

# The *drive* to win

Move over, Greg Norman. Karrie Webb is our most successful golfer, writes JULIE McCROSSIN, who is bowled over by her determination

**T**here's a fine line in sport between being excellent and being a true champion. It's a line that is primarily psychological, especially in a solo sport like golf. The Australian golfer who has crossed the champion's line most consistently is a 32-year-old from the small town of Ayr in the sugar-cane country of far north Queensland. Her name is Karrie Webb.

Golf Australia says Webb's record is "unmatched in Australian golf history". This accolade is even more impressive when you realise they're taking into account both men and women. It is a tribute echoed by the veteran sports broadcaster Tim Webster, who says Webb has "surpassed Greg Norman" when it comes to sustained performance on the international circuit.

Webb is keen to share this success with other Australian women golfers and to raise the profile of women's golf. This year she launched the Karrie Webb Series of 12 amateur tournaments designed to nurture elite women golfers by offering opportunities for tough competition. She is also personally funding two Karrie Webb scholarships that provide international travel assistance, greater playing opportunities and mentoring from Webb herself.

When I spoke to her from her waterfront home in southern Florida, I was keen to hear her thoughts on the psychological side of golf and whether it's possible to recognise the qualities that make a champion when you see a young player for the first time.

These were the questions on my mind as I waited a little apprehensively for her call from the United States. Webb has a

reputation for being media shy and reticent in interviews. But when we speak she is warm, generous with her time and excited about her plans for the opening of the 2008 season in Australia.

Golf is a sport that loves to measure performance. The Golf Australia website is packed with statistics about Webb's birdies, eagles, putting averages, driving averages, sand saves ... the list goes on and on. But if you're not into golf, prize money is a more comprehensible way of explaining what she has achieved on the international stage.

Webb is a seven-time major winner whose career earnings so far total US\$13.5 million. Back in 1996, she stunned the world by winning four titles and becoming the first Ladies Professional Golfing Association (LPGA) player to win US\$1 million in a single year. She went on to become the fastest player in the history of the LPGA tour to cross the US\$9 million mark and the third player in the history of the circuit to earn more than US\$2 million in a single season.

But when I ask her to name the achievement that means the most to her, she answers without hesitation, and it's not about money. "To be inducted into both the LPGA and the World Golf Hall of Fame is the ultimate for me," she says with a smile in her voice. "I never thought at the beginning of my career that I'd achieve half of what I've done."

Her pride is understandable. The LPGA Hall of Fame is one of the most respected institutions in professional sport. Webb is one of only 23 members inducted since its origins in 1950. And there are only three

other Australians, Greg Norman, Peter Thomson and Walter Travis, who have made it into the World Golf Hall of Fame.

Like any true champion, though, Webb's focus is on the future, not the past. She'll start 2008 by defending her titles in Australia's two biggest women's golf tournaments. First up is the 2008 MFS Women's Australian Open at Kingston Heath in Melbourne from January 31 to February 3. (It will be screened on ABC TV.) It's the first time the women have had the chance to play a professional tournament at this course. Webb tells me Kingston Heath is "a classic course and one of the best golf courses in Australia" and she's "feeling excited" about the championship.

As always, the pressure is on to match her record and to defeat the younger players eager to make their mark. In 2007, she won the Women's Australian Open at Royal Sydney, her third win in this prestigious tournament, finishing on a total of 10 under par at 278, six strokes ahead of Yun Jye Wei of Taiwan.

A week later, she took out her sixth ANZ Ladies Masters with a final round 68 at Royal Pines Resort on the Gold Coast. It was the second time she'd won both these major titles in the same year. (She did it in 2000 as well.) Everybody will be watching in January 2008 to see if she can do it again.

How does she cope with this pressure? "That's the sort of pressure I love," she says, laughing. She tells me she revels in the atmosphere of major competitions, even when it comes down to a sudden death play-off, where two or more players with the same final score play single holes until somebody wins. "It's what I love about what I do," she explains, "It comes down to this: you've practised over and over again and it's your time to pull off the shot."

So is there a type of pressure she doesn't

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# real life

like? “Oh, yes,” she says with feeling, “It’s the pressure I put on myself that I don’t like.” Which brings us to the mental side of the game. Does she believe there is a psychological dimension to champion golf? “Yes, definitely,” she answers quickly. “You have to have a physical talent. You have to practise. But the mental part of the game is 70 per cent of it, after you’ve got past the youthful time when you play with no fear.”

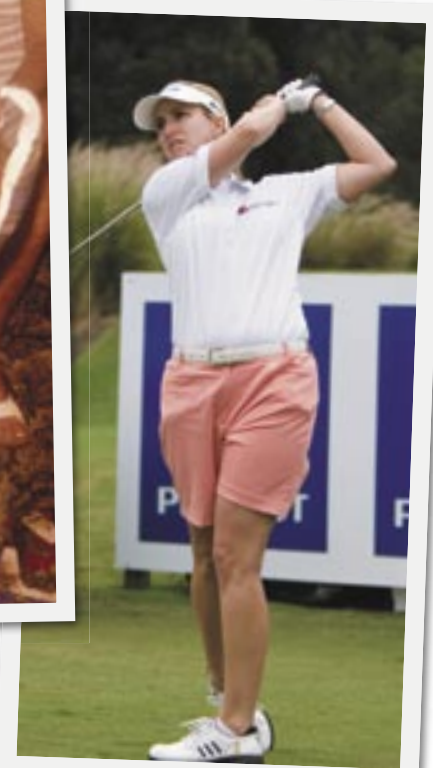
I want to hear more about playing with no fear. It’s a topic Webb discusses with passion. “When you’re playing with no fear, you don’t realise you’re doing it,” she says. “I look at young players and they just have this inner confidence that there’s no way they’re not going to hit the shot well. They haven’t had enough experience to know there’s every chance you won’t hit it well or make the putt.”

Webb has experienced the ups and downs of every professional, long-term player. “As you get older, you know just how fine a line it is between playing really, really good golf and feeling like you’re pretty close but your results are not showing it,” she explains. “It boils down to the mental edge and getting on the right side of that confidence.”

If you lose this inner confidence, can you get it back? “Absolutely, you can.” Her approach could apply to every part of life, not just golf. As she says, “I overcame a mental lapse this year. It’s a matter of sticking to good visualisations and the belief you’re going to hit that shot well. Sometimes, you have to correct something technically and do the practice. Ultimately, I know I can do it; it’s just a matter of those 30 seconds that you’re standing over the ball and telling yourself, I can do this. It’s the inner confidence.”



Karrie Webb started developing her swing from age four when she was given a plastic set of clubs. She got her first real set when she was eight.



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It's this inner confidence that Webb looks for in the young women she mentors. "It is hard to put your finger on it, but they just have that look in their eye that they know they're going to be successful," she says. "They believe in themselves without being overly confident and they're keen to ask questions. You can see that they want to succeed."

It's the same quality that Karrie Webb had from a remarkably early age. She got a plastic set of toy golf clubs at the age of four. There's a family photo of her unwrapping them on Christmas Day. "They had a plastic grip and a cheap metal shaft with a plastic head and a plastic ball," she remembers. She got her first real set of clubs at age eight. "I have most of my original set," she says.

By the time she was 11, when someone asked her what she wanted to do when she grew up, she answered firmly, "I want to be a professional golfer." The answer stayed the same all through her time at Ayr State Primary School and Ayr State High School. "Mum and Dad say a lot of people would laugh," Webb recounts. "How could that possibly happen when you come from Ayr and you're a girl? But I never noticed that."

Webb praises her mother Evelyn, 54, and her father Rob, 56, for the lowkey but crucial support they provided throughout her childhood and early years. And there was another crucial influence as well. There wasn't a professional golfer in Ayr, but when she was about eight or nine, Webb's parents asked a family friend, Kelvin Haller, who was a good player, to "keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn't develop any bad habits".

It was the beginning of a remarkably successful partnership. Webb says of Haller, "He taught me the game. I know just about all I know from him." He continued as Webb's coach and mentor until four years ago, when Ian Triggs joined her team.

What makes the role of Kelvin Haller truly unique is that he became a quadriplegic after an accident when Webb was only 16. Yet he continued to guide Webb's career and provide advice on her game. The internet enabled her to send him images of her swing and putting and he'd offer his advice from Ayr. Webb also visits Ayr three times a year and this gave him the chance to work with her in person.

Webb cherishes her privacy and prefers not to discuss her private life at all. She wants to be known, she says, for what she does on the golf course, not off it.

Kelvin Haller is still an "important friend and mentor", Webb says. She is now at a point in her life she describes as "a crossroads". For the first time, she is thinking seriously about life after the intensity of the professional golfing circuit. Haller is one of the key people she is talking to about her future. She knows she wants to spend more time in Australia — she's buying a home in Townsville, her first Australian home after 10 years based in Florida. She knows that, whatever she does, it has to "make a difference and help people less fortunate than herself".

In the past, she has helped to raise money for the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, working with Reeve before his death to organise charity golf events. The experience of watching Haller's capacity to adapt to a life with a severe disability has been inspirational in Webb's own life.

Whatever the future holds, Webb's current priority is that first 30 seconds over the ball on January 31 at Kingston Heath and every other 30 seconds that will make up the 2008 Women's Australian Open, her first major of the year.

And every time she tees off, she offers a message to every little girl with big dreams in a small town: anything is possible. ■

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