

The Gods of Lytham shine on Els

/// By Paul Prendergast

Ten years is a long time in sport and in life. Just ask Ernie Els, the 'Big Easy', for whom golf and life has been anything but in recent years. 10 years since his last Major victory at the 2002 Open Championship at Muirfield, Els recaptured the Claret Jug at Royal Lytham & St Annes in dramatic circumstances as close friend Adam Scott, in search of his first Major, succumbed to the pressure of expectation.

Els began the day six strokes behind Scott and was able to post a four under 32 on the closing nine,

including a birdie on the par four 18th hole, for a final round 2 under 68 and one stroke victory over Scott (75), who inexplicably bogeyed each of the last four holes.

Most in the golf world had thought they'd seen the best days of Ernie Els but he has turned his form around in 2012. With his brave challenge at the U.S. Open and now this unlikely victory, he has made believers again out of the naysayers. Els even joked with the crowd at the presentation ceremony "You guys have gotta ask yourselves a question. Were you just being nice to me or did you really

believe I could win?"

His struggles over the past few seasons on and off the course have been well documented, yet the perennially popular South African has stuck to the task of climbing back up the mountain and received the ultimate reward for his perseverance. At age 42, he earned his 4th Major championship the year after another 42 year old, Darren Clarke, was victorious at Royal St George's.

The Gods of Lytham would finally shine on the veteran after finishing 2nd behind Tom Lehman in 1996

and 3rd behind David Duval in 2001 in the two previous Opens held at Lytham. After 3 putting the ninth hole, Els stood up in breezy conditions on the back nine and refused to concede to the seemingly unassailable lead held by Adam Scott, shooting 32 coming home while Scott was doing his level best to avoid making mistakes.

For 68 holes of this championship, Scott's form was imperious and he was seemingly impervious to the pressure of the occasion. With what appeared to be an unassailable lead on the 15th tee as closest challengers Graeme McDowell, Tiger Woods and Brandt Snedeker were going in reverse as Lytham finally bared her teeth in the final round, Scott split the fairway yet again with a driver but erred slightly with a long approach to find a greenside bunker from where he would make bogey.

However, given the conditions on this final day, the prospect of anyone behind Scott making significant inroads into his lead over the difficult closing stretch could have been considered slim if he held his nerve. Scott and caddie Steve Williams' mantra all week, '6 good swings' over the final three holes, would be enough to close out a breakthrough victory. Sadly, Scott's bogey on 15 was the beginning of a catastrophic 'hour from hell' for the Australian, where we all wanted desperately to look away but couldn't.

As Els' completed a perfectly played final hole with a 15 foot putt for birdie to reach 7 under par, Scott





before and golf tournaments before, and I just hope he doesn't take it as hard as I did. I've been on the other end more times than I've actually been on the winning end. And it's not a good feeling."

Scott finished three shots clear of Tiger Woods (73) and Brandt Snedeker (74) who finish tied in 3rd place on three under par. Northern Ireland's Graham McDowell, playing alongside Scott, also went backwards with a 75 to finish tied 5th with the fast finishing World No. 1 Luke Donald at 2 under. Belgian Nicolas Colsaerts followed up a strong U.S. Open showing with the round of the day, a 65, to share 7th place alongside South Africa's Thomas Aitken at 1 under.

For Scott to see his name inscribed on the Claret Jug alongside his idol, two time champion Greg Norman, would have been a childhood dream accomplished. As a 13 year old, Scott watched every step of the way as the Shark won at Sandwich in 1993 and like many Australians, was inspired there and then by the Shark's example to make professional golf his life.

Although he was unsuccessful in his quest, Scott was able to emulate Norman by keeping golf fans in Australia glued to the TV and Internet in the wee small hours of the morning in a bleary eyed vigil, willing him on to fulfil his massive potential and become the nation's first Major champion since Geoff Ogilvy at the 2006 U.S. Open.

Some of the country's champions of yesteryear were also not immune to the emotional turmoil of the final round, their emotions laid bare for all to see in Twitter posts throughout the round. 1991 champion Ian Baker-Finch tweeted 'Scotty looks great and confident, what a perfect drive down 14. C'mon Aussie, C'mon!'; then later 'This is so sad for Adam I feel sick.'

In commentary at Lytham for the BBC, Wayne Grady tweeted 'I am feeling sick. Knock it in Scotty!' while Steve Elkington proved that while you can take the boy out of Oz, you can't take the Oz out of the boy, with 'You've got to be ***** kidding me...Nooooo' and 'I can't watch...I'm going to listen from under the couch.'



Norman, while not a Twitterphile, would also have been squirming in his seat as he was when Scott pressed for victory at The Masters in 2011. On that occasion, Scott was unflinching in his first serious tilt at a Major but it took the greatest finish in Masters history to beat him when Els protégé, Charl Schwartzel, birdied the final 4 holes. What Scott would have given at Lytham for 4 pars!

The inevitable comparisons between Scott's fall from grace and some of Norman's similarly disastrous rounds that cost him victory in Majors have already been made, although Scott did play flawlessly for 68 holes on only the second occasion he has put himself in this position to win a Major. With his talent, his time will surely come as Els magnanimously pointed out in his victory speech.

Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy, who knows a thing or two about bouncing back from final round collapses, also took to Twitter soon after the round to provide words of encouragement to Scott in his hour of need.

While devastated by his finish, Scott earned many admirers for his poise, good sportsmanship and for offering no excuses for his play. "I can't justify anything that I've done out there. I didn't finish the tournament well today. I feel fine at the moment," he said. "I'm a positive guy. I'm optimistic and I want to take all the good stuff that I did this week."

"Next time – and I'm sure there will be a next time – I can do a better job of it."

It says much for the type of man that Els is that he spoke with such grace and displayed obvious concern for his vanquished rival in the aftermath of the championship. "I did see Adam in the scorer's hut afterwards and he seemed okay. I told him I was sorry how things turned out. I told him I've been there many times and you've just got to bounce back quickly. Don't let this thing linger."

"So I feel for him. But he's young enough. He's 32 years old. He's got the next ten years and can win more than I've won. I've won four now. I think he can win more than that."



missed a tiddler on 16 for a three putt bogey and missed the green on the tough 17th in the worst possible place, in lush rough to the left of the green, from where a 3rd successive bogey was inevitable. "Looking back on it, it all comes down to the shot into 17 for me," Scott said. "That's the one I'm most disappointed with."

With Els now tied for the lead, Scott's choice of a 3 wood off the 18th tee brought fairway traps into play and when his errant tee shot toppled into a steep faced pit, Scott's

ability to win the championship in regulation evaporated. Despite a heroic approach to 15 feet after being forced to play his second shot out sideways, Scott's putt to extend the championship to extra holes was pulled to the left and with that, the Claret Jug belonged to Els once again.

As elated as Els was to have his name back in the winner's circle at the oldest Major, he was genuinely crestfallen for his buddy 'Scotty'. "I feel for him, I really do," said Els. "I've been there before. I've blown Majors

If we were in need of any further evidence of the stature of the man and golfer that is Ernie Els – from his fund raising work for Autism research and the Ernie Els Foundation that has nurtured the aspiring careers of many underprivileged youths back home in South Africa, including Louis Oosthuizen and Charl Schwartzel – we need only look to the humility in victory that he displayed in the Sunday evening twilight at Lytham.

The careers of Els and Scott have

been down similar paths in recent years. The friends and long-time Presidents Cup teammates both lost their way on the golf course and struggled mightily on the greens, only to each be resurrected after turning to a long putter. Until the tragedy of the final four holes, Scott was destined to become the first player to win the Open with a long putter. That mantle now belongs to Els.

Sometime in life and in sport, good guys do finish first. And second.