

COUNTDOWN TO THE OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP ENGLISH STAR SEEKS THE BIG TIME

Els: It will be more exciting without Tiger

ERNE ELS believes that the 137th Open Championship will be the best for more than a decade – simply because Tiger Woods is not here.

is not here as a player. It's the first Major I think he has missed since he started playing as a pro 11 or 12 years ago.

The 2002 champion suffered the same knee injury that has ruled Woods out for the rest of the year – causing him to miss his first Major since 1996.

“It's kind of a generation almost, in a way – the best player in the world playing in every Major.”

But while he can empathise with the world No1, Els knows that golf has little place for sentiment and that a competition robbed of its perennial favourite makes the event more interesting for spectators, with uncrowned competitors such as Sergio Garcia and Phil Mickelson among the leading contenders to lift the Claret Jug.

“Now you've got to talk about Sergio and Phil and 30 or 40 players who have a chance.”

“It's an interesting championship – it's very exciting. For once everybody can be very excited. Anyone can win.”

Els will not approach the tournament any differently but is honest enough to admit Woods casts a large shadow wherever he goes.

“Choke is a very strong word in golf but the thought of him around is quite ominous, especially coming down the stretch or even preparing yourself for the last round when he is in the mix,” said Els.

“You've got your worries, but you know this guy is going to be in contention at the end.”

“It's an opportunity for a lot of guys and I'm one of them. I'm not overly disappointed he



Picture: STUART FRANKLIN

MATTHEW DUNN
at Royal Birkdale

LAST year, Oliver Wilson wrote a column in the Daily Express explaining what it is like for the 'rank and file golfer' at The Open. The diary of a nobody, essentially.

Since pointing his sponsored Toyota Avensis away from Carnoustie after just two windswept days, he has racked up five runners-up medals, played for GB and Ireland in the Seve Trophy, earned himself more than £1.3million and is currently eighth pick for the Ryder Cup team after finishing joint ninth at Loch Lomond.

When he pulls up at Royal Birkdale in his top-of-the-range BMW X6, having left the Porsche at home, you could be forgiven for thinking that his life has changed completely.

True, instead of being one of the 'rank and file' he is now one of the few men genuinely capable of ending the 16-year wait for an English winner since Nick Faldo lifted the Claret Jug.

But – and it is becoming something of an irritation to Wilson – he is still very much a nobody.

He is ranked 45th in the world, just three places behind Ian Poulter, for example. But while the silly-trouser-wearing

“I don't know Ian Poulter that well,” said Wilson, 28. “He gets the most out of his game and he has marketed himself well.”

“Before he was in the top 50 you could have gone up to people and asked them to name an English golfer, and he would probably have been the one they mentioned despite being 60th or 70th in the world.”

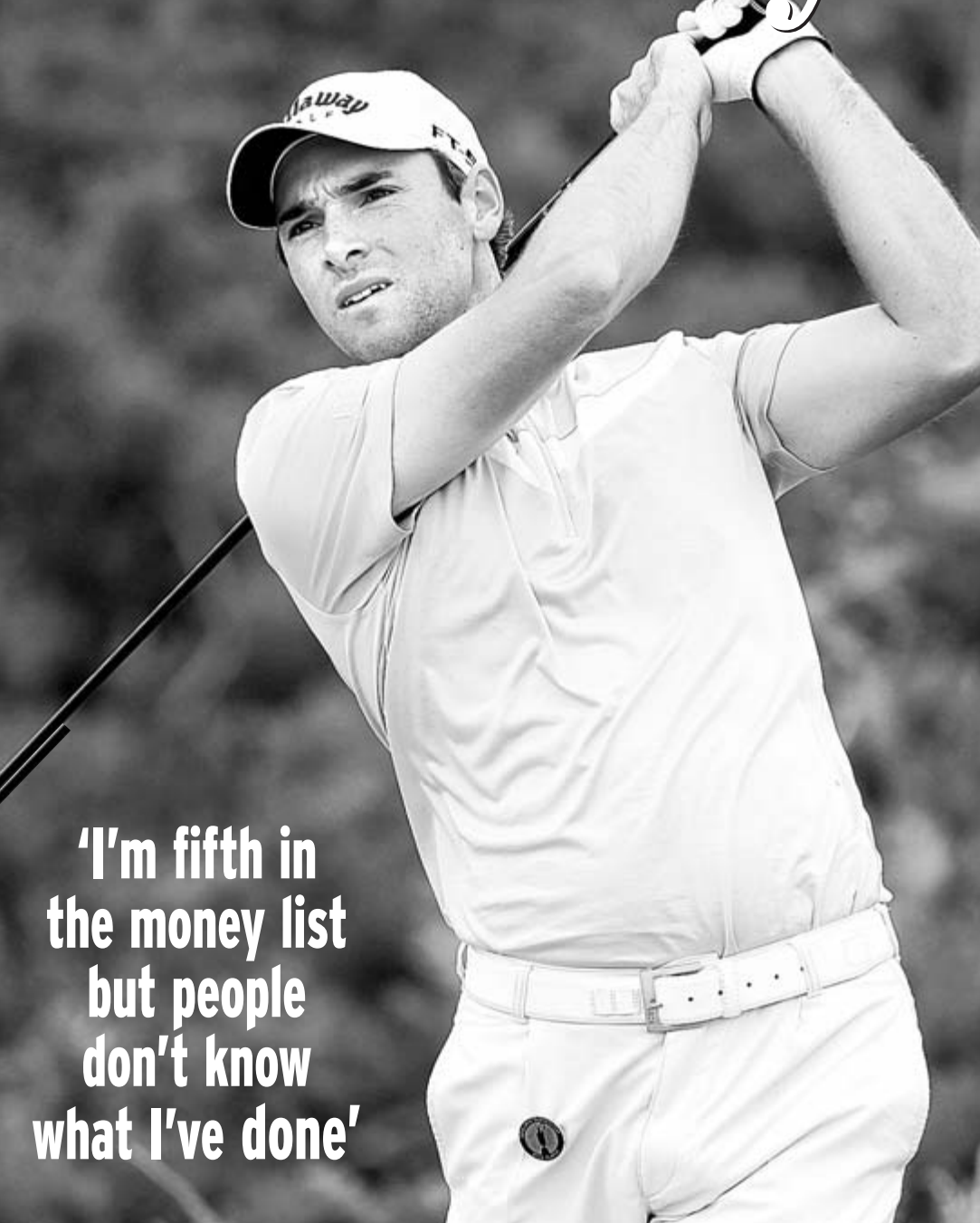
“I am still not recognised by the general public and have never been asked for my autograph out of the blue. That is one thing that has annoyed me a little bit.”

“Obviously I had not done loads until this year, but after the first few second places you still don't really get the recognition you feel you deserve.”

“It does amuse me at times when certain people at tournaments who should know better don't know what I have done.”

“I get the odd comment asking how it is going this year. I don't like to tell them that I am fifth on the money list. It amuses me just to say, 'not too

Wilson just wants to be somebody



Picture: STUART FRANKLIN

bad, thank you'. I doubt I will get much of a following at Birkdale, but it was massive at the US Open and I am sure it was just coincidence Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson were in the group behind.

“On top of that, Poulter has got the head to do it and Paul Casey is always hard to beat. Then there's Justin Rose.”

“Before I would not have thought that I was in there but now I do. I am definitely ready to win and I feel I am ready to win a big one.”

“There are guys who are more experienced and higher in the world rankings, but golf is one

of those games where whoever is in form can go on and win.”

If that is Wilson, recognition will finally catch up with success. He recently moved from “a pokey flat in Brentford” to a spacious apartment in Weybridge on a leafy road posh enough to have an Aston Martin dealership on the corner. He plans to wander up there for a celebratory browse if he wins this week. Fighting off autograph hunters all the way, no doubt.

OLIVER WILSON is to reprise his 2007 role as Open diarist exclusively in the Daily Express. Don't miss his first 2008 despatch – tomorrow.

'I'm fifth in the money list but people don't know what I've done'

RISE OF WILSON

JULY 2007: Missed Open cut on 10 over par, two shots from being the worst score at Carnoustie.

JULY: Second in the Deutsche Bank Players' Championship.

SEP: Helps win the Seve Trophy for GB & Ireland.

NOV: Finishes 30th in the European Order of Merit.

DEC: Runner-up in South African Airways Open.

APR 2008: Second in the Volvo China Open having scored a course record 66.

MAY: Two more second places – Italian Open and BMW PGA Championship at Wentworth.

JUNE: Briefly leads the US Open.

JULY: Currently 5th in the European Order of Merit.

AS MICKELSON RESOLUTELY FOCUSES ON HIS OWN PROSPECTS



Picture: STUART ROBINSON

JOHN DILLON
at Royal Birkdale

ONE day next year Tiger Woods is going to make a comeback from injury, and most other golfers will be trampled in the rush to ask him how it felt to be away for so long.

Phil Mickelson will surely be the one to avoid getting run over. He never stands too close to Tiger, anyway. Even when they play together. Yesterday, as The Open's tented carnival on the Irish Sea dunes opened in earnest, dominated by the presence of this year's one-time-only Invisible Man act, Mickelson wouldn't even mention You-Know-Who's name.

One of the basic requirements for a professional sportsman is the need to be single-minded. Golfers know that better than most after being burned off so relentlessly in the hushed slipstream Woods has left in his path in 14 Major victories.

If he can do it so unshakably, so can they. So Mickelson was much too smart even to pay passing lip service to the idea that this year's yomp around the British links is missing something because of Tiger's absence, and that whoever wins will have triumphed in a mere money war.

“Can't you say anything in particular about Tiger,” the shrewd old lefty was asked by a man in a

Sorry, who's not playing this year?

floridly-lime-green jumper when he returned from a practise round for which his long-serving caddie Bones had mysteriously failed to turn up until the second fairway?

“Oh, I'm sure I could...” replied the 38-year-old Mickelson, to the laughter of a press tent which knows all about the iciness of his relationship with Woods, but knows also that he rarely loses his sense of humour.

“But right now, my focus this week is to get my game sharp. I came here to Birkdale last week and spent Sunday, Monday and Tuesday practising. I was able to identify areas that needed improvement and right now all I care about is getting those stronger.”

“It's the short game for me, getting my chipping and putting

strong. With it blowing as strong as it is here, that will be a critical element in this tournament.”

In the length and uninvited detail of this straight-bat answer, you could detect the a profound and certain message; Mickelson, the world No2, isn't going to be haunted by a man who isn't here. Forget him. For a while at least.

Mickelson has chased him and been troubled by him enough, most recently at this year's US Open in June at Torrey Pines, his home course. While Woods limped on his busted left knee towards his most epic win, Mickelson shot a quadruple bogey nine on the Saturday.

Every player is having to wrestle with the unique situation created by Woods' injury. He rules their

business so completely, his absence is almost as big a story as his presence, whether anybody likes that hard fact of media life or not.

Some, like Ernie Els, have spoken profusely about the opportunity it allows everyone else. Mickelson clearly wants to try to bury the thought any victory is by default.

It is an understandable position. It is the hard-headed option which you would expect of a top-level American competitor as well as a fractious rival of Woods. The asterisk they say will go by this year's winner's name in the record books hangs heavy in the breeze.

Mickelson wants to swipe it away before the competition's start.

Asked again whether this was the open Open because of You Know What, he spooled through a detailed

list of his engagements after this weekend. Straight bat again.

Prodded for a final time about whether or not “there is a different aura around some of the players”, because Tiger is at home, Mickelson dead-panned again: “I haven't had a sense of that either way.”

Mickelson's best Open was when he finished third at Troon in 2004. After his Masters victories of the same year and 2006 and his USPGA win in 2005, his was the most bold challenge to the rule of Woods. But it has stuttered.

“I feel more comfortable with each year over here and I love Royal Birkdale, because it's the site of my first Open in 1991,” he said.

Was that another gentle way of telling the world that golf exists beyond Tiger? Mickelson doesn't even doubt it. He has done more than enough to be a true champion. He won't see it any other way if he wins here.

Monty's in a rut over putt

By Neil Squires

COLIN Montgomerie's problems on the green this season have contributed to the worst slump of his career but he has candidly admitted that he has been putting badly for three years.

Montgomerie, 45, has missed seven out of his last eight cuts in Majors, a string of failures he blames on his inability to stick with a single putter.

“Quite honestly, the last time I putted well was in the 2005 Open at St Andrews and when I won the Dunhill Links later that year,” he said. “I've chopped and changed too much – it's a mistake I wouldn't recommend to anybody.”

“It's not the putter it's the puttee. It's all about confidence and the momentum you get from holing those eight-footers. “Those are the killers after you've hit a good iron shot to the green.”

Montgomerie missed another cut last week at the Scottish Open but stubbornly insists his chances of breaking a Major duck have not gone yet.

“I'm not saying that time is running out but you feel you have fewer opportunities to succeed and that's when you start to press too hard,” he said.

“But the great thing about the Tour is that you start afresh each week and I am looking forward to The Open.”

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