

EL NIÑO

Kempinski's Alexandria Gouveia chats up one of golfing's youngest sensations, Spaniard Sergio Garcia, ahead of the 2008 Masters Golf Tournament



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Sergio Garcia is a man in demand – a long-awaited press pass, failed emails, and a perilous sprint past security guards verified this when

I tried to catch him earlier this year at the Dubai Desert Classic tournament. “He is the god of golf,” I was told by one of his advisors. “Not everyone can get an interview.”

Currently preparing for the 2008 Masters Tournament, the Augusta-based tournament, which runs from April 10 to 13, is one of golf’s four majors. It’s a contest Sergio would love to win. Despite six wins on the PGA (Professional Golfers’ Association) tour, the world-class player is yet to win a major title. “I’ve won some big events, but unfortunately I haven’t won any majors yet – I have been very close,” he discloses with a hint of disappointment. He’s clearly not one to let this minor setback stand in the way of his path to success. “I wake up every morning very early and I practice for a minimum of six hours to try to get better.”

Sergio watches his shot during the final round of the PODS Championship at the Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club

Throughout the interview, the man who has spent much of his career in the top 10 of the Official World Rankings, exposes an innocent and humbling persona. Shunning celebrities who take advantage of media attention, when it comes to his high-profile status, Sergio refreshingly utilises his fame to help others. “I always try to give to charity or donate money to organisations in need. I like to help where I can. In Spain, I’ve set up the Sergio Garcia Foundation where we teach golf to handicapped children. I go to the school at least twice year to play a round or two with the kids,” says the modest Samaritan.

In spite of claiming 16 professional wins, Sergio is faithful to his roots and possesses no delusions of grandeur. “I feel I’m slowly getting better,” he says of his skills. “It’s still work in progress, but it’s getting closer every day.”

Taught by his golf pro father, the dapper Victor Garcia who regularly tours with his son, the Spanish ace entered the golfing world at the tender age of three. He won his first junior tournament at the age of 10. At 12, he was triumphant at his club championship and, aged 16, he became the youngest player ever to make the cut at a European Tour event and win the European Amateur Championship.»



Aged 19 years, eight months and 15 days, he became the youngest player to appear in the Ryder Cup, earning him the nickname El Nino, meaning the infant, in Spanish.

In 1999, Sergio turned pro, shooting the lowest amateur score in the Masters Tournament. That same year, he rapidly rose to prominence on the global golfing stage when he entered into a duel with Tiger Woods in the PGA Championship. Although Tiger went on to win the title, Sergio stole the show with his animated performances.

Despite starting his career at a similar age as Tiger, Sergio claims there is no bitter rivalry between the talented duo. "At the moment, Tiger doesn't have many rivals. He's playing at a very good level," he asserts. "I guess all we can really do is improve and keep working on our game and try to challenge him as much as possible throughout the year. It's definitely hard because he plays at a consistent level year after year."

While Tiger is popular for his unswerving mannerisms and results on the green, Sergio introduces a youthful passion, ensuring that whether he wins, loses or draws, he captivates audiences across the world. Even his occasional outbursts of temper – he was threatened with a fine after furiously spitting into the bottom of the cup on the 13th green during the WGC-CA Championships – have made him a huge hit among golfing fans. From his manic sprints onto the fairway to his crying into his mum's arms after a disastrous loss during the 1999 Open at Carnoustie, Sergio's unconventional antics have helped turn golf into a spectators sport. "Golf is exciting," enthuses the tempestuous Spaniard. "It may not have the tackles and free kicks you get in football, but I think golf can be a lot more exciting towards the end. Football is over in 90-minutes, whereas golf is a longer game so there's more potential for change, it's less predictable."

It's this effervescent attitude that's made Sergio a marketable star, with global brands battling to associate him with their products. Sergio has promoted Adidas since his pro debut in 1999, and has been an Omega ambassador for six years. "I decided to team up with Omega because they're an international company, just like I'm an

BOGEY WONDERLAND

UPCOMING US PGA TOURNAMENTS

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| SHELL HOUSTON OPEN, TEXAS April 03 to 06 DEFENDING CHAMPION Adam Scott US\$990,000 | THE MEMORIAL TOURNAMENT PRESENTED BY MORGAN STANLEY, OHIO May 29 to June 01 DEFENDING CHAMPION KJ Choi US\$1,080,000 |
| MASTERS TOURNAMENT, GEORGIA April 10 to 13 DEFENDING CHAMPION Zach Johnson US\$1,305,000 | STANFORD ST. JUDE CHAMPIONSHIP, TENNESSEE June 05 to 08 DEFENDING CHAMPION Woody Austin US\$1,080,000 |
| EDS BYRON NELSON CHAMPIONSHIP, TEXAS April 24 to 27 DEFENDING CHAMPION Scott Verplank US\$1,134,000 | U.S. OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP, CALIFORNIA June 12 to 15 DEFENDING CHAMPION Angel Cabrera US\$1,260,000 |
| WACHOVIA CHAMPIONSHIP, NORTH CAROLINA May 01 to 04 DEFENDING CHAMPION Tiger Woods US\$1,134,000 | TRAVELERS CHAMPIONSHIP, CONNECTICUT June 19 to 22 DEFENDING CHAMPION Hunter Mahan US\$1,080,000 |
| THE PLAYERS CHAMPIONSHIP, FLORIDA May 08 to 11 DEFENDING CHAMPION Phil Mickelson US\$1,620,000 | BUICK OPEN, MICHIGAN June 26 to 29 DEFENDING CHAMPION Brian Bateman US\$882,000 |



LEFT Sergio chats to Tiger Woods at the World Golf Championships
ABOVE Celebrating his US\$1.1 million at the 'Battle at Bighorn' event in Palm Desert, California

international sportsman," he says, dressed head-to-toe in Adidas gear and sporting a luxurious Omega watch that sparkles under the Middle Eastern sun. "Omega is a strong company with a lot of good qualities, so it was an easy decision for me. We have a good relationship."

As well as his talents on the fairway, the lothario is also renowned for his skills with the ladies. The 5ft 10in, dark and handsome sportsman has dated a bevy of beautiful celebrities including enjoying a brief fling with Hollywood actress Jessica Alba. "We went on a few casual dates back in 2003," he boasts. "We met in Vegas when I was playing there. We were more like friends, although we did kiss. She's a great woman, very confident and extremely hard working." Sergio's bulging black book also lists tennis player Martina Hingis, whom he dated for nine months back in 2002.

Although his conquests include several A-listers, the exuberant golfer insists he doesn't seek celebrity companionship. "I date women who make me feel comfortable," he concedes. "Obviously she has to be pretty to get my attention, but she must also have a great personality, good sense of humour, open-mindedness and confidence." For Sergio, girlfriends aren't hard to find, but his career is generally responsible for the demise of most of his relationships. "The problem is maintaining the relationship. When I'm travelling for tournaments I'm away for three weeks and back for one. It's hard to sustain a relationship when you hardly see each other."

A Real Madrid fan with a serious passion for football, Sergio counts footballers Diego Forlan and Ronaldo as friends and can often be spotted challenging them to a game of footy. Rumour has it that Sergio is quite good: "I played when I was younger. If I wasn't a golfer, I'd definitely love to be a footballer. I don't know whether I'm up to the standard of a professional footballer, but I'm decent. I haven't tried tackling Ronaldo but if he tries to get in front of me, I knock him down," jokes the jock.

It'll be a long time yet before he trades in his clubs, as Sergio's days as a golfer are far from numbered. With plenty more tournaments diarised, El Nino is focusing on one thing in the future: to win. "I'm feeling confident. I hope to get a major win soon," he declares buoyantly. ●