



# DRIVING TOWARD SUCCESS

GOLF CHAMPION ERNIE ELS TAKES HIS WORLD-CLASS GAME FROM THE FAIRWAY TO THE VINEYARD

Winner of nearly 60 professional golf tournaments over the past 15 years, Ernie Els is considered one of the most successful golfers in the history of the game. He has won some of golf's most respected titles, including two U.S. Opens, an Open Championship and a record six World Matchplay titles, to name just a few. During the mid-1990s, Els was ranked the No. 1 golfer in the world; his haul of trophies is second only to that of Tiger Woods.

The South Africa-born Els began his love affair with sport at age four, soon becoming skilled in soccer, cricket, rugby and tennis. In fact, at age 13 Els won an important regional tennis tournament. But it was golf that would ultimately claim his allegiance. As a youngster, Els often caddied for his father. He took up the game himself at age eight, and by the time he was 13, he could hit the ball as far as his father could. At 14, Els was named junior world champion; at 16, he won the South African Amateurs tournament. He turned pro at age 19.

Now 37, Els is also successful in the wine business. In 1999, Ernie Els Wine grew out of Els' friendship with Jean Engelbrecht, whose family owns the Rust en Vrede wine estate in Stellenbosch. The two believed that Jean's knowledge of the world's wine markets would make a perfect match with Ernie's worldwide acclaim and reputation.

This season, Els is scheduled to play tournaments in Qatar, Dubai, Thailand, China, England, South Africa, Germany, Scotland, Canada and Singapore as well as 12 different locations in the United States. Despite his packed schedule, Els took time to talk with Wine Report about a

golf pro's insights into the wine business.

**WINE REPORT: What first sparked your interest in wine and owning a winery?**

**ERNIE ELS:** A couple of things. My wife, Liezl, grew up around the wine country of Stellenbosch, South Africa; so after meeting her, I started to get into wine a little bit. And then my friendship with Jean. Owning a winery wasn't something that happened overnight; the idea came together over a long period. But I like to have other interests outside of golf, so in many ways this was one of the most natural things to do.

**WR: What wines does your winery produce?**

**EE:** Ernie Els is our flagship wine. Built around my palate and tastes, it's a Bordeaux-style blend of five different varietals. Then we have Engelbrecht Els, Cirrus and Guardian Peak. The idea is to offer quality wines right across the price range.

With my playing schedule, I obviously can't visit the winery any time I like, but I'm the type of person who likes to be involved in every aspect of my businesses. I sit with Jean and our winemaker, Louis Strydom, to determine the final blend. I take a keen interest in the whole business side of the wine operation.

**WR: How are your wines' sales?**

**EE:** Our sales have been growing every year, and the United States is our biggest market. We are a private producer with relatively small volumes, so our wines go out on allocation.

**WR: What are your goals for the winery?**

**EE:** Consistency is one of the things I strive for in my golf game, and funnily enough, it's the same with our wines.

**WR: What are the biggest challenges or surprises you've faced in the wine business?**

**EE:** It is a competitive business out there, but that's something I'm used to. I like it that way.

**WR: What are your grapes' growing conditions?**

**EE:** We are located in Stellenbosch, just 40 minutes east of Cape Town. We have a very Mediterranean climate in our area, similar to Europe, but with less risk of rapidly changing weather patterns. The property is on the slopes of the Helderberg mountain, known for its deep red soils. We are also close to both the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, so we get cool sea breezes at night, which is good for bringing the temperatures down in the vineyards.

**WR: If there's a perfect golf swing, there must be a perfect food-and-wine pairing. What would that be, in your opinion?**

**EE:** For me as a South African, it has to be a good steak with red wine. That's probably my favorite meal.

**WR: How do lessons that you've learned on the golf course translate into the wine industry?**

**EE:** I guess you learn that nature often has the final say! You have to be able to adapt to the conditions and change your approach sometimes. In golf and in the wine business, patience is very important. And you always have to focus on the small details.

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