) – have been tipped to do so in the coming years.

And here you can throw Stone into the mix. You really can. Still 25, he has the experience of a rich amateur career, a stint in US Collegiate golf where he performed alongside Jordan Spieth at the University of Texas, a best of T12th at a Major – a position he shared at the 2018 PGA Championship with Spieth and Fowler – and those wins on the European Tour. Now he is at the right age to kick on even further.

Those who have met the South African, or have spent some time watching him conduct his business on a golf course, will have come to understand that nothing is ever good enough in his search for perfection. He is a confident young man who genuinely believes he has a Major title in him and the potential to be world No 1, while he also understands how hard one needs to work and the sacrifices required.

Let's just dwell on the confidence aspect for a moment. When the European Tour invited Stone to Gary Player Country Club to try to score a hole-in-one on the par-three 184-yard (168m) 4th hole he jumped at the opportunity. He was offered 500 attempts to get it right with an 8-iron. 'I honestly believed it would take me an hour and





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a half, two hours tops, to get one. I'd be done and dusted and home by lunchtime. A couple of shots. I don't know how they didn't find the hole, it was so frustrating. After being there the whole day I could hardly clutch the steering wheel on the way home. I got home, said hello to my wife, Anette, had a shower and went straight to bed.'

Hed hit 176 shots to within 10 feet of the hole and 404 of his attempts ended up on the dance floor. Justin Thomas, the 25-year-old world No 4, tweeted: 'This is brilliant. I can't imagine how frustrating that would be! Would be fun to do. Hats off to you Brandon Stone.'

The video went viral and attracted nearly 180 000 views on YouTube and apart from the frustration the golfer showed - and he remained adamant that a few descriptive words and a throwing of his club should not be edited out - 'That's me in my office at work. Are you going to tell me people in other professions don't show frustration in the office?' - there were the physical reminders.

'I was raw in the "V" between my fingers from pushing the tee into the ground,' he says of the experience.

In a year that Stone was tipped by the great Gary Player as a potential winner of the 2018 Open Championship at Carnoustie, the 25-year-old's form fell off as we headed into December, with a tie-46th being the best return of his last five tournaments before the Alfred Dunhill Championship at Leopard Creek.

There was a simple, and understandable explanation for this. 'I was fatigued, having had two months of a strenuous programme with Gavin Groves [former head of strength and conditioning at TuksGolf Academy]. I need to be the most professional professional I can be and control the controllables. I can't control the bounce the ball might take on landing, or a putt affected by a spike mark, but I can control my fitness, diet and strength, and so on.

'Working with Gavin, I am aiming to get one to two percent stronger from a physical standpoint and get up there with the likes of Rory McIlroy, Justin Thomas and Brooks

Koepka. I'm by no means a short hitter but we're aiming to improve my distance off the tee by five yards and improve my driving accuracy percentage to over 60.'

The European Tour stats for 2018 had Stone's average drive at 303.21 yards with an accuracy of 50.83%. Should he increase to closer to an average of 310 yards (283m) and start hitting 60% of fairways, expect to see him again crash through the top 100 in the world and move sharply towards the top 50.

Stone is 178m and 70kg, and he feels that if he can get stronger and get more clubhead speed through the ball, he'll be able to push his game up the couple of percent required. 'More strength and more power,' is how he explains his approach to 2019. It's all in the search of a few more metres off the tee, hitting more fairways, having a shorter iron for approaches and allowing for more aggression in firing at the pin. 'Cameron Champ, for instance, is about 14mph quicker than most with his clubhead speed and he's getting the distances.'

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However, more than what people see of him on a golf course, decked out in his sponsors' apparel, the 25-year-old just wants people to understand that he's a normal guy. 'I like to sit with my feet in the pool, love to spend time around the braai like so many South Africans do. I chill with my *tjommies*, watch rugby on TV, curse at the TV and throw biltong at it, just like anyone else. There's a perception that pro sportsmen are untouchables, and I want people to know I'm not like that. I have no problem with people coming up to me when I'm playing and stopping for a selfie with them or signing an autograph. Interaction is healthy and I'm the same person I was when I was growing up, 13 or 14 years old.'

Sometimes, considering what Stone has crammed into his life, it's hard to imagine

that he's still 25. Last September he got married and one of his groomsmen was Proteas cricketer Aiden Markram. It's as if the two have been mates forever and it's a friendship born out of the one of their respective fathers, Kevin and Vic.

'Back in the day we used to go to Centurion and watch the cricket and the two youngsters were with their mates on the grass banks. Vic and I would say, "Imagine if our boys succeeded in sport and we'd be able to watch them play," says Kevin, himself a multiple winner as a pro golfer and a huge influence on Brandon's career. 'And now it's all happened.'

Many people reckon the modern golfer is overpaid and when Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson staged 'The Match' in Las Vegas in November, Mickelson won \$9-million for winning over 22 holes.

Stone may have earned the equivalent of over R20-million on the European Tour last season, but he is quick to correct the perception that golfers pocket all the money at the level he is at.

'It doesn't work like that. It's easy to say something like I've won a million or two this week, but then I have all my own expenses to pay: coach, caddie, manager, flights and taxes. A flight to China comes out at around R45k, for instance. That's just for me. At the 2016 Rio Olympics I had a great experience but it wasn't cheap. A rugby player earns x-amount per game but they don't have to pay their own expenses, flights, accommodation, etc.'

Stone, who was excited to accept the position of *Complete Golfer* playing editor, explains that he has always been interested in sports media and when he went to Texas it was with an ambition to study journalism. However, he quickly found it wasn't what he had envisaged. 'The degree is quite specialised and, to be honest, it was boring. I'd sit for hours in the study hall and hardly play any golf. I played only 12 tournaments in my freshman year and here in South Africa I was doing 12 tournaments in three months.'

What Stone didn't add was that his freshman year (2012-13) was as impressive as Spieth's was in his own freshman year 12 months earlier. They both won three of their

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20 TOP FINISHES

2013 BMW International Open (T10th), National Bank of Oman Classic (T4th)

2015 Cape Town Open (1st), Kenya Open (2nd), GANT Open (T2nd), NBO Golf Classic Grand Final (6th), Madeira Islands Open (T7th)

2016 Alfred Dunhill Championship (1st), BMW SA Open (1st), Shenzhen International (2nd), Open de France (T5th), Cape Town Open (T2nd), Mauritius Open (6th)

2017 Dubai Desert Classic (T7th), Joburg Open (T4th), Vodacom Origins - Highland Gate (2nd), US Open (T35th)

2018 Scottish Open (1st), The PGA Championship (T12th), Alfred Dunhill Links Championship (T10th)



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12 tournaments and their statistics virtually mirrored each other's. The American has gone on to win three Majors and become a world No 1, which again highlights an earlier point that when it comes to Stone, there are plenty of reasons to believe he too is going to go all the way to the top.

At the 2018 Scottish Open he famously shot that final-round 60 on the way to winning at Gullane Golf Club. It was the third time he has posted 60 - the others being at Oubaai and Els Copperleaf - although this was the first occasion he was putting for a 59. 'I wouldn't do anything differently. I had the right line, but it just died in front of the hole. My caddie is a

good reader and we agreed on the putt.

Afterwards, as we were waiting in the players' scoring area, Rickie Fowler came up to me and said, 'Did you have a putt for 59? Was it 10-foot right, pin high? Did you miss it left?' The same thing happened to him. Later that night, at about 11pm after all the media had gone home, my caddie and I went back to the green. I missed it again six times before making it. My caddie drops his ball on the green and sinks it first time.'

Stone has some brilliant ideas for his column in this magazine and all I can say is, 'watch this space'. He won't mind me throwing a couple of bones as he looks to 'take you on his personal venture'. 'I'm a

25-year-old who has won only three times on the European Tour. I'm not a nine-time Major champion like Gary Player. My goal as playing editor is to create awareness for the reader of what our life as a professional entails. I enjoy the media aspect and I want the person aspect to be more evident. I want it to be genuine and transparent.'

Which means we will soon be drawn into his world of cars. 'I am a car fanatic' he says ... and he's off from 0-100 in a couple of seconds. 'When I get home and have three weeks to spend in South Africa I put my cars in a truck and I take them to Zwartkop raceway. I burn every last litre of fuel and then I load them up again and go home. My folks think I'm nuts and if I go five or six months without buying a car, I've done well. (As we talk in a restaurant near his home, he is looking to 'sort out a car' for his father.)

Is his dad as much of a petrolhead? 'He's interested but not to the extent I am. But, when I turned professional amateur - because that's what it is these days - he and I would go all over the country in his Mercedes-Benz C350 diesel station wagon to play in tournaments. He put 260 000km on the clock in four years. We drove everywhere ... to Cape Town, to Durban ... you name it, we were there.'

But Stone is someone who loves his life, and travelling the world is something he enjoys, even if a lot of it is at his own expense. But he's quick to remind one that getting to the point of where he is came with sacrifice and hardship. 'It hasn't all been glamorous. There was an occasion I flew to Azerbaijan and had to travel four hours by bus to get to Baku. And then, at the end of the event, another four hours by bus to get a connection to Kazakhstan. And if I told you what meat we ate while there you wouldn't think it's glamorous. People say how beautiful our lives are and I reply, 'Do you know what I did to get here?'

That's the way Stone goes about his life, with a smile on his face, an energy and enthusiasm that is infectious, but behind all that a steely mentality and a determination to make the most out of every situation. ☺

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