

All set for Player's Zimbali course

BARBARA COLE

GOLFING icon Gary Player wants South Africa to produce its own Tiger Woods, he said on the North Coast yesterday.

And a black, Indian or coloured player could become "a real champion", he said, adding that 15 years ago people would never have imagined there would be black Springbok rugby players.

"We've got to have good instructors," he said, adding that SA had a reputation for being "a land of champions".

As an academy is being planned at the region's newest golf course, which the 75-year-old grand slam legend is designing, his dream of a Tiger Woods-type star could well become a reality.

The famous golfer stood in a cleared section of sugar cane yesterday and turned the sod at the fifth tee on what is to become the Gary Player Signature-designed golf course.

It is the first milestone in the planned exclusive residential and leisure Zimbali Lakes Resort (there will be man-made lakes), which will go up on the hillside opposite the present Zimbali developments, between the M4 and the N2 roads.

Zimbali Lakes Resort will be a joint venture between IFA Hotels & Resorts and Tongaat Hulett, while the Gary Player Golf Course, which will also include a clubhouse, is being built by IFA, which specialises in hotel and tourism projects.

IFA has already invested R1.6 billion in South Africa, and Wessel Witthuhn, president of IFA Hotels & Resorts Africa and Indian Ocean, said that the facility, which would take about 18 months to complete, would cost R150 million.

About 2 500 people would get work during the construction of the projects.

Player has designed more than 300 layouts around the world, and the North Coast course is his first in KwaZulu-Natal.

After turning the sod, he handed the special silver spade over to Mike Mabuyakhulu, the MEC for Economic Development and Tourism, and then to



A ZULU ON MY LAP: World-famous golfing legend Gary Player was the star of the sod-turning ceremony on the North Coast yesterday, but he could not help making a fuss of 11-year-old Themba Mkhize, who joined him in a dance on the hillside.

PICTURE: PURI DEWJEE

Witthuhn, for them join in the ceremony. Then, he insisted that cricket star Shaun Pollock – the reigning Zimbali Country Club golf champion – stand next to him for a photographic session.

Having been entertained by the uMkhonto Kashaka dancers from Shaka's Kraal, Player singled out 11-year-old Themba Mkhize from the group, and joined him for a quick dance on the hillside.

Player, who continues to travel the world – he has been to 15 countries in the past two weeks – said that South Africa was the best country in the world, with incredible people and the best climate.

"Everyone should play a

role to contribute to this great country," he said.

Mabuyakhulu praised the famous golfer for "showing the world what South Africans are capable of".

He said the prestige of the Gary Player brand, coupled with another world-class golf, residential and commercial development, would add to the region's tourism offerings.

The investment came at a time when the world economy and tourism industry was still recovering from the effects of the economic recession, and was thus a confidence booster for the province and vote of confidence in the future growth of the region's tourism industry.

"IFA Hotels & Resorts and Gary Player could have chosen to invest anywhere in the world. But they have chosen our country and our province, and this will send a clear message to other prospective investors that KwaZulu-Natal is ready to do business with investors from all over the world," he said.

Mabuyakhulu also said that an aggressive marketing campaign was planned to make KwaZulu-Natal a preferred destination of choice in the world.

The province had 33 percent of the domestic tourism market, but "we think we need to push it to about 50 percent", he said.

