

GOLF
PROFESSIONAL

Clarke returns to the winner's enclosure after nine year absence

BY CHRIS CALDWELL

DARREN Clarke ended a nine year wait for a victory on Sunday last when he clinched the TimberTech Championship on The Old Course at Broken Sound in Florida.

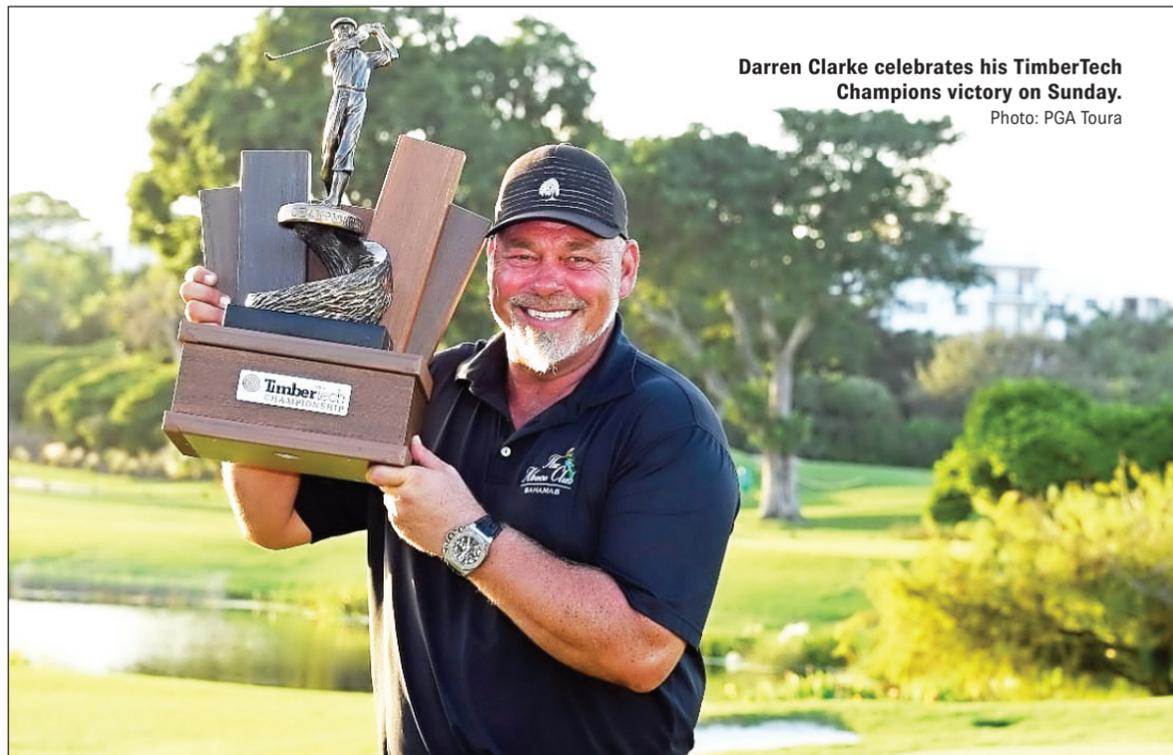
His one stroke victory not only ended the Dungannon native's long wait for a victory since his famous Open success at Royal St George's in 2011, but it also brought his first PGA Tour Champions title at his 40th attempt.

The 52-year-old played the 18th hole confidently, hitting a six iron into the middle of the green before leaving an eagle putt around a foot from the hole. He knocked his second putt in for birdie which left him four-under for the final round and on 17-under-par overall, one ahead of both Bernhard Langer and Jim Furyk.

"I've had a lot of opportunities the last few years, so it's great to finally win one," Clarke beamed. "I wouldn't be working this hard if I didn't think I could still win."

"I haven't had one of these in a while. I was drunk for a week the last time I won. I imagine I'll wake up with a headache tomorrow."

Clarke moved into a share of the lead on Saturday when, despite earning a penalty stroke for picking his ball up on the second fairway, he shot a 62 to draw level with Robert Karlsson. On Sunday of last week, Clarke was able to hold off the challenge of former Masters champion, Langer, who was trying to win his 42nd career PGA Tour Champions title.



Darren Clarke celebrates his TimberTech Champions victory on Sunday.

Photo: PGA Toura

The German topped the leaderboard on 17-under after 14 holes but he uncharacteristically stumbled over the next three holes.

Despite having failed to card a bogey throughout the tournament, Langer dropped shots on two of his next three holes before recovering with a birdie on 18 to finish at 16-under and force Clarke to birdie the par-5 last to win.

Clarke had started Sunday brightly, birdying three of his first seven holes to lead on 16-under. However, he wasn't immune to the pressure of chasing a long-awaited title and he double-bogeyed the ninth hole after his drive went into the water.

But he responded with birdies on the next two holes to remain in contention before sealing victory on the last with a nerveless finish.

Had Clarke lost, no doubt he would have rued a one-stroke penalty he received Saturday for picking up his ball on the second hole, forgetting the field was no longer using preferred lies.

"I seem to keep doing these stupid things," he acknowledged. "I'm in the cart and had hit that snap hook, my only real bad shot [on Sunday], on number nine, and thinking, you're

cruising again, but don't do something stupid again."

It was only a temporary setback, however, as he used lessons learned under his sports psychologist Dr Bob Rotella to get him back on track.

"My attitude was great," he added. "I spoke last night with Dr. Bob Rotella, who I've been working with for a very long time. Doctor told me to hang in there and keep going and just accept what comes out. Sometimes we push and push too hard. Today it was just patience."

This was Clarke's last chance to win this year. Because of visa issues, he has to be out of the country by Wednesday, meaning he will miss next week's season-ending event in Phoenix.

e'll take with him a nice parting gift – the TimberTech Championship trophy. And more time to celebrate.

"My VISA's expired and as a non-US citizen, you can only go to the embassy outside of the US to get it renewed, but they're all shut due to COVID," he explained.

"It's nobody's fault. Then my ESTA is for 90 days only and that runs out on Wednesday. Consequently, I've got to leave the country."

"I would love to go and try and win again next week, but unfortunately that won't be the case. I'm going to have to sit at the beach down in Abaco Club, drink some sea breezes and watch the boys on the big screen."

"When everybody makes a birdie, I'll go cheer and have another sea breeze or a Kalik Light. It will be a little bit of both."

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