

From ductwork to driver

Alistair Presnell's rise from mild-mannered air conditioning mechanic to equal-sixth behind Ernie Els at the World Golf Championship in March is the stuff only dreams are made of. But it wasn't long ago that a life on the tools appealed, as Sean McGowan discovered when he recently spoke to the rising star of Australian golf.



Alistair Presnell, 2010 Cellarbrations Victorian PGA Champion. Source: PGA of Australia.

One could be forgiven for thinking life as a pro golfer on the PGA's Nationwide Tour is far removed from that of a young Melbourne air conditioning mechanic's. Travel, hotels, big money up for grabs and the allure of the world's prettiest golf courses sounds incredibly appealing against cold winter mornings perched on a rooftop repairing pipe work.

But for Alistair Presnell, life as an air conditioning mechanic appealed from the time his Scotch College career's adviser suggested it.

Having been educated in one of Melbourne's finest private schools, and disliking the idea of a sedentary working life, Presnell suffered the same torment as many teenagers nearing the end of their secondary schooling – what to do when it all comes to an end.

"I was always just going to do my schooling and my university degree, whatever that may have been I have no idea. But when the careers adviser

pretty much spelt it out, I thought maybe that's (air conditioning apprenticeship) a good solid choice for me," he recalls of the pathway to a career on the tools.

Having always played sports, the idea of doing something with his hands appealed, he says.

It was a big step for a private school boy to switch to Box Hill TAFE, and he readily admits to "copping a bit of grief" when he arrived as a "silver spoon." But with a family friend's business, Techair, offering him an apprenticeship, employment in the HVAC&R industry immediately became more interesting.

With a clear career path beginning to materialise, Presnell's interest in golf was also developing.

A young tennis tyro, any aspirations of chasing that sporting dream had been quashed due to foot injuries during his teens. With his late father

Ray captain of the Huntingdale Golf Club (home of the Australian Masters), taking up golf seemed appropriate for Presnell, then 15, despite not having played it seriously.

"I had played, like, half a dozen times a year and during school holidays with a mate, but tennis was my big thing. [When] my feet couldn't stand up to it, golf was the obvious option," he says.

Although he says his father didn't push him to play the sport, he was certainly encouraged to pursue it given his excellent hand-eye coordination. Days spent with his father on the driving range or out on the course soon began to pay dividends, as Presnell's love and ability for golf quickly developed.

"It was his [father, Ray] love for the game and how he didn't push me, and just allowed me to enjoy it as a game – he just made it out to be a lot of fun so it wasn't hard to not take a great interest," he recalls.



Alistair Presnell. Source: Anthony Powter.

With a good natural swing and tips picked up from his father, Presnell's game began to develop to the point where golf took up most of his time away from his air conditioning apprenticeship, whether out on the driving range or playing in local weekend tournaments. Golf had got under his skin.

After striking an arrangement with Techair which allowed him time off to compete in the occasional amateur tournament, it was only natural that the lure of life as a professional golfer would draw him away from air conditioning.

"I was 20 and working 50 hours a week as an apprentice, and I was competing against guys who were in the Australian and Victorian Institutes of Sport, and I didn't feel as though I was far behind them," Presnell says. "Dad agreed and gave me the chance to chase it."

"He was a big believer in making sure you had something behind you, and therefore the trade was my backing. So if I got injured or it didn't work out, I could fall back onto it."

Leaving Techair and a weekly pay cheque behind was a major decision for Presnell, and not something he took lightly. Nonetheless, he didn't want to look back one day with any regrets.

"It's one thing you hear a lot of fellows talk about – how good they were and how they wish they'd given it a go, and I didn't want to get to the age of

30 or 40 and see the guys that I did compete against being out there and doing something they love."

Joining the Victorian squad, Presnell began to play a lot more golf, and his game quickly developed further. He turned professional at the end of 2003, joined the Asian Tour School (with his father as caddy) and subsequently earned his tour card for 2004.

Soon after, Ray Presnell sadly passed away. Despite his son performing spectacularly well at the Australian Open in 2004, finishing equal fifth behind Peter Lonard, it wasn't long before the passing of his father, together with the rigours of the tour and pressure to perform began to wear him down.

Just three years into his new life as a professional golfer on the Asian and Australasian Tours, Presnell no longer saw golf as the same fun game his father had introduced him to.

"I was no longer playing for a travel rug and a trophy – I was now playing for a pay cheque, so therefore you do start to think that every shot does actually count," he explains.

"The [Asian] lifestyle wasn't really for me and I got a bit sick of it, a bit complacent and didn't work hard enough, so therefore I wasn't playing as well. It got to the point that I thought I'd rather give it away than do this."

Returning home, Presnell played in Pro-Am events around the country during 2007 and 2008. He started well, before again falling into a rut and not reaching the heights he expected from himself.

It was a tumultuous period for Presnell, who was now in his late-20s. He could chase his dream again, or become another who had let it get away. He chose the latter, and regained his PGA Tour of Australasia tour card through qualifying school.

"I found myself thinking that if I didn't get onto a major tour soon, I would rather be back doing something in Melbourne, perhaps back to air conditioning."

Working hard on his game in the knowledge that he probably had one last shot, his game finally came together when he birdied the last hole to win the Moonah Classic in Victoria last year over Peter O'Malley. It was an important and timely victory, because the tournament was co-sanctioned by America's Nationwide Tour, the pathway to the PGA.

The victory delivered Presnell his biggest pay cheque of \$108,000 and a guaranteed place on the Nationwide Tour for this year and last.

Presnell went on to perform consistently in the US last year, enjoying the lifestyle that the tour offered him. He narrowly missed earning a card to join the big names of world golf on the 2010 US PGA Tour, finishing 28th on the money list.

Finishing so close to the Top 25 only gave Presnell the belief that earning a place on the US PGA Tour was possible.

He returned home to win the Victorian PGA Championship at Sandhurst in February with a breathtaking final round of 60, equalling the lowest ever recorded in Australasian tour history.

A month later, he continued his good form, playing the tournament of his career to finish equal-sixth behind Ernie Els in the World Golf Championship at Doral in the US in March. Ironically, and as he explained to the South African on the driving range, it was a teenage Presnell who carried the walking scoreboard during Els' final round of the Australian Masters at Huntingdale in 1993.

Presnell's place in the field came via his place on the Australasian Order of Merit, and he made the most of his first major tournament.

"It was fantastic to just even be there. Although I'd played with Tiger at the [Australian] Masters at Kingston Heath late last year, I hadn't played with Phil Mickelson and Steve Stricker, or [Jim] Furyk, those kind of guys, so it was certainly an experience," says Presnell, still with an air of excitement.

In a crack field featuring most of the biggest names in world golf, including Australian compatriots Adam Scott, Robert Allenby and Geoff Ogilvy; Presnell shone, carting a final round 8-under 64 to finish at 10-under, and give him his biggest pay day to date.

"The cheque (\$AU236,000) was great, but it was more of a boost of self-esteem, of confidence that I can actually compete against those guys," he says. To be playing in an event with the top 50, and there I am 360 in the world, to have come through and have a top 10... well to have that kind of result is more satisfying to me than any paycheque."

Nevertheless, Presnell's earnings will certainly go a long way to making the 2010 Nationwide Tour a more comfortable one, albeit still far removed from the jets, limousines and dare way say it, other indulgences, afforded by the likes of Tiger Woods and company.

"It's living out of a suitcase, and although it might be exciting to go to a hotel for a weekend; it is week, after week, after week, after week," he says. "It can be an expensive lifestyle and you can easily chew through thousands of dollars each week."

For the time being at least, the Nationwide Tour must now seem a world away from the life that

Presnell was so close to returning to had he not made birdie on the 18th green at Moonah Links just two years ago.

It proves that with work and persistence, even golf balls can eventually fall your way. ■

Speaking of falling...

"We were installing air conditioners at a primary school on the roof one day, and I don't know how I ended up doing it, whether I electrocuted myself or whether I just tripped and fell, but I came straight off the roof and landed on the wooden decking.

The grade threes thought that it was Superman jumping off the roof!

I fortunately got away with it. It did put me in hospital, but nothing too serious. My boss would have a bit of a giggle about it and he'll always have that one up on me."



Moonah Links Golf Course, home to Alistair Presnell's win at the 2009 Moonah Classic. Source: Moonah Links.