



Ernie Els, winner of the World Golf Championship in Miami last March, with his seven-year-old son Ben who suffers from autism.

The 2nd Annual

ELS *for* Autism

Charity Pro-Am Golf Tournament

With the help of 22 professional golfers and 66 amateur players, Ernie Els raised more than \$800,000 in his drive to help find a cure for Autism

By Gordon Mott

By 10:30 in the morning, the driving range at the PGA National Resort and Spa was filled with people who were playing in the 2nd annual Els for Autism Charity Pro-Am golf tournament. Everyone was waiting for the tournament host, Ernie Els. When he appeared, he was immediately surrounded by well-wishers and television cameras, all congratulating him for his victory in the World Golf Championship at Doral Golf Resort & Spa in Miami the day before. The good vibe from his win, and the show of support for his autism foundation gave the day a truly special aura.

The charity fund-raiser, held March 14th and 15th, tallied



Marvin R. Shanken and Ernie Els, center, the creators of the Els for Autism Foundation, are flanked by Hall of Fame golfers Raymond Floyd, left, and Jack Nicklaus, right, who both turned out to show their support for the charity pro-am fund-raiser at PGA National Golf Resort & Spa in West Palm Beach, Florida.

more than \$800,000 for the Els for Autism Foundation. Given that it is only the second year the event has been conducted, it is an outstanding result. Els couldn't have agreed more.

"My wife Liezl and I are foreigners here in your country," Els told the group after the round of golf. "And your generosity and support is unbelievable. There just are not words to express how we feel."

The foundation was created last year by Ernie and Liezl with the help of Marvin R. Shanken, the editor and publisher of *CIGAR AFICIONADO* and *Wine Spectator* magazines. Johann Rupert, chairman of the Richemont Group, is the honorary chairman of the event. The first annual event in 2009 raised more than \$650,000 for the

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charity. The Els have launched a \$30-million fund-raising drive to build a Center for Excellence in Florida that will include a school for 300 autistic children, and a research center to study the causes of autism as well as look for a cure for the millions of kids affected by the disorder.

Autism is a complex development disability that appears in childhood and can dramatically affect a person's ability to communicate and interact with others. Current statistics, according to the latest survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, show that one in 70 young boys and up to one in 150 of all children, fall somewhere across the autism spectrum. The incidence of autism has increased dramatically in the last 20 years, and researchers are still puzzled about

why the disorder has become so much more prevalent.

Els announced to the world in 2008 that his son Ben, now 7, has autism. He made the revelation in the wake of winning the Honda Classic at PGA National. When Mr. Shanken heard Els's admission, he was moved to do something about it and approached Els with the idea of starting a foundation for autism. Els said, "Let's do it," and by March 2009 the first Els for Autism charity fund-raiser was held.

The 2010 event began with the pairings dinner on Sunday evening. It got a late start because most of the attendees were glued to their television sets watching Els finish off his four-stroke victory in the WGC-CA Championship. But there was plenty of conversation in the small patio



Twenty two professional golfers and 66 amateur players turned out for the Els for Autism Charity Pro-Am golf tournament.

off the ballroom at PGA National where people sipped cocktails under the sky in Florida's early spring weather. The dinner followed and no one was dismayed by the absence of Els, who was in the pressroom at Doral in Miami until quite late.

The live auction was conducted by Shanken and Rupert. The four lots consisted of a golfing safari provided by Mantis and South African Airways, an Irish golf trip which was donated by IRISH-LINKS, a solar-powered golf cart presented by Club Car and SolarDrive and a round of golf with Els. The four lots raised \$145,500.

Monday morning dawned crisp for Florida, but with bright sunshine and a breeze that increased to a steady 20 mph wind with higher gusts in the late afternoon. Breakfast was served overlooking the large putting green where cameras from the PGA Tour and the Golf Channel waited patiently for Els. The 22 pros milled around putting and talking about the previous week's tournaments, including the Puerto Rico Open which had been rained out for two days, and prevented several committed pros from attending the Els event. At 11:30 sharp, the carts pulled out onto the course to begin the best-ball competition between the 66 amateurs and their pros.

By 4 p.m., the tournament ended. Bruce Fleisher's team of Bill Deutsch, Mark Halpern and Michael Aiken, took first prize with a net score of 59. David Frost's group, with Gary Klein, Mike Anderson and Mark Kramer, finished second with a 60. Justin Rose's threesome, with Jim Clerkin, Wayne Chaplin and Charles Bailes captured third place with a 61. Other winners included closest to the pin by Steve Gross and Charles Bailes, and the longest drive winner was Nate Harris.

After a post-round buffet, Shanken, who is chairman of the Els for Autism Foundation, said a few words about the more than \$800,000 raised, and told the crowd that Els had committed \$6 million "to help us get off the ground" in the quest to raise \$30 million for the Center for Excellence. He introduced Els to hearty applause from the audience.

Els once again thanked all the golfers present for their support. "Our dream is becoming a reality with the help and support of generous people,"



Raymond Floyd, second from left, with the owners of PGA National Golf Resort & Spa: Jeff Quicksilver, Jay Weaver and Eric Mogentale.



Golf Channel anchor Steve Sands, left, interviewed PGA Tour player Adam Scott during a break in the action.



Fuzzy Zoeller, left, a Champions Tour regular, speaks with John Esposito, the president of Bacardi Limited.



Paul Varga, chairman and CEO of Brown Forman, lines up a putt.



Marvin R. Shanken, left, with Steve Stricker, the world's No. 2 player, and Rush Limbaugh admire a tee shot.



Steve Ross, of The Related Group and Miami Dolphins, lines up a shot.



Johann Rupert, right, the event's honorary chairman, congratulates Charl Schwartzel, a fellow South African.



Pro golfer Stuart Appleby, playing in his second Els for Autism event, lights up a cigar during his round of golf.

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PGA Tour player Justin Rose, second from left, teamed with Jim Clerkin, COO of Moët Hennessy USA, Charles Bailes of ABC Liquors and Wayne Chaplin of Southern Wine and Spirits.



Bill Deutsch, left, of W. J. Deutsch & Sons, led the team of Mark Halpern and Michael Aiken, which captured the first prize in the pro-am tournament with a total net score of 59. Bruce Fleisher, not pictured, was their pro.



Billy Terlato, of Terlato Wines International, shows his fine form with a driver during the charity event.



Robert Allenby, left, enjoyed the afternoon of golf with Brad Vasser of Southern Wine & Spirits, one of the company participants in the Els for Autism Charity Pro-Am tournament.



Larry Schwartz, the president of Diageo North America, enjoys a cocktail with Gerry Ruvo, chairman and CEO of Sky Spirits.



Marvin R. Shanken and his wife Hazel, Johann Rupert with his wife Gaynor and Maria and Raymond Floyd attended the Sunday night pairings party.



Els said. He highlighted the participation of the golfers, saying “it was a Hall of Fame field with major champion winners. They came out and helped us today.” He said that he hoped in five years, he would be able to stand before the people attending the Els for Autism fundraiser to announce the completion of the Center for Excellence. “We know the families of autistic kids need a lot of help, and we know the kids need a lot of help. When that center gets built, we will name it for all of you.”

Some of the corporate sponsors for the event included Bacardi, Barnes and Noble, Brown-Forman, Callaway Golf, Diageo, Moët Hennessy, Patrón Spirits, PGA National, The Related Group, Royal Bank of Canada, Robert Talbott, Sky Spirits and the PGA. Six cigar companies have also joined in the fund-raising effort including Alec Bradley cigars, Padrón cigars, La Flor Dominicana, Rocky Patel Premium Cigars, Oliva Cigar Company and A. Fuente cigars.

By the end of the day, all the 66 golfers and the 22 pros basked in the knowledge that not only had they had a wonderful day of camaraderie and golf, but they had contributed to a great cause and a great goal, the cure of autism. ❖