

AIG Women's Open

Wednesday, 19 August, 2020

Martin Slumbers

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the 2020 AIG Women's Open. This afternoon I am joined by Martin Slumbers, Chief Executive of The R&A.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everybody, and I'm very pleased that you have been able to join us for this afternoon's press conference from the AIG Women's Open here at Royal Troon.

We are very much here in circumstances that none of us would envisage when we were at Woburn for the championship last year. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the whole of golf, but we are pleased to give women's professional golf a real boost this week by playing this year's first major championship over these world famous links, albeit behind closed doors.

I would like to thank everybody who has been involved in staging the championship this week, and ensuring that it can be played safely for the benefit of the world's leading women golfers. In particular, our thanks go to the members of Royal Troon for their support and the club's grounds staff for preparing the course to a simply world-class standard.

As many of you know, AIG came on board as title sponsor last year, and they have been hugely supportive of our decision to go ahead with this year's championship. This reflects our shared vision for the future of women's golf, and our aim to elevate the AIG Women's Open to being a major global sporting event.

The pandemic, though, has given us a real opportunity to pause for thought and consider how we could best work towards our goal of elevating this championship.

With that in mind, I want to announce today a schedule for the AIG Women's Open for the next five years. We appreciate the cooperation of the venues helping us compile what is a very exciting run.

This is a very strong statement of intent as to where we want to take this championship, and I'm delighted to tell you that the venues which will stage the AIG Women's

Open until 2025 are as follows: 2021 will be at Carnoustie. 2022 will be at Muirfield. 2023 will be at Walton Heath. 2024 will be on the old course at St Andrews and we will culminate this fantastic five-year run in 2025 at Royal Porthcawl.

The flexibility the venues have shown in adjusting their own calendars has been vital in allowing us to confirm our plans for the championship for the next five years. It's been a truly collaborative effort, and we look forward to working with them to deliver an outstanding experience for the world's best women golfers in the coming years.

Q. Were the members at these venues enthusiastic? Begrudging? How would you characterise it?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Absolutely ecstatic about it. They all -- they are not only some of the best venues that we have to offer in this country, but they are clubs who really believe in helping the women's game and are absolutely delighted to have their golf courses stage this great championship.

Q. Obviously Muirfield will be the headline venue of that very good list. Could you have ever imagined when you took over from Mr. Dawson that you would be announcing Muirfield as a host of the Women's Open, considering their history and not having female members until a few years ago?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think the world has changed quite a lot in the last five years. The game of golf has changed quite a lot in the last five years. I think there is a lot more discussion and energy and commitment about the game more modern and relevant to today's society, and we couldn't have a more enthusiastic partner in the Honourable Company in wanting to change this championship. I think it will be a fantastic place for the women golfers to go and play. I'm pretty excited already and I think Muirfield will really embrace it and give us a fantastic championship.

Q. Great statement on their behalf, isn't it?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: It's a huge statement. It's a huge statement of their commitment to the game and their commitment to the women's game. But the whole five years is intended to be a huge statement of intent about



how we want to provide the platform for the best women golfers to play on some of the best golf courses that we can offer in GB&I. It's a five-year run that really should whet the appetite of every great golf lover.

Q. Could you explain the philosophy in terms of the courses you've selected? Obviously Walton Heath is in there and that isn't a seaside links. Obviously you have the rebranding of what was the women's British Open to the Women's Open, which suggests a move to a closer alliance with The Open, which is always played on links courses. I wonder what the philosophy is.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, I think we've sort of talked a little about this over the years and whilst The Open will always be played on a links course, I've always said the Women's Open may not always necessarily be on a links course.

You know, we need to find a combination of venues that not only show they have the right platform, but where we could attract interest in the women's and girls game. To do that, we felt it was very important to have one of our biggest inland courses in London where there is a growing women's and girls golf and use the capital of the country to really galvanise that and be close to it. I think it complements those three real top-quality open championship links courses.

I do think as the years go by in a five-year cycle, we'll always want to have one course that is in the capitol and be able to attract that. We want to use this championship, not just for the players show us -- as I said many times, to show us good they are, but to get more and more interest in women and girls to play. We didn't do it this year. It's hard because we can't get any crowds. But in these future years, we will absolutely look to market those crowds into the events.

Q. In context of this week, The Open was postponed and that proved to be completely the correct decision, what was your percentage hope of this event happening and how strong was your desire to make it happen? Because in the bigger picture, this feels like a really significant week for women's golf?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think like a lot of people, those were pretty dark times, weren't they, in late March, early April. There were bigger issues for the world to worry about and still are bigger issues to worry about.

I think at that time we were struggling to see how any golf was to go to take place, certainly at the top level. Right through it we wanted to take as possibly could on this

event, the women's event. We wanted to see where everything developed, and all along, I have felt this sort of deep responsibility to stage this.

I think I have been committed about women and girls golf since I arrived in St Andrews, taking control of this event for the first year this year made me more determined to wait as long as we possibly can and see how the world evolved, and when I sit here today on the eve of it teeing off, all be with some pretty dreadful weather forecast for the next couple days, it was a great decision. I think there's a wonderful sense of excitement and I'm glad you feel that there is something special about holding it this week, because we certainly do.

Q. Can I ask the point when you realized this would be possible in the context of everything going on; when did you realise, yes, we can do this?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think we have spent a large part of the last three months in deep, deep dialogue, not just with AIG and making sure that they were committed to it, but with the Scottish government who have been incredibly supportive and suitably challenging in making sure we got an environment that was safe for the players.

But if I'm really honest, it was probably only a month or so ago that we were really comfortable that we could get this away, and it has been an enormous effort by an enormous number of people, and our thanks go to not just our pars but the government both in Westminster and Scotland who have been tireless in helping us try and make a statement of putting this championship on.

Q. I don't know if you've seen, there's a report out today, the Women's Sport Rich List by Forbes that has nine of the Top-10 are tennis players. I wonder, first of all, your reaction to that and that golf continues to see underrepresented for prize money as far as women goes. What is the feeling for you as one of the custodians of the game in that respect?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think the 10th player was a footballer, wasn't it, if I remember correctly.

I think we've talked about prize money in women's sport and women's golf. I've said that we are committed as an organisation to moving it and to building a sustainable business model to be able to justify that. We took a significant increase in the prize money last year moving it up 40 per cent.

This year our commitment is staging the championship, but we will absolutely look to move -- to move up and it's my job to sell and market this event to sponsors and partners,

and I think that there's a rolling snowball developing and I would look to all corporates to help get this behind women's sport and grow that prize money. We're committed, absolutely committed to doing that, but in a sustainable way.

Q. Is there a sense of frustration then that there are companies out there that will put up \$2 million bonuses for players for seemingly arbitrary bonuses, when ideally, you'd want that money to filter down to the women's game?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: No. No frustration at all. It's all about developing the product and the right platforms for it to be played on, and then being able to work with pars to understand their needs and them to understand our needs.

I think the run of five years of venues that we've put together is part of that. I mean, it doesn't get better than that in this country, and we are so excited for the next five years showcasing these brilliant players on, as I've said before, some of the greatest golf courses we have.

Q. On a separate topic from today's announcement, but a topic I'm sure you expected to come up. Last weekend at the Renaissance you had all the ingredients in place for it to be one of the most thrilling climaxes of the season, and unfortunately it was so painfully slow that it was hard to watch at times. Has the time come for far stricter sanctioned shot penalties, that kind of thing, and then for referees to be stricter with shot penalties, would a major championship with the eyes of the world on you be the best place to do that?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: The rules around pace of play are clear and in the rules of the sport. We know what the sanctions are and how they can be managed. I have consistently said that pace of play is important to the development of the game. It is absolutely one of the top reasons that people give for not taking up the game and pursuing it further. We have been as diligent as we can over the last few years with the R&A events to improve pace of play.

It always makes me smile when we see the times for The Open that actually The Open's pace of play is pretty good compared to what some people's expectations are of it.

I think with regard to this week, let's not kid ourselves. We are in for two really rough days of weather. I mean, we are forecasting 20-mile-an-hour wind steady, but gusting up to 45 miles an hour on a really tough links golf course. Now, we are doing our bit. We are easing the golf course as much as we can to make it as playable, because we want

a spectacle. I want to see the players play.

But let's not kid ourselves; this is going to be very, very tough for the next two days. But we have written -- I have written to all the players today, and outlining to them our plans for the championship in terms of the conditions and making it clear that we will finish on Sunday.

The COVID restrictions around this event mean that we do not have an option to go to Monday, so we will finish on Sunday. We may be required to play 36 holes on Sunday and we are going to see how the weather goes, and in that, I have also made it clear that pace of play is important, but we need to do it together. We will do our bit and we expect and ask the players to do their bit.

So we are having that -- we are having that conversation, but don't overestimate how hard or underestimate, my apologies, how hard it's going to be the next two days for these players.

Q. Do you believe if there were shot penalties in place rather than just a slap on the wrists, then slow play would very quickly improve?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, there are shot penalties in the rules, and prescriptions about how those shot penalties can end up being awarded.

Q. Just a couple things. One, you say that when you go to talk to companies about Women's Open or women's events in general, that you have basically a playbook that you come out with and explain why they should be involved. Can you give us some of the highlights of what that is when you're talking to other corporations about why they should get involved in women's golf?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, I mean, there's no magic in the playbook, Alex, and good morning, by the way. There's no magic in it. It is about how to engage with a broader audience as a consumer audience; how to be part of developing what is a better diversity in the sport and a better diversity in the working of the sport; and how they can be part of that journey that we are trying to move the game on.

You know, I look at the U.K., and I look at club golf, and it's about 15 per cent of club members are female. In countries where the game is really growing, that number is in the 20s and 30s, and the high 30s in some cases.

So the opportunity to grow the audience is dramatic and being part of that development is part of the -- part of our sort of playbook, the word you used, to describe about

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getting involved with this.

And AIG have been fantastic in embracing that. It fits with their corporate objectives, as well, and how golf can be a part of that, and I couldn't wish for a better partner with AIG.

Q. One other thing. You obviously learned a lot since you made your decision to cancel The Open Championship this year. The PGA TOUR, The European Tour, obviously the LET, the LPGA, they are all playing golf without fans. If, in fact, the situation came about where fans again starting in 2021 were not allowed to be at golf tournaments but the tournaments were going on, would you entertain having an Open Championship without fans?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think we're all learning. I think we've all learnt an awful lot in the last few months. I have absolutely no regrets over the decision we made to cancel The Open this year. It was not possible for us to do it. It was the wrong thing to do on the timing.

You know, one hopes that the world is going to be in a better place come next season, but if it's not, we will absolutely assess behind closed doors Open Championship as one of the options come July 2021.

Q. Greetings from Penang in Malaysia. Sorry I can't be with you this week. We have a defending champion this week from Japan. We have a wonderful presence of Asian girls in the Rolex Rankings, and yet we have five major championships for women, none being in Asia. Do you not think that the promotion of the game in our part of the world, that is something that should now be looked at for the betterment of the women's game here?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, I think in terms of the majors, because I can only really talk about the one event that I'm responsible for. I think it would be presumptuous for me to comment on that regard.

But what I would say is that I think that women's golf is truly a global sport, and I don't think there are many sports that are as global as women's golf. It's fascinating, I spent a lot of time behind the driving range making sure it's all working properly, and you see the breadth of cultures, it's terrific.

And I see the game evolving globally. I think the great opportunity is particularly for the men's game in Asia, but the women's game can still grow. And so who knows what the world is going to throw up in the next few years on that, but we certainly through the LPGA have some fantastic Asian tournaments that really do showcase the players in

Asia, and I certainly enjoy watching them.

Q. You talked about a snowball developing for the women's game. There seems to be a snowball developing for the game in general. There seems to be a silver lining to this pandemic that people are interested in golf, participation numbers are up, and I'm wondering if you're seeing that, and if there's any evidence in numbers to back that up. And is this a prime opportunity to actually grow the game that we need to seize on?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We absolutely are seeing that. Sports Marketing Solutions published their draft July numbers today that show that we are back already level with July of last year, 2019, despite the fact that we had a couple of months where the numbers -- one month went 100 per cent down.

I think we have done a really good job of portraying golf as good for your health, good for your mind, and a sport that you can do in a socially distant and responsible way. I think that there are -- there's always been a lot of sport lovers, but if you love team sports, whether you watch or play, that's going to be a challenge for the foreseeable future, and they are turning to golf.

But our real challenge now is to make it sustainable. You have heard me talk about people will join golf clubs when golf clubs are selling the product that people want to buy, and we've still got to do that, and we've still got to keep changing and we've still got to keep being modern and relevant.

But this could be a real opportunity for the game if we can grasp it and start showing the game in a positive way and I think that there's going to be a huge amount more debate about the need for health and the need for mental well-being out of this. It's been an extraordinary five or six months, and I think golf is right up there, and I intend to use my efforts to maximize the value.

Q. In your note to the players, you said that you're going to be thoughtful in the setup of the course, and then you also talked there about easing the course. Can you expand on that a little bit, and is it sort of a fine line between making it a little bit easier but not taking the test away altogether?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I don't think it's going to be easy, Martin, for the next two days. The winds forecast are from the south tomorrow and the southwest on Friday. The latest forecast I had before I came over here is the two days are going to be pretty consistent at the moment with that 20 gusting up to 45 miles an hour.

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Now, southerly, southwesterly is into the first or into off the right of the first. So the front seven holes for those of you who know the golf course well will be into the breeze.

So we have looked to make sure that carries can be made on some of the par 5s, but we've also looked to make sure that bunkers that are meant to be in play off the tee are in play off the tee, even if they are hitting a 20-, 25-mile-an-hour wind. And I think that's important, Martin, in terms of we've eased it but we have not taken the full teeth out of the golf course.

And then when we turnaround, we are going to shorten one of the par 3s, the one into the wind. When we turnaround, once they get on to the 13th tee, they are downwind the whole way, which will make the back nine, which as you know is the toughest nine, a bit more playable and hopefully they will be able to score.

But it's going to be -- we will be wrestling with balls moving. We slowed the greens down. A bit of rain forecast tonight that will soften it a little bit, but there's plenty of rough.

It's fascinating listening to the players as they have been having their practise rounds, and they have all -- the overriding feeling is, wow, this is a really tough links golf course, and at times, pretty intimidating.

We want to do that balance. I think the scores will be spread, but I think the best players, we want to make sure the best players who are playing well can score because that's what I think professional golf should be about.

Q. And is this the biggest test in that respect in your time in charge?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think the biggest test in my time was standing here in 2016 on the first day of The Open being responsible for The Open and never having done it before. That was pretty scary. But yeah, we're spending a lot of time thinking about the course because we want to get it right, Martin. We pride ourselves on getting it right.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, everyone, for joining us this afternoon, and we do hope that you enjoy the 2020 AIG Women's Open.

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