

Henrik Stenson has won all over the world but seems likely to be remembered for playing a shot in his underpants

PAUL KIMMAGE



"Hey! Isn't that Henrik Stenson, the robotic-looking Swede?"
"Where?"
"He's coming out of the clubhouse."
"Yes, yes it is."
"Oh my God!"
"What?"
"He just made a lunge at Tiger."
"Whaaat!"
"He has him by the throat. He's beating the crap out of him. The guy is completely insane!"

The madness of King Henrik. How do you explain it? Let's start with the temper; let's start with the rage; let's start with the devil that enters his head on this beautiful afternoon at Lake Nona in Florida, as he steps from the opulent clubhouse to begin the photo shoot.

"What about a smile please, Henrik?" the photographer pleads. He is useless at smiling. "This way... one more." He tries but it feels ridiculous.

"Could we try one without the sunglasses, please?" This is the trigger.

A lady member's golf bag with a Tiger puppet on the driver is sitting on the back of a buggy. Stenson walks across and whips the head-cover from the bag. "Would this work?" he asks. He strangles the cute little Tiger with his thumbs. "What about this?" He pummels the cuddly puppet with his fists.

The photographer can't believe it: "Terrific... Great... Can you kick it, Henrik? What about a head-lock?"

To find the real Henrik Stenson, just ask him to remove his shades.

"What about Tiger?" I caution. "Aren't you worried how he'll interpret this?" "Naah," he smiles. "I owe him one."

"You do?"

"Yeah, for the underwear."

"The underwear?"

"Yeah, he gave me some signed underwear recently at the Tavistock Cup."

"Some signed underwear? Really? What was that about?"

The emperor's new drawers. How do you explain them? Let's wind the clock back to March. Let's join him with seven holes to play in the opening round of the World Golf Championship event at Doral in Florida. His wayward drive from the third tee (he started his round at the 10th) has landed in a bog of mud. He is five under for the round and challenging for the lead but has to make a choice.

If he drops the ball from the hazard he will incur a penalty stroke, face a tough shot from the rough and will surely make a bogey; if he plays the ball from the mud he will surely make par but will be forced to finish the round looking like he has fallen down the toilet. His caddie, Fanny Sunesson, is studying the yardage book. He removes his shoes, socks, shirt, sunglasses and hat and his crisp, white Hugo Boss trousers.

"I was wearing two things when I hit the shot, my jocks and my golf glove," he smiles. "Just the way God created me." A photographer was on hand to capture the moment. For the first time in his life Henrik Stenson, the world's fifth-ranked golfer, was front-page news and the talk of the locker room.

"In my wildest dreams I could never have imagined the impact it would have," he says. "It travelled around the world like a forest fire; it was in every newspaper and on all the news channels... but not everyone saw the fun in it. I just hope they get a sense of humour for Christmas."

"Give me an example of what was said to you?" I ask.

"Well, I was amazed. One guy [a fellow player] said, 'I wouldn't have done that for a million bucks! And I thought, 'Well, what's the big deal?' It was only one shot. It's not like I'm looking for cash to drop my clothes again! But it's amazing how these things grow and live on. One of my friends was following me at the par-three tournament at Augusta and heard these two guys talking in the crowd, 'Oh, there's that Swede... the one who played four holes in his boxers!' Who knows what it will be next?"

"What about Tiger?" I ask.

"That was funny. He gave me some signed underwear at the Tavistock Cup [an annual interclub match between the neighbouring Isleworth and Lake Nona-based professionals]. The whole Isleworth team signed a pair of boxers for me that I was given on the first tee by Tiger so I've been thinking of a way to get him back. The head-cover is just a start."

Last Sunday, fully clothed and playing flawlessly, he crushed Woods and the classiest field in golf to win the Players Championship with a performance Woods described as "pretty incredible". But for ardent Stenson followers it was no real sur-



Animal instinct: Henrik Stenson attacks a Tiger Woods headcover after the world No 1 presented him with a pair of signed boxer shorts and, below, enjoys his win at Sawgrass with daughter Lisa

TIGER HUNTING

prise. In Europe, he has always been the boy most likely; in Sweden, he has long been the special one. Will Henrik Stenson fulfil his potential and become the first Swede in history to win a major?

THE ELDER of two children born to Ingemar and Mona, Stenson spent his formative years at the family home in Gothenburg, going to I.F.K. games with his dad and playing football, bandy (a form of ice hockey) and badminton. Then a friend, Pontus Eriksson, introduced him to golf and from the first moment it was all he wanted to do.

"I was 13 years old and had this tape of the [1989] Ryder Cup at The Belfry that I wore out from playing. I remembered Olazabal and Seve drove the green at the 10th, and all these things, and it was fantastic. Playing bunker shots, and around the green, was more amusing to me than the soccer pitch and my focus was that I was going to make it in this sport."

He grins when you ask what "making it" entailed. "I was doing it for the love of the sport," he says. "I never thought about making money. Just to be able to participate in these events was a dream of mine and to win a European Tour event was every dream come true. That was definitely making it."

He didn't have to wait long. In May 2001, he brushed away the challenge of Angel Cabrera and Paul McGinley to complete a wire-to-wire victory in the Benson and Hedges International Open at The Belfry. It was his 11th start in his rookie season on

tour and he was absolutely ecstatic. A week later, when he finished eighth behind Tiger Woods in Germany, the critics were unanimous; Henrik Stenson was Europe's next superstar.

But then something extraordinary happened. A month later, after a middling performance at the Volvo PGA Championship and a missed cut at the English Open, he travelled to Cork for the Irish Open and missed the cut again. The 17th at Fota Island, a long but pretty innocuous par three, still haunts him in nightmares. "I hit it so wide it wasn't funny," he says. "It was out in the middle of the fairway on the 16th or 15th or whatever was to the right of it and I had a 70-yard pitch coming back sideways, to the green. That was the start of it."

"I had been hitting the ball poorly for a couple of tournaments and at first you don't think too much about it. But when you start spraying it as wildly as I did on that par three, things just begin to spiral."

A week later, he travelled north to Co Kildare for the European Open at the K Club. Fifty-three days had passed since his brilliant performance at The Belfry and he had been drawn to play with Sandy Lyle and Miguel-Angel Jimenez. "We started on the 10th tee," he recalls, "and I had to hit two provisionals. The first one went way right; the second one went way right; and I just managed to squeeze the third down the middle."

"I started with a double or triple bogey and it just continued for eight holes. I was all over the place, making doubles every-



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where, and eventually, after eight, I decided to make an exit. I said [to my playing partners], 'You guys would be better off without me. I'm feeling sick with the way I am playing.' He drove to the airport and caught the first flight to Sweden.

He started working on his technique and changed his coach but it was as if the magic had just deserted him. His game had completely unravelled; he couldn't hit the planet off the tee. Among the many drills they tried to turn him around was to walk on a balance beam blindfolded, another was to hit buckets of balls with the blindfold on. The message was clear. The problem was mental. The only way back was to trust in himself again. The process was tortuous.

In 2002, he played in 22 tournaments and missed 15 cuts. In 2003, the slump continued until September when, gun-to-head and facing the prospect of professional extinction, he somehow turned things around with a 24th place finish at the Trophée Lancome in Paris. A year later, he earned his second career victory at the Heritage tournament in Woburn and hasn't looked back since.

"At the end of 2003 I was in a bad way and knew I had to find something in Paris," he says. "Then I finished 13th at the German Masters and sixth at the Dunhill Links and suddenly I had turned the corner. A lot of it was definitely mental... I mean, you look at Tiger Woods — and I'm not comparing myself to Tiger Woods — but when he needs to make those big putts to win, he makes them and I suppose I have part of that ability to deliver when I

have to." I suggest to him that there aren't many golfers who would have survived what he came through. "No," he concurs, "but in a sense I'm grateful for it. You know that saying, 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger?' Well, that definitely applies to me. It's easy to play golf with the wind in your sails but you learn a lot by coming back from a tough time like that."

He has enjoyed a lot of wind in his sails of late but faced some choppy waters, too. In February he announced that he had invested "a big part of his savings" with Stanford Financial, the banking group run by Sir Allen Stanford, with whom he had signed a three-year sponsorship deal. "It's a very unfortunate situation," he said. "I'm as much a victim as everybody else in that big thing. So we just have to see how bad it is. Everybody has got to sit tight and see what comes out of it, but it's obviously hard to be too positive at the moment."

Three months later, not much has changed. "The difficult part is that no-one knows what's going to happen," he says, when asked if the issue has affected his sleeping patterns.

"You don't actually know that the money is lost?"

"No," he says. "It's an ongoing process and we will just have to wait and see."

"Have you considered the worst case scenario?" I ask.

"Yeah, definitely, you think that part of your savings might be lost but there is no point speculating when you don't know the answers. For the first couple of weeks it took up a big part of your thoughts but after a while you realise that whatever comes out of it, will come out of it and I will deal with it then."

His reward for winning last week — a tasty cheque for \$1.7m — will help to cushion any blow and he arrives in London this afternoon, refreshed from a brief family sojourn in the Bahamas, with the BMW PGA championship at Wentworth in his sights. And then his thoughts will turn to the majors.

"Does it seem as absurd to you as it does to me that no Swede has yet won a major?" I ask. "Well, I think that we'll definitely win one, or two, or three at some point," he says, "whether it's me or Robert [Karlsson] or somebody else in the near future, and no-one would be more happy than if I could do it for myself."

The interview ends. He replaces the shades on his head. Time for business.

"Now, where's that f***ing Tiger..."

Henrik Stenson: the joker in the pack

■ The Swede has won only twice in America, but his victories came in two of the biggest tournaments in the world, the World Matchplay and the Players Championship, known as golf's fifth major

■ He has also won six European Tour events

■ Stenson is ranked No 5 in the world

■ Despite having been one of the best players in the world for some years, Stenson is seldom recognised in public. Even those involved in the game sometimes struggle to identify him. During the 2008 Ryder Cup he was

announced as Henrik Stevenson and Henrik Stevens before the announcer finally got it right

■ During the recent WGC-CA championship, Stenson found his ball at the edge of a muddy pond and stripped down to his underwear to play the

shot, far right. He said afterwards that he did not want to complete his round in mud-splattered trousers. It could have been worse — it could have been John Daly

■ His caddie is Fanny Sunesson, who carried Nick

Faldo's bag during the Englishman's glory years

■ He is 33, married to Emma and has a daughter, Lisa. They live in Dubai



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