

A full-page photograph of professional golfer Karrie Webb in the middle of her golf swing. She is wearing a bright pink long-sleeved shirt, a black baseball cap with sunglasses perched on top, and a black belt with a large gold buckle. She is holding a golf club with a silver head. The background is a soft-focus green field.

KARRIE WEBB

In the SPOTLIGHT

Karrie Webb's latest victory, breaking a two-year LPGA Tour event, saw Australian golf's age-old argument rise to the fore once more. Just who is Australia's greatest golfer ever?

Bruce Young wades into the debate.

When Karrie Webb completed her 39th LPGA Tour victory at the recent ShopRite LPGA Classic in New Jersey, it rekindled the ongoing discussion as to just who is Australia's greatest ever golfer.

It was not necessarily a significant victory in the overall scheme of things, but it again raised her profile and reminded us all just what an achiever she is and has been in and for the game in Australia.

There is little doubt that the three greatest players of all time in Australia, whatever qualifying criteria is used, are Karrie Webb, Peter Thomson and Greg Norman. The argument, or rather discussion, is just where they sit in the pecking order.

To all intents and purposes it probably does not matter as they have

all made outstanding contributions to the profile and growth of the game in this country, putting the sport in the public eye and bringing thousands of people to golf.

That, though, is not the question in this discussion but rather how their respective achievements stack up against each other and whether there is one who should be considered the greatest of all time.

Let's lead with Webb. Now nobody would suggest for a moment that in their respective primes Webb could compete against Thomson or Norman shot for shot, but when stacking her achievements against Thomson and Norman, it makes very interesting reading.

Webb began her professional career in Europe, where, in her first full year as a professional, she won the Women's British Open, won Rookie of the Year honours on that Tour and later that year

(1995) gained her card to play in the US.

Winning her second event as an LPGA Tour cardholder, she would not only be the leading money winner and Rookie of the Year in her first year on the LPGA Tour, she would become the first player on either the LPGA or PGA Tours to win more than \$1 million in a rookie season.

It took until 1999 before she would win her first major championship, the now defunct du Maurier Classic, and over the next seven years she would win six more major titles, the last of those coming at the Kraft Nabisco in 2006. Webb has since gone on to record another three runner-up placings in major championships and at the age of just 38, there is no real reason why she can't win more.

Webb has always been a golfer who appears to thrive in the heat of the battle and personifies the saying 'when the



Seen here with 20-year-old Jessica Korda, Karrie Webb's career has spanned generations.

going gets tough, the tough get going'. Her game and demeanour are suited to the most demanding of tests.

She also won two other British Opens before they became major championships and when that event became an official major in 2002, her victory there meant she had become the first player to win all five of the major championships.

Webb has also won the Evian Masters, which will this year become a major championship and so, in September, in France she could conceivably become the first player to win all six of the major championships, either current or existing, in the history of the female game.

Webb sits only one behind Annika Sorenstam among the modern-day players in terms of major championship titles won and, given her current form, has the capacity to go past the brilliant Swede.

Importantly, when assessing the respective careers of Australia's greatest three, is the fact that Webb has won all five of the major championships titles

available to her. Thomson (with five majors) and Norman (two) have won only Open Championships, so surely the diversity of Webb's success at the elite level is another tick in her box.

In addition to those major championship titles, Webb has won nearly 50 events worldwide including four Australian Women's Open titles and eight Australian Ladies Masters. It is a phenomenal record.

Norman's winning record in major championships belies his ability. Admittedly, he finished either runner-up or third on 12 other occasions but that accounts for little when making this assessment; and that he was able to win on only two occasions when the elite took on the elite on the best of layouts is a statistic that will forever be a qualifier in his career. It may be that it matters little to Norman as he counts the massive amounts of money he won in prizemoney and earned in appearance fees, endorsements and ongoing

WEBB THEN

At the 1995 Women's British Open, Karrie Webb was a talented 20-year-old who proved she could mix it with the best, taking a six-stroke victory over future Hall of Famer Annika Sorenstam and American Jill McGill.

That year also saw her become the European Tour Rookie of the Year and qualify for the LPGA Tour after she finished second at the LPGA Final Qualifying Tournament, despite playing with a broken bone in her wrist.

In her first year on the LPGA Tour she was remarkable, winning four tournaments and posting 15 top-10 finishes. She became the first ever LPGA player to earn \$1 million dollars in a single season and claimed LPGA Rookie of the Year honours.



WEBB NOW

Fast-forward to the 2013 ShopRite LPGA Classic, her 39th LPGA Tour victory and the now 38-year-old Webb has become a dominant and well respected veteran of the sport.

She has won seven major championships, is a two-time LPGA Player of the Year, is 11th on the list of players with the most career LPGA tournament wins and first among all active players, all of this recognised with her 2005 induction into the World Golf Hall of Fame.

Her amazing list of achievements prove the young woman who showed such promise has delivered throughout her stellar career time and time again and staked her claim as a golfing legend and an Australian sporting hero.



ALL PICTURES: GETTY IMAGES

"I am very proud of my career and what I've achieved with golf. For people to say that, it's definitely the highest compliment. But, even to me, Greg Norman's still Greg Norman. I'm still an 11-year-old girl sometimes when I think of Greg Norman."

— *Karrie Webb on comparisons to 'The Shark'*



businesses established as a result of his on-course success.

Somehow, however, that his lack of winning success in major championships has held him back from being considered among the game's overall greatest must be a source of frustration to him. He is too proud and too driven for it not to be.

Thomson, of course, and as we hear every time his name is mentioned, won the Open Championship on five occasions across an 11-year period between 1954 and 1965. To be fair to the other two, and without in any way demeaning the incredible feat in winning five Open Championships, four of those were achieved before the wave of Americans, driven mainly by Arnold Palmer's success in 1961 and 1962, arrived.

Webb's and Norman's major championship victories on the other hand were achieved when nearly every one of the game's leading players were in the field.

Thomson, though, would claim huge success internationally in Japan, Asia, Europe and Australasia; although, perhaps, counting against his right to be considered Australia's greatest ever was his lack of success on the PGA Tour in the US. He won only one title there when taking out the Texas Open in 1955, although his Open Championship victories have now retrospectively become PGA Tour victories.

That was a choice of his rather than an inability to dominate in the US; Thomson preferring to play internationally rather than focusing his attention on the PGA Tour. Interestingly, when Thomson took on the Americans in 1984 and 1985 in the early stages of the Seniors Tour, he won 11 titles in two years, including nine in 1985.

In addition to his five Open Championships, Thomson won 24 other events in Europe, 34 in Australasia, numerous titles in Japan and six national opens in Asia.

Outside of the majors, Norman's record is outrageously good. Norman won nine events in Europe before leaving for the US, but afterwards, he won a further three European Tour events in addition to his two Open Championship victories there.

He won 18 PGA Tour titles in addition to his Open Championship victories, 31 titles in Australia, two in Japan and numerous official and unofficial titles elsewhere.

So having drawn comparisons between the careers of the respective players, are we any the wiser?

It probably does not matter, but Webb, who is typically mentioned behind Norman and Thomson when the question is asked, deserves serious consideration for the mantle of Australia's greatest and many might suggest she deserves the title.

Karrie Webb perhaps put it all in perspective when that very question was raised in the lead-up to her eighth victory at the Volvik RACV Ladies Masters earlier in 2013.

At the press conference that day, tournament organiser Bob Tuohy, in his preamble and thanks to Webb for playing the event once again, suggested Webb's record entitled her to be regarded as Australia's best. Webb gave the perfect response.

"I mean, obviously, it's a great compliment but it's not something that you ever set out to achieve to become," she said. "I think you set out to achieve to be the best that you can be but I think it's always hard to compare careers to other players, and different generations and obviously male/female."

"I am very proud of my career and what I've achieved with golf. For people to say that, it's definitely the highest compliment. But, even to me, Greg Norman's still Greg Norman. I'm still an 11-year-old girl sometimes when I think of Greg Norman."

"I don't compare my career to a Greg Norman or a David Graham or a Peter Thomson. It's just really too hard to do that. I think they've had fabulous careers and my career doesn't diminish theirs or vice versa. I think we've all waved the Aussie flag when we've been overseas and we've all done it very well. I think that's why golf has continued to be a big sport in Australia and continued to grow over the years."

There is perhaps no better way to draw this discussion to a close. ■