

U.S. Open Championship 2020

Tuesday, September 15, 2020

Mamaroneck, New York, USA

Winged Foot Golf Club

Rory McIlroy

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're pleased to have 2011 champion Rory McIlroy to the 2020 U.S. Open interview area. Rory is currently No. 4 in the world, the four-time major champion, and he is making his 12th start in the U.S. Open. Rory, just to start it off, just some initial reactions to the course here at Winged Foot.

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, it's awesome. I've never been here before. This is the first time I've had a look at it. Played 18 holes yesterday and loved what I saw.

It's hard, obviously, but I think it's very, very fair. I said to someone yesterday when I played Oakmont for the first time, my initial reaction was, this place is impossible, where it's not -- this course doesn't feel quite as -- it gives you a little more chances if you miss it, I guess. You can run the ball up on to the greens and maybe a touch more playable, but it's a tough track, and I'm still learning it as I go here. I'm going to go and play nine holes this afternoon after this.

But I loved what I saw yesterday morning, and I'm excited to get going.

Q. You said yesterday you didn't think it was quite playing as long as maybe you had thought or at least if you look at the card. Can you talk about how you think it's going to play for the week and what's the most challenging part of this golf course?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, so I think when you read articles about golf courses and you -- Dan and I were having this discussion yesterday; sometimes they get so hyped up and so made into these -- this is a wonderful golf course, and I think one of the best that I've played for a U.S. Open, but you still get here and -- I thought I was going to have to hit driver, 5-iron into every par-4, and it's not quite like that. There's still places where precision beats power, and that's been the case here at U.S. Opens in the past.

But not as many drivers off tees as I thought there would be, which is good. You've got to put your ball into position, and then once you do that, that's a tough part, and then

getting it on to the right levels of these greens, leaving it below the hole, giving yourself decent putts.

I think this place tests every single aspect of your game, so I don't think I could single out the toughest thing that you need to do or the hardest thing you're going to have to do this week. It's all pretty tough.

Q. You said not many drivers; I'm curious, 6 and 11, do you think you'll be going for 6, and just more generally speaking, how do you go about mapping your strategy for risk-reward holes like that where the data or some visualization might say go for the green or wisdom might say lay back. How do you approach that?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, so again, this course is a little different than it was in previous championships, so there isn't much data to look back on and see what other guys did. You think about the last major championship played here in '06, the game has changed dramatically since then in the last 14 years. The game is different.

So I don't think -- other stops that we go to throughout the year, you can look back on previous years and see -- and maybe make a -- like the 10th at Riviera, for example. You have data for that every year. Everyone knows by now the best way to play that hole is to go for the green. That's the best way to make a 3. But here you don't really have that. It's a matter of playing practice rounds, getting comfortable.

Honestly, on the 6th hole I'm more comfortable hitting a driver up at the green than I am hitting a 3-iron for a lay-up. That hole is certainly one that suits my eye and suits hitting a cut driver in there. And hitting shots from the front bunker there yesterday, it seems like if you're in that front bunker, it's pretty good to most pin positions.

And then on 11, I can't see -- I don't see many people hitting driver on 11. You can carry that bunker on the left, but then the fairway is like a hog's back. It just doesn't seem as if a ball can stay in that fairway if you carry it over. That's not a hole that I would -- that's something I would just be trying to hit something down to the bottom of the hole and hitting a 9-iron or a wedge in.



Q. What has been kind of your biggest takeaways in U.S. Opens since Congressional?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I think if anything, they provide different tests every year. You have somewhere like a Congressional, and the weather wasn't quite cooperative there, and the course probably didn't play the way they wanted it to. But then you go to somewhere like Olympic, which is completely different. It's on the West Coast, it's different grass, it's a different climate. Then somewhere like a Pinehurst where it's completely different again, and then Chambers Bay, Erin Hills -- every year is just a little different, and I think that's a nice thing. It definitely doesn't get repetitive, which is nice.

Q. J.T. called this a different kind of fun, I guess in like a sick, perverse way. I'm curious if you relish that challenge, and at what point does it venture from extremely difficult to then goofy golf?

RORY MCILROY: You know, look, I've only played 18 holes here, but there would have to be -- something would have to go seriously wrong to get into the realms of goofy golf. I think good shots here seem to get rewarded. It's not -- again, going back to Oakmont, Oakmont is a wonderful golf course, but I think Oakmont setup normally is right about on the edge, and if you just go a little further, then that can start to get a little goofy, where here it doesn't seem like that can happen. Certainly if you get it way too firm and you get some crosswinds and stuff, it can get pretty dicey, but from what I've seen yesterday and today, I expect that not to happen.

It's cooler temperatures. I'm sure the course can get pretty firm, but it's a little different in September than it usually is in June, as well, I guess.

Q. How are Poppy and Erica doing, and how was it being at home last week?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, they're doing great. Thankfully everyone is healthy, which is obviously the most important thing.

Yeah, they're good. Erica has bounced back well. She's back doing our four-mile runs and stuff in the morning, so a lot tougher than I am. But yeah, everyone is good at home. It was tough to leave on Sunday. Could have spent an extra couple days there for sure.

But yeah, everyone is good, thankfully. And just grateful that everything is good at home, and it allows me to come up here and focus on what I'm supposed to do.

Q. Have you changed a diaper?

RORY MCILROY: I actually changed the first two diapers, so I'm very proud of that. But yeah, I've got my hands dirty; put it that way.

Q. How has it been for you playing without fans and just kind of are you used to that experience yet?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, I'm used to it now. I think at the start it was different. It was interesting. You know, I've been pretty vocal on the fact that it took me a while to adjust to not having fans. But it's sort of become the norm nowadays.

Look, it's different. I wish we were playing in front of fans, especially here in New York. It's a different reception than you receive most other places in the country.

You know, hopefully this is the only one that it's going to happen, and we can get back to somewhat normal life next year and crowds are allowed back and we can do what we want. Yeah, but it is different, but it has to be this way for a while, unfortunately, but hopefully not for too much longer.

Q. TV probably doesn't do these greens justice in terms of the amount of slope and undulation. How do you go about preparing for a putt that could be 50 feet and feature just crazy amounts of break?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, I think you have to have a lot of imagination. There's a lot of feel involved. I think especially on these greens, where's the easiest next putt from and where is the easiest next shot from. I think there's a lot of thinking ahead on this golf course, and okay, where can I leave this next shot that I have the most routine chip shot or second putt or whatever. So there's a lot of just thinking one step ahead.

As you said, a 50-foot putt like that, you're maybe just thinking of if I can leave this eight feet below the hole so my next putt is coming back up the hill, then that's a good thing.

Q. Obviously it's been 14 years since the Open was here, but with regard to Phil, it's his first time back since then. Do you remember what your emotions were when you went back to Augusta in '12, and did you feel like you had a score to settle? Were you still shaken at all by what happened the year before, that kind of thing?

RORY MCILROY: I was probably -- luckily I bounced back quickly and won the U.S. Open at Congressional a couple of months later. I didn't let -- I let my chance of winning a Masters slip through my fingers, but at least I didn't



squander a chance to win a major that year. I went into '12 at Augusta -- yeah, the memories that come back and things that you would have done differently, of course they all come back, but it didn't feel like I was there and trying to get one over on the course or trying to settle a score in any way.

It's different, right; Phil has been so close in this tournament so many times, and you could argue that this was his best chance. He had a few other chances that were maybe just as good. You know, it's a tough one, but I think Phil at 50, I'm sure he's made his peace with the fact that he may never win this tournament. He may, could go out this weekend and blitz it, but at the same time, I think when you get to that stage in your life and everything, and his life has gone the way it has, his career, his family, everything seems to be in a good place, I think he's probably made his peace with what happened here 14 years ago.

Q. You've been No. 1 so much of the time over these past few years, but in the majors you have struggled, I think, more than people would have expected. Is that something that you put any analysis into or that you've mulled over to think of what can you do to bring it up in those tournaments to match the rest of your play?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think if anything, if you've looked at my major championship performances over the last few years, I've just gotten off to slow starts. I probably just put a little too much pressure on myself going into tournaments. And from there, shooting a bad score on the first day and putting yourself under even more pressure from there to just make it to the weekend, and then to try to play catch-up. I think that's been the big thing.

When I start tournaments well, I seem to stay up there. I started Pebble last year with a nice score and stayed up there for the most part. I didn't quite finish the week the way I wanted to. But that's been the big thing for me. If I can start and put a good solid round together on a Thursday, I'm usually right there.

Q. Gary Woodland said that he thinks that the long hitters like yourself will have a major advantage at this course. I know you're saying you're not going to have to take as many drivers as you thought, but with the rough being where it is, if you're farther down, what kind of advantage do you think you might have?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, I think any golf course that we go to nowadays the longer hitters are going to have an advantage. I'm not saying I'm not going to hit drivers. I think in my mind I just expected I was going to hit 14

drivers and whatever the par-3s are. I hit 3-wood into one of the par-3s yesterday, so it wasn't that much less than driver.

Yeah, look, every course we go to nowadays, it's the way that the modern game has went. The longer you can hit it, the more advantage you have. And as I said at the start of this press conference, the course does allow you to run balls up onto the green. So if you are in the rough and you are down there, you have a chance to advance it onto the green and give yourself a putt for birdie or at least get out of there with a par.

But I still don't think that's a -- I'd still take hitting fairways over hitting it 350 in the rough here.

Q. Aside from being up all night, has fatherhood relaxed you? Do you come in here with a little better frame of mind?

RORY MCILROY: I think so, yeah. I mean, I'm -- I sort of referenced this a couple weeks ago. I think it just puts things in perspective a little bit. Not that this -- not that my career -- it matters to me and I care about it very much, but at the same time, it makes the hard days a little easier to get over, right. And I'm not saying that I want to have hard days to get over, but yeah, you're a little more relaxed.

When I say it's not the be-all and end-all, it's a major championship and I've grown up my whole life dreaming of winning these tournaments, and that's not going to change, but if it doesn't quite happen, I can live with that and go home and be very happy and leave what's happened at the golf course at the golf course.

I think that's maybe something that I haven't done so well in the past is I haven't left my job at the office basically, I've brought it home with me, and I've let it affect my mood and how I am.

I think having that little bit more perspective definitely helps.

Q. Shifting gears a bit, early in your career when you decided to start hitting the gym a little more intensely and pay attention to what you were eating a little bit more, I'm curious what prompted that change and what your advice may be to other golfers who may look to you as an inspiration.

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, so the reason that I decided to get healthier and get in the gym, I had a herniated L4-L5 disc in my back, and I had some bone edema in the vertebrae, and the doctor said to me if you let this go any longer, that could turn into a stress fracture and that could

put you out for a long time.

It was more out of necessity than anything else. So just to get stronger, build up a little bit of robustness in my body. Honestly, make myself a little less flexible, a little stiffer, that was one of the reasons. I had so much movement in my hips and in the lower part of my spine that it just wasn't -- there was not enough stability around there to protect the joints and the discs and the vertebrae. It was basically out of a necessity to do that and get stronger and prevent injury.

So that's my big thing, is the -- knock on wood, since then I haven't really had any back issues. I've had a couple other things, a couple not from golf, the ankle and stuff, but -- even like the rib injury, for example, that's something that I got into the gym and tried to strengthen and mobilize a little bit, my thoracic spine a bit, and once -- Tiger has probably talked to you about this at length, once one part of your spine is stiffened and stable, like his lower is, something else up the chain is going to have to take that stress. So for him it's his neck or his whatever, and for me it was my thoracic spine.

I think nowadays, again, with how the modern game is and how fast and hard we swing at it, you have to at least do something in the gym to prevent injury.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Rory. Good luck this week.

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