

THE PLAYERS Championship

Tuesday, March 7, 2023

Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, USA

TPC Sawgrass

Rory McIlroy

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome 2019 PLAYERS Championship winner Rory McIlroy to the interview room here. You're coming off a runner-up finish at Bay Hill last week and making your 13th start here. Just some opening thoughts on carrying that momentum into this week.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, last week was definitely a positive, a step in the right direction, especially considering the finishes in Phoenix and L.A. so, yeah, as much as I was disappointed that I didn't play the final five holes the way I wanted to, it was still a good week, and I feel like getting into contention last week and sort of having those feelings sets me up well for this week.

THE MODERATOR: With that, we'll open it up to questions.

Q. You guys obviously just got out of the player meeting. How would you describe the vibe in there, the level of buy-in from all the players? What's that dynamic been like?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so I think when more information and data was presented to them, the people that maybe had reservations about it I think came around, or at least were more informed on their opinions, right.

I think the TOUR executives did a really good job of basically just walking them through the slides that we saw in the board meeting last Tuesday, obviously not to the same degree of detail. We were in that board meeting for almost seven hours last Tuesday.

Obviously we're all here trying to get ready for one of the biggest tournaments of the year. So with that time crunch, we just sort of took the -- or they took the sort of most important slides and showed them to the membership. Yeah, I think it was good for them to see that and to see what the thinking is behind what we're really trying to do here. I think the temperature in the room was nowhere near as hot as I anticipated it to be once the information was sort of laid out.

Q. Is there anything specifically about the rollout last week or about the either public perception or some player perception that you feel like needed to get cleared up?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I think just more so that there's enough jeopardy built into the system. Obviously there's going to be eight events with no cuts, but with everything that you have to do to get into those events, you know, like Tiger Woods won 26 no-cut events in his career, right. There's always been no-cut events. So we just have to -- Jack Nicklaus won 20 no-cut events. Arnold Palmer won 17.

Again, as I said last week, there's precedent for no-cut events. But I think the -- like cuts that you have to make to get into those events, so making the playoffs, getting into the top 50, so there's certain things that you have to do to qualify for those events. I think that's more than fair to warrant eight events a year that are guaranteeing the players four days.

Q. If you go back to Delaware and the first meeting and what you guys talked about that night, how did it look then compared with how it looks now?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so I said this in the meeting today. The presentation in Delaware was very self-serving for the 20 players in that room. We were looking at fields of 50 to 60. We were looking at only 10 players dropping out of that top 50 every year, so a retention rate of 80 percent. The TOUR were like, look, the typical retention rate for the top 50 has historically been around 60 percent, so let's try to get back to that number.

So the structure that has been rolled out here is vastly different from the one that we all talked about and the guys saw in Delaware, and I think for the betterment of everyone. I think if we had have went down that road, it doesn't serve the membership anywhere near as well as what this structure does.

Q. What in your opinion was the bigger change, the size of the field, retention, or number of elite events or whatever they're called, designated?



RORY McILROY: Even that, the designated events were -- I think there was 14 originally in the Delaware deck. I think we settled on eight designated events outside of this event, the majors and the playoff events. So you look at the entire schedule, there's eight designated events outside of those tournaments that I just mentioned. But then there's 29 full-field events during the rest of the calendar year.

Q. Six years ago when Jon Rahm played his first event here at THE PLAYERS he had a really bad day on Saturday, shot his worst career round, struggled with reining in his emotions, and I asked you about it afterwards and you said that he's going to be one of the best players of this -- he had only been a pro for less than a year. You said he was going to win majors; you said he was going to be one of the greatest players of his generation, as long as he channels his energy and passion the right way. Could you talk about what we have seen from Jon Rahm since then, because that seems like that has happened and just talk about how he has evolved.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I think that's just all a part of the maturing process and experience and learning. I think we all knew that even when Jon Rahm was in college you could have made the argument that he was a top-20 player in the world. All the stats suggested that.

Yeah, I mean, what he's done in the game up until this point I think we all -- he had the talent to do that, but as you said, it was just more of the using that passion that he has and making that fuel his performance instead of taking it away. He's obviously learned how to do that. He's an amazingly talented golfer.

Look, last week wasn't a great week for him after the great start, but he's been relentless. He's been relentless since that first win of his at Torrey Pines. He's just, year after year he wins; he's always up there; he's so consistent. His top-10 percentage rate is off the charts. As you said, he's going to be one of the best players of his generation.

Q. Could you just talk from your own personal experience the degree of difficulty of reining in your emotions when things aren't going well?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it's hard. I think when you're younger, I think it's a little more difficult to see the bigger picture. Every opportunity you get, every round you play feels like the biggest moment ever. But then when you sort of take a step back and you think about a career in golf, especially with how young Jon started or how young I started, over the course of 30 years you're going to play a ton of golf tournaments, you're going to have a ton of

opportunities, so it makes a lot of those moments seem a little more manageable whenever you can sort of see the bigger picture better.

Q. When you look at what the PGA is doing now, considering how good its product and even its policies, how much of that would you say can be attributed to the emergence of LIV Golf and the actual news clash that's playing out in the California court right now?

RORY McILROY: A lot of it. I'm not going to sit here and lie; I think the emergence of LIV or the emergence of a competitor to the PGA TOUR has benefited everyone that plays elite professional golf. I think when you've been the biggest golf league in the biggest market in the world for the last 60 years, there's not a lot of incentive to innovate. This has caused a ton of innovation at the PGA TOUR, and what was quite, I would say, an antiquated system is being revamped to try to mirror where we're at in the world in the 21st century with the media landscape and just every -- you know, the PGA TOUR isn't just competing with LIV Golf or other sports. It's competing with Instagram and TikTok and everything else that's trying to take eyeballs away from the PGA TOUR as a product.

So, yeah, you know, LIV coming along, it's definitely had a massive impact on the game, but I think everyone who's a professional golfer is going to benefit from it going forward.

Q. Given the defending champion isn't here, I'm just curious about what the people's sentiment is like at the moment?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I think, would it be better if the defending champion was here this week? Absolutely. But he made a decision that he felt was the best thing for him, and he knew that decision was going to come with consequences, and one of the consequences is right now not being able to play on the PGA TOUR.

Q. For the better part of almost two years you've been dealing with talking about this week in and week out, not only working with the TOUR, trying to build a better model, working with Tiger on your project that starts next year. Do you feel like now with a lot of this stuff behind you that maybe it will be easier to focus on golf and try to do what you want in that realm now?

RORY McILROY: I hope so. I mean I think I've been doing a pretty good job of trying to balance both of those things. I feel like over the past 12 months I've played pretty well, but at the same time, I've had all of this other stuff to deal with.

When I went on the board of the PGA TOUR, I didn't imagine it would take up this much time. But I think it's been important work, and I'm proud of the steps that we and the PGA TOUR have made to try to make everything better for the membership and try to stem the flow of players that have went to LIV.

But yeah, hopefully with these new changes that have been announced, hopefully the majority of my time will be spent on concentrating on getting ready for golf tournaments and trying to be the best player that I can be. Not that I feel like it's taken away any of that, but it might give me a bit more free time to do other things that I enjoy, as well.

Q. That's good info on those non-cut wins for Jack and Arnie, thank you.

RORY McILROY: Just doing your job for you, Bob. It's fine.

Q. This year you guys are required to play in three non-designated events, and it's really helped like the AmEx and Torrey Pines and maybe Valspar next week. That's not going to be the case next year. Do you see yourself playing any beyond -- you know, there's 16 of these now, I guess. Do you see yourself playing any beyond those 16, and could that be an issue if guys don't do that?

RORY McILROY: So, again, I think one of the things you're going to hear a little bit later on is like schedule cadence. That's going to be a pretty key term in all this. The way the schedule is laid out next year, you're going to have -- everyone has sort of heard this, like two designated, maybe three full-field, two designated, and I don't particularly want to take three weeks off in between big events. I'm going to play at least one of those three to try to keep my game sharp.

So, again, it's trying to create the best schedule that guarantees that the top players play in the big events. But also that it can sort of guarantee the participation in a handful of the full-field events as well. So I think there's a pretty good balance to it, and I can certainly -- if you've got those 16, 16 events from January to August isn't a ton, right. You're going to play more than that to feel sharp and ready to go at the biggest events.

Q. Do you feel that five European victories here, if I've done my math correctly, is a fair return on in terms of European players playing in this event? Do you feel they've underachieved, or do you think that's about right? There's a general perception, which, of course, can be wrong, that its probably not quite as good as it

should be. What do you feel about that?

RORY McILROY: Just at this event?

Q. Yeah. Here.

RORY McILROY: I guess I would have to look at historical averages of European players winning on the PGA TOUR and seeing what percentage that is compared to -- I don't know how many PLAYERS Championships have been staged, 40 something? So you're saying five European winners in 40, so over 10 percent? I don't feel like that's a bad average. But, yeah, I would have to dig into it more.

I mean, as the years have went on, we've had more and more Europeans play in this event, so you would like to think that the chances of European victory are going to become more and more as those participation levels increase. But if someone just was to say to me that 10 percent of PLAYERS Championships have been won by Europeans, I would say that that's a pretty good return.

Q. Do you feel there's anything about this course that undersuits or stones suit players who come from Europe?

RORY McILROY: Not anymore. I mean, all the top Europeans live here. They play on this TOUR. You could maybe have made that argument 20 years ago, but I just think with the way the professional golf landscape is, we all base ourselves in this country and specifically in this area in Florida at this time of the year, so I don't think there's any excuses.

THE MODERATOR: Appreciate the time as always, Rory. Good luck this week.

RORY McILROY: Thank you.

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 . . . when all is said, we're done.®