

Extract from *The Extraordinary Book of South African Golf*, written by Michael Vlismas and published by Penguin.

[Contents](#)

The history of the South African Open	1
A Short History of the SA Open	2
History and highlights of the South African Open Championship	3
The Player who made the SA Open his own.....	4

The history of the South African Open

“The South African Open launched my career when I won it in 1992.” – Ernie Els

The South African Open is the most prestigious title in South African golf and the second oldest national Open in the game after The Open Championship.

Every South African professional aspires to win his national Open, and especially this one.

The tournament has an illustrious history dating back to 1903, and its list of past champions includes legends such as Bobby Locke, Gary Player, Ernie Els, Retief Goosen, Vijay Singh and other stars such as Trevor Immelman, Tony Johnstone, David Frost, Mark McNulty, Wayne Westner and Henrik Stenson.

Gary Player holds the record for the most number of South African Open titles of 13.

The South African Open is linked very closely to the evolution of golf in South Africa.

Port Elizabeth Golf Club hosted the first South African Open, which was won by the Scottish professional Laurie Waters, who served as an apprentice to the legendary Old Tom Morris at St Andrews.

In 1908, the first time the South African Open was played over 72 holes, the tournament’s first true superstar took control.

George Fotheringham won five of the next seven South African Opens. It was Fotheringham who in the 1905 Championship, where he finished second, had to play his ball from the bottom of an old ginger ale bottle, with the Bloemfontein Golf Club that served as the host course that year having been constructed on an old British army dump.

In fact, from 1908 to 1912 he was only beaten once. That was in 1909, by none other than his brother John. George finished runner-up that year.

This also set the tone for another interesting element of this championship’s history, namely the brothers who have dominated it over the years.

In 1914, Jock Brews finished second to George Fotheringham, and a new era was emerging. Not only did this year mark the first time that the South African Golf Union decreed that all future South African Opens

would only be played on golf course with 18 grass greens, but the Brews dominance of South African golf also teed off.

In the Twenties and early Thirties, Jock and Sid Brews were unbeatable. Sid claimed a total of eight victories and Jock four.

And Sid completed his place in the Championship's history when in 1952 he became the oldest winner at 52 years and 11 months.

The youngest champion also marked the start of another era in the SA Open. In 1935, Bobby Locke became the youngest winner of the SA Open at the age of 17 years and five months. He went on to win nine titles in total, four of them by 10 shots or more.

After Locke, it was the turn of Gary Player to make the SA Open his own. Following his first victory in the 1956 tournament at Durban Country Club, Player went on to win a record 13 titles. He also tied Locke's record of five consecutive victories.

In 1965 at the Royal Cape Golf Club, Player became the first golfer in the history of the championship to break 70 in all four rounds. Then at Royal Johannesburg Golf Club in 1977, he became the first player in the championship's history to shoot 63. Player shot 29 on the back nine that year, including an eagle three on the 18th.

But Denis Hutchinson punctuated Player's dominance with a record of his own when he became the last amateur to win the title in 1959 at Royal Johannesburg Golf Club.

In the Fifties and Sixties, Harold and Allan Henning became the third set of brothers to make their mark on the SA Open with their combined three victories.

In 1963, Papwa Sewgolum came close to becoming the first non-white to win the South African Open Championship, eventually losing by one shot to Retief Waltman at Durban Country Club.

The South African Open is intimately linked with the history of South African golf and commands respect worldwide as one of the great Opens in the game.

- *Michael Vlismas*

A Short History of the SA Open

The South African Open is the most prestigious title in South African golf with an illustrious history dating back to 1903.

Its list of past champions includes giants of the game such as Bobby Locke, Gary Player, Ernie Els, Retief Goosen, Vijay Singh and other stars such as Trevor Immelman, Tony Johnstone, David Frost, Mark McNulty, Wayne Westner and Henrik Stenson. Gary Player holds the record for the most number of South African Open titles of 13.

The South African Open distinguishes itself from every other tournament in South Africa by sheer weight of its history in the game. “All the South African players, we’re proud of this championship and play it as if it’s a Major,” says Els.

“When I won it for the first time in 1992, that really set me on my way. I won and it got me into some tournaments on the European Tour, one of them being the Open Championship where I finished fifth. That in turn got me into the US Open the next year, and my performance there got me into the US Open in 1994, which I won. So without my 1992 SA Open win I wouldn’t have made it into those tournaments and maybe not have had the career I have had.”

Retief Goosen agrees. “Both my titles were great because on both occasions I beat Ernie coming down the stretch. He was always the best player in the field at the time. But 1995 was my first really big win so it will always stand out for me.” PGA Tour campaigner Tim Clark also has fond memories of his two titles in this tournament. “They’re titles that I really cherish and this is certainly a tournament I look forward to every year. The chance to play in South Africa in front of your home fans is great because we spend so much time playing overseas. I think after the Majors, any golfer wants to win his national Open and it’s the same for me. This championship has so much history and it’s always produced such great champions.”

Denis Hutchinson still takes immense pride in being the last amateur winner of the South African Open in 1959. “I won well over 50 amateur and professional tournaments in my career, but the South African Open Championship has always stood out as my greatest achievement. There is no doubt that it is a title that demands a great deal of respect and every South African golfer hopes to win our national Open.”

- *Michael Vlismas*

History and highlights of the South African Open Championship

- In 2006, Ernie Els shot a championship record total of 264 at Humewood Golf Club in Port Elizabeth, surpassing the 267 of Tony Johnstone at Durban Country Club in 1993. In the first round, Retief Goosen was three strokes clear of the field with two holes to play when he carded a disastrous 11 on the 17th hole. In the second round, Els chipped in for an eagle two on the 16th hole. In the third round, Trevor Immelman signed for a course record nine under par 63.
- In December 2005, Retief Goosen and Ernie Els endured a dramatic final round battle at The Links at Fancourt. Tied with Els for the lead on eight under with two holes to come, Goosen chipped in for birdie on 17 and then birdied the last as well to win by a single stroke on 10 under. It was his second SA Open title since 1995.
- In 2004, Trevor Immelman became only the seventh golfer in the history of the South African Open to successfully defend his title with a three-stroke victory at Erinvale Golf Club. The second round of this championship featured a brutal south westerly wind that plagued the field. Colin Montgomerie struggled to a 78. In the third round, Immelman worked his way into contention and then suffered a disastrous closing stretch in which he bogeyed holes 16, 17 and 18. Immelman started the final round two strokes off the lead of Craig Lile and Anders Hansen. He went out in 33

and then surged ahead with birdies at holes 10, 13 and 16 for a four-stroke lead playing the 18th, which he bogeyed to win by three.

- In 1971, Simon Hobday won the South African Open in controversial fashion. Playing at Mowbray Golf Club, Hobday thought he incurred a two-shot penalty on the 14th hole in the final round when his shot out of the bunker rebounded off the face and towards him. He couldn't confirm whether the ball had hit him or not. The South African Golf Union ruled that it hadn't, and Hobday went on to win by a single stroke over Gary Player.
- In 1963, Papwa Sewgolom came close to becoming the first non-white to win the South African Open Championship, eventually losing by one shot to Retief Waltman at Durban Country Club.
- In 1956, Gary Player won the first of his record 13 South African Open titles at Durban Country Club. In 1965 at the Royal Cape Golf Club, Player became the first golfer in the history of the championship to break 70 in all four rounds. Then at Royal Johannesburg Golf Club in 1977, he became the first player in the history of the championship to shoot 63. Player shot 29 on the back nine that year, including an eagle three on the 18th.
- In 1935, Bobby Locke became the youngest South African Open champion at the age of 17, when the championship was played at Parkview Golf Club. Early leader JW Verwey hit two tee shots out of bounds on the 12th and went on to make a crucial nine that opened the door for Locke. Verwey scored 76 for a total of 299, meaning Locke needed a 77 to win. He came to the last three holes needing to play them in 4, 4 and 5 (one under) to win. He birdied 16, parred 17 and then birdied 18 to win by three strokes.

- *Michael Vlismas*

[Gary Player]

The Player who made the SA Open his own

- *Michael Vlismas*

Gary Player's passion for the South African Open was distilled on the putting green at Zwartkop Country Club late one evening in 1955.

South Africa's greatest golfer had just failed to qualify for his national Open in Pretoria that year.

"At about 10 o'clock at night, in the darkness and by the light from the clubhouse windows, I was still practicing my putting," recalls Player. "There was someone there who said, within earshot of my father, 'He'll never get anywhere'. My dad used it as a lesson to tell me I had to learn to take the bitter with the sweet and bounce back."

A year later, Player won the first of his record 13 South African Opens at Durban Country Club.

While the SA Open has had many great eras and enjoyed dominance by some of this country's finest players, there is no doubt that the championship has always meant the world to Player, and that he has always worked incredibly hard to win it.

His record in this championship is unlikely to ever be bettered, especially in the modern era where the commitment of the country's leading players to the national Open is always questionable.

Harry Brews, the son of the late Sid, wrote, "To his great credit, Gary is to be admired for making a point of being in South Africa almost every year to compete in the South African Open, even during the years when he was at the peak of his career on the international scene. It is regrettable that his example has not been followed by his world famous successors."

As a winner of the SA Open in four decades – the Fifties, Sixties, Seventies and Eighties – Player joins Sid Brews as the only two golfers to have achieved this.

Player's victories spanned 25 years, from the age of 21 in 1956 to 46 in 1981. He also has the record of 20 top-five finishes in the championship, including his 13 victories, two second-place finishes, three thirds, two fourths and a fifth.

And Durban Country Club has also played a special part in the best individual record in the SA Open, where Player won three of his 13 titles.

It was in the 1969 SA Open at Durban Country Club that Player equaled Bobby Locke's record of five consecutive victories with his triumph that year. That same year Player stunned the field with a final round of 64 to win.

As expected, Player features prominently in the SA Open record books. With his victory at Royal Johannesburg in 1981, Player became the second oldest champion in the history of the tournament at 46 years and one month. Sid Brews takes the title of oldest at 52 years and 11 months.

His nine-under-par 63 in the third round at Royal Johannesburg in 1977 is one of the lowest in the history of the championship.

And his victory at Houghton Golf Club in 1979 featured one of the biggest comebacks in the tournament as he overturned a six-shot deficit to win.

In 1965 at Royal Cape Golf Club, Player ushered in a new era of scoring in the SA Open when he became the first golfer to score all four rounds in the 60s, winning that year with rounds of 69, 68, 67 and 69.

It is a remarkable record, and one which began in the pit of adversity late on a putting green in Pretoria one evening.

"Adversity was always one of the great motivators for me," said Player. "It will always be there, and you need to find a way to live with it and roll with the punches, rather than fight against it."

"If you can get your head around this and see tough times as a chance for growth and deeper meaning, you will arm yourself with the most powerful mental weapon known to man – optimism."
