

HENNIE OTTO

Age 31 / Boksburg / Gauteng

The outspoken tour professional on breaking his clubs and being fined at the Wild Coast, punching a troublesome neighbour, why he does not need a sports psychologist or manager, and hosting his own Sunshine Tour event. **Interviewed by Barry Havenga**



**** I enjoyed playing rugby very much,** but was forced into choosing between rugby and golf in my first year after school. I played first team flyhalf at Dr E G Jansen in Boksburg and a little bit of club rugby afterwards. I was playing in the Under-23 Interprovincial but had to play rugby later in the afternoon. My dad was watching and could see I was getting anxious. He said, "If you walk off the course, you're finished with golf." My rugby coach said that I needed to get my priorities right, so I did and concentrated solely on golf.

**** There's no better feeling** than beating an opponent or a team on home soil. I won the Western Province Amateur Strokeplay by eight shots from Andrew McLardy in 1995, shooting 282 in two gale-force days at Strand GC. Trevor Immelman, Jean Hugo and the Sanderson brothers were in that field and they didn't take kindly to two Vaalies beating them at home in the wind. But rivalry is a great thing in sport, and I am good friends with many of my old amateur enemies.

**** You have to really be at the top** of the amateur game if you intend turning professional. I was disappointed not to win a national title, but I won several major tournaments in my last amateur year, played for South Africa in the Eisenhower Trophy (1996) and won the Freddie Tait Cup at the SA Open. I was ready.

**** Winning becomes a habit** and

an amateur needs to have that winning experience when he enters the pro game. It's a big jump to the paid ranks, and I suggest aspiring pros play for the national side against strong opposition to prepare themselves adequately.

**** I should have won more** tournaments. My 11 second-place finishes on the Sunshine Tour is not a good stat. But a lot of times guys did amazing things to beat me. Early in my pro career McNulty and Frost dropped some bombs on me over the final few holes of tournaments. I shot 65 in the final round of the Hong Kong Open in 2004, but Pdraig Harrington birdied the last two holes to beat me by one.

**** My clubs have been stolen twice.** I missed going to the European Tour Qualifying School in 1998 because my car was stolen – with my clubs in the boot – outside Brakpan rugby stadium while I was watching Eastern Transvaal play Western Province in a Currie Cup game.

I was in a restaurant in St Andrews during the Dunhill Links in 2003 with my wife Liezel and my caddie, when my clubs were stolen from our car right outside the place.

**** I'm done with managers.** I've had three during my career and two of them took me for a ride. That's the last time I'm bumping my head over them. Now I have control of everything and know where all my money is. I have a travel agent in South Africa and one in England and a lawyer

friend that looks over my contracts. Liezel handles any other arrangements. What more do I need, and how difficult can it be for players to organise those details themselves?

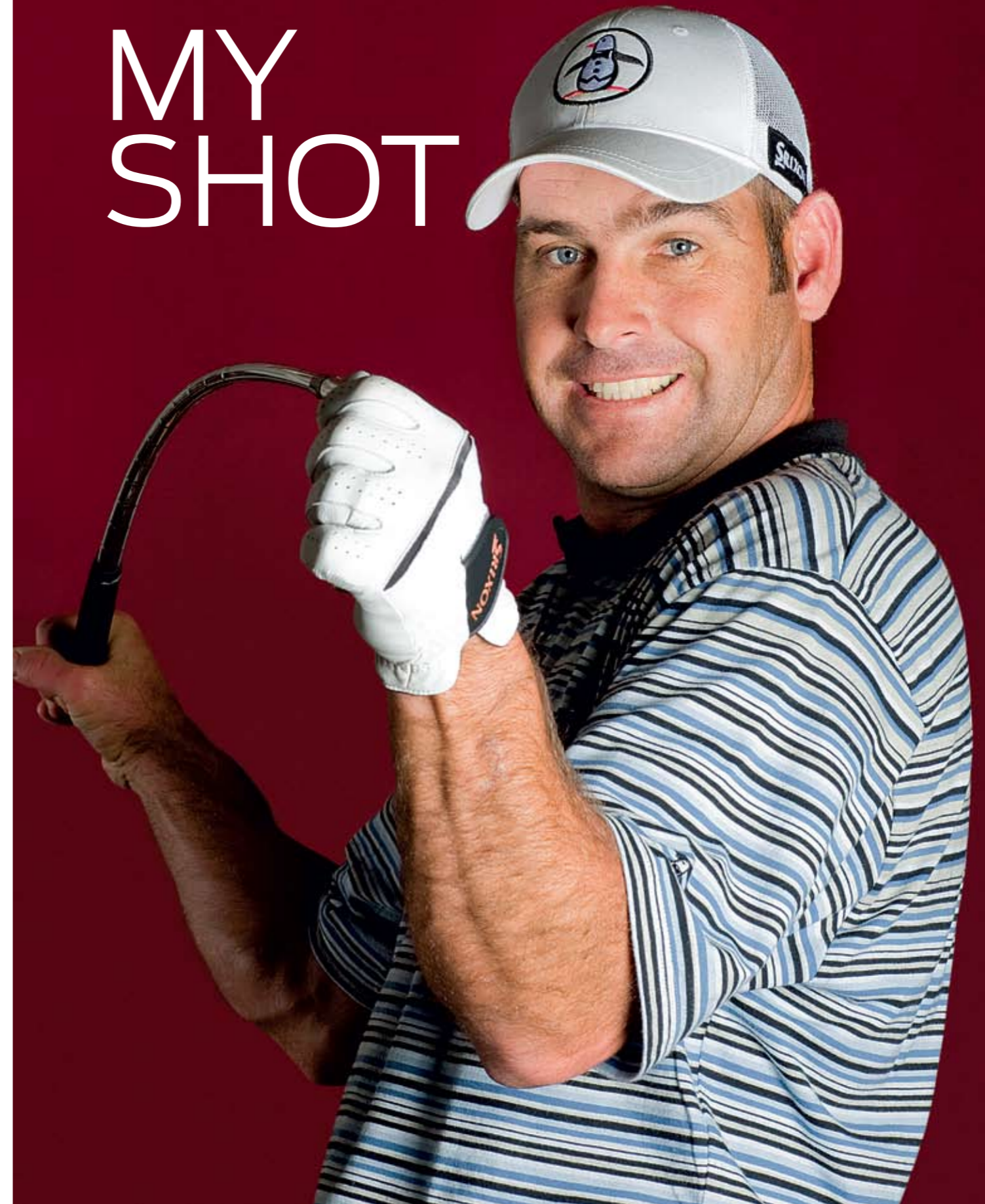
**** I don't react well** to spectators who are annoying me. In 1999 I was playing on the European Challenge Tour, and I came up against a local player (Pello Iguaran) in a playoff in a small town in Spain. The crowd were rooting for him but they were way over the top. It was like a scene from Caddyshack. They were talking while I played, and when I had a birdie putt to win, one guy was crushing a cold drink can while I was over the ball. I holed the putt and then turned around and threw the ball at him. It hit him, but I didn't care. I was on my way to the European Tour.

**** My short fuse might** have held me back in my career. I need to become more accepting out on the course. But I don't let my anger linger. I get pissed off and let it out immediately so it doesn't affect my next shot. I've had lots of arguments with caddies, and once my old caddie Darren Normand and I almost got into a scuffle on the course.

**** A pro's caddie** is almost as close as his wife. You spend seven hours a day together, so you need to get along. One caddie tried to leave me mid-round, but I said, "You won't be paid if you leave now," so he had second thoughts.

**** There have been lots** of different

MY SHOT



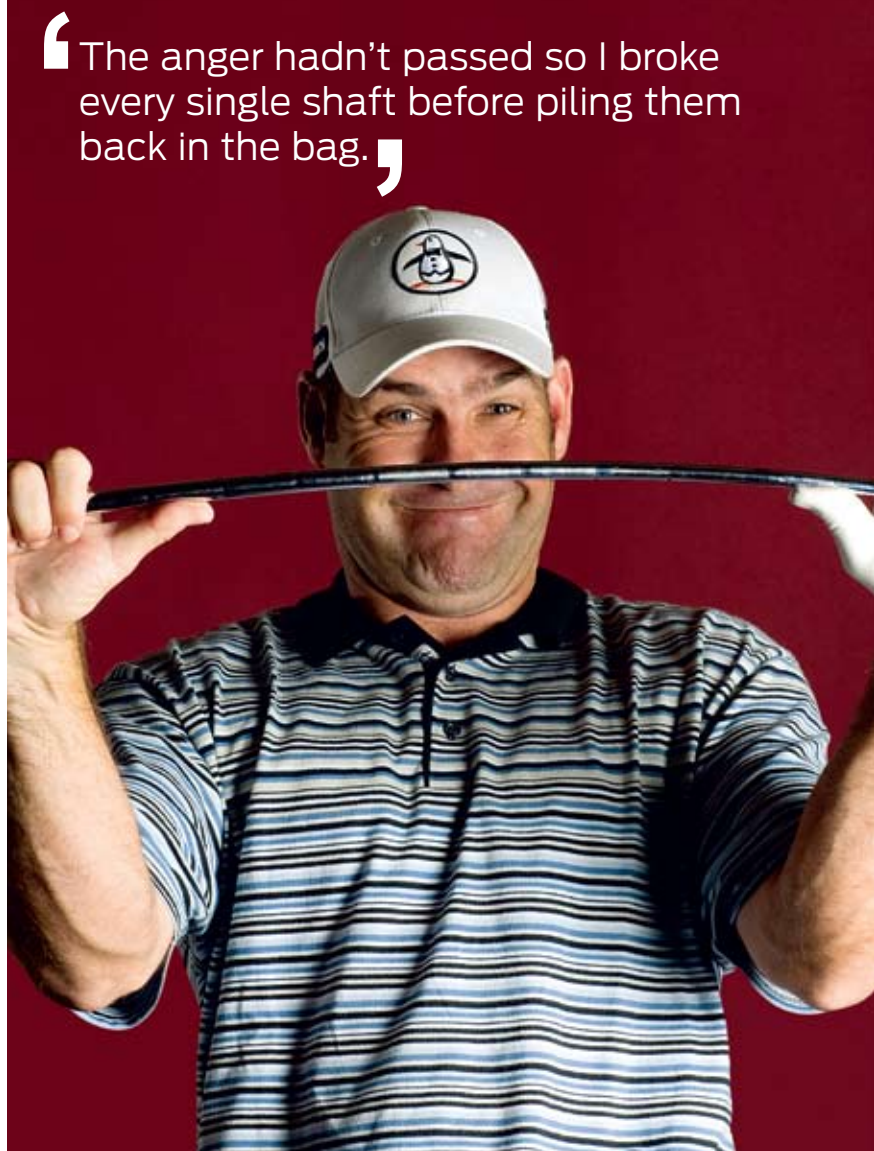
versions of my bag-throwing incident into the river at the Wild Coast seven years ago. Here's the real story. I had shot 63 in the Nashua Masters Pro-Am that year (January 2001), but then opened the tournament with a 70, before blowing out with 80 in the second round to miss the cut. I went straight to the car park and smashed holes in my bag with an iron. The anger hadn't passed so I broke every single shaft before piling them back in the bag. Liezel was driving and as we headed towards Durban over the bridge I told her to stop the car. I opened the boot, picked up the bag and tossed it into the Umtamvuna River below. I felt much better after that. I wanted to change my clubs anyway.

**** I don't know what it is about** the Wild Coast and me. The next year I again missed the cut. Then I won the Masters there at the end of 2002. But in 2005 I got fined R20 000 by the Sunshine Tour for 'bringing the game into disrepute.' I swore a few times and had a six-putt in the final round on the 12th green. I definitely couldn't deny it. It was on live television.

**** I worked for a while** with Jos Vanstiphout, the famed Belgian sports psychologist, who works with Ernie. But it didn't help me much. I am my own head doctor. You can tell a player how to vision things or how to breathe, but it's really up to the player to get things done. If you are an uptight person and get nervous in certain situations, don't play this game.

**** In the Boksburg complex** where we used to live, we had problems with some neighbours. When I was away they would hassle Liezel. The final straw was when they poisoned our dogs. I knew exactly who it was, so I went up to their security gate and confronted him. He wasn't going to let me in, so I threw a punch (through the bars of the gate) and knocked the oke out. Things got resolved before any court proceedings took place, but I said to Liezel, "We need to move, or I am going to land up in prison."

**** Becoming a father** has mellowed me. Hendrik Johannes is the sixth generation Otto to carry that name. When I lost



“The anger hadn't passed so I broke every single shaft before piling them back in the bag.”

my European Tour card I didn't do any travelling for three months and it worked out nicely because I got to spend so much time with him. Liezel and 'Boeta' travel to all the local tournaments with me. He's two and I don't want him to be a mommy's boy. That's why I make the effort to be around him as much as possible.

**** I'm sure Tiger** now knows what it's like to get up at weird times to change nappies too.

**** Golf is a lonely game**, so you need to have strong family support. If you don't have that, you can leave this profession. Liezel and I were high school sweethearts and have been married for nearly six years. If I come off the course hot, she knows I

need half an hour to calm down. But after that I am fine and we can talk about the day.

**** The Sunshine Tour** has changed in the 10 years I have been out there. Obviously there is more money to play for, but the players have become more serious. They go to gym, and instead of having a beer after a round, they practice. A decade ago guys like Russell Fletcher and Sean Pappas would never have done that.

**** We have the best weather** in the world in South Africa and you can play golf 365 days a year. But we need more money on the tour for our youngsters. It costs R60 000 to go through European Tour qualifying school, so many can't afford it by just

Hennie Otto and two-year-old son "Boeta".



playing on the Winter Tour.

**** Our players travel** better now than they used to. When I first went to Europe it was only McNulty, Els and Roger Wessels who were there. Now there are over a dozen on the European Tour and Challenge Tour. A lot of us are based in Manchester and when you are around mates, it's easier to be far away from home. Sunday nights we would all meet at Nando's and Mondays would be movies at the Trafford Centre.

**** I could have won** the Open Championship (at Royal St George's) in 2003. I won the qualifier at North Foreland and then led after the first round. Most people might be overwhelmed by all the extra attention you receive when leading a major, but I don't get psyched up about such things. People asked what it was like in the press conference after my opening 68. I was asked questions and I gave answers, simple as that. My third round let

me down when I dropped four shots in three holes, because I only finished five shots back (in 10th place) of winner Ben Curtis.

**** My escape from the game** is hunting and fishing. I've been all over the country on hunting trips and there is nothing quite like being out in the bush. I am building a house at Elements Private Reserve near Bela-Bela in Limpopo Province. I want my son to be able to live outdoors, because you can't do that in Boksburg anymore.

**** This year will be the** tenth consecutive year I have organised the Prieska (Northern Cape) golf and hunting trip which raises money for the local golf club. I used to hunt with Hennie Walters on their family farm nearby, and once played golf with the members. But 60 members can't keep a club going, so I get Sunshine Tour pros to go down for the weekend to help raise money. Charl Schwartzel, Louis Oosthuizen and others like Kallie Knoetze,

Pieter Hendricks and Tappe Henning all make the effort and come along, and we raised R50 000 in 2007.

**** I'm in the final planning** stages of hosting a Sunshine Tour event at Elements. It will have a R1 million purse made up of 54 holes of strokeplay (R650 000), with the top 32 qualifying for a separate matchplay (R350 000) event. It will be good to bring a matchplay event back to professional golf in this country. We're hoping to stage the tournament in March.

**** Tiger Woods is one of the** worst drivers of the ball in the game, but he is going to break every record possible. I've played in tournaments where he is in the field and the conditions can be terrible and he still wins easily. Ernie and I are friends, but when Tiger is on, no one can touch him.

**** Those Afrikaans singers** you see on the TV adverts, I am making them rich. I buy their CDs. I like that sort of entertainment. 🍷