

CANBERRA TIMES

Major win a minor ambition

Scott Walsh

Monday, 9 October 2006

Stuart Appleby is rapidly building his status as a warrior for one of golf's most unwanted titles.

Since Phil Mickelson broke his major championship hoodoo with victory at the Masters in 2004, the golf world has searched for a successor to the long-hitting lefty's tag as the best player without a major.

Appleby - by statistics, at least - could be the man.

This year, for the first time in his 11 seasons in the US, Appleby won twice - the Mercedes Championships in January and the Shell Houston Open in April.

His victory at the Houston was his second, after a 1999 win, while the Mercedes triumph was his third in succession following crowns in 2004 and 2005.

He sits eighth on this year's US money list with earnings of \$4.35million in 20 events.

The 35-year-old has eight career wins on golf's toughest tour - the most of any player younger than 40 without a major - and is lauded as having one of the cleanest, most efficient swings in the game.

Of the seven players above him on rankings, only two are major-less - young compatriot Adam Scott and South African Trevor Immelman.

Appleby - in Australia this week for today's launch of the 2006 Australian Open at Royal Sydney - conceded he had underachieved on golf's biggest stage.

"Since Phil, I don't know who's on that list these days," Appleby said.

"It's an interesting list in itself. A lot of guys have won six to 10 tournaments and then won a major, so I'm getting in that zone of winning one. I have no doubt I have the skills, I just haven't proven myself to put those skills on the table during the weeks that have mattered.

"I've proven myself at the right levels and the next level is a major. I really do believe I will win one."

Appleby has, of course, come close to major success. He was in a four-way play-off for the 2002 British Open won by Ernie Els.

Had he won that title he would have become the first Australian major winner since Steve Elkington won the PGA Championship in 1995.

Instead, relative newcomer Geoff Ogilvy this year broke the Aussie drought by winning the US Open at Winged Foot.

But Appleby is in no rush to make his breakthrough.

"No doubt, you don't get those opportunities every day now to win a major," Appleby said. "I look back now and say man, I could have won that [2002 Open], I really could have.

"But you know, majors are important but they're only as much as you want to make them. They put you on the map but there is always the old story about becoming one of the One Major Wonders. If Geoff doesn't win another one in the next five years they're going to give him the tag of One Major Wonder.

"I don't care at all what title I have. I just want to be in the thick of things. That's how you learn how to play."

Oddly, perhaps - for a golfer blessed with his smooth stroke - Appleby's spiritual beacon is textbook-shredder Jim Furyk, whose figure-eight backswing would look more at home in a weekend club competition than on golf's most lucrative circuit.

But the unorthodox Furyk is golf's Mr Consistent. He ranks first on this year's US tour for top10 finishes with 12 from his 22 starts.

Appleby is ranked 19th with five, tied with players including Sergio Garcia and Retief Goosen. That, Appleby says, is not good enough.

"I need to be more consistent - be more of a Jim Furyk-type and get more top10s," Appleby said.

"And yeah, I'd adopt any swing that works like his. It's weird but it works - real good.

"I'm even prepared to not win, because I'd rather get my game more consistent and know that consistency leads to higher finishes versus the ups and downs."

Despite Appleby's international major void, he did climb Australasia's golf summit in 2001 by winning the Australian Open.

The country Victoria export has already committed to all three Australian majors this season.

Greg Norman, Adam Scott, Geoff Ogilvy and Robert Allenby have also chosen to play this summer's opening event the Australian Open, starting on November 16.

The quartet of Appleby, Ogilvy, Scott and Allenby also overlooked representing Australia at World Golf Championships in Barbados in favour of the PGA Championship at the Hyatt Regency Coolum from December 7.

But a spell from Australia's summer was never in consideration for Appleby. It is, he says, his annual eight-week intake of "serenity".

"It's amazing. You just catch up with friends and family, sit around and have a drink or a barbie, talk shit or go fishing," he said.

"There's nothing better."