

Cognizant Classic

Wednesday, February 28, 2024

Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, USA

PGA National Champion Course

Rory McIlroy

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: All right, we'd like to welcome Rory McIlroy to the interview room two Cognizant Classic in the Palm Beaches. This is your first return since 2018. You have great history here. In 2012 you held off Tiger Woods to win the event and ascend to No. 1 in the world for the first time.

Can you just take us back to those memories and how special of a day that was.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I remember having a chance to get to world No. 1 the week previous at the World Match Play in Tucson. Hunter Mahan beat me in the final and I was pretty motivated. I don't think I -- I don't know if I quite needed to win to get to world No. 1 that week, but I was pretty motivated to get the job done seeing I missed out on an opportunity the week prior.

So, yeah, it was a great week. It was just -- I was renting a place here. Hadn't bought a place here yet, so still figuring out the area. But obviously it's become a place that I call home now, so always nice to I guess achieve a lifelong ambition.

And I remember Tiger making that charge on the Sunday and then sort of having to hold on the last five holes. I made two really good ups and downs on 15 and 17. And, yeah, no, it was a really cool moment. I can't believe it's 12 years ago, but here we are.

Q. Third start this season. Had a chance to play Pebble and Genesis. Can you share where you game is and what are you looking forward to this week?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so third start on the PGA TOUR. I had two events in the Middle East and played well in Dubai. I feel like Pebble, the weather disrupted it and the courses were super soft.

Won the pro-am portion, so I guess it wasn't all bad. And then Riv was pretty good. I made a mess of 15 and 16 on the first day, but apart from that, I felt like I played some pretty good golf.

Feel like my game is in pretty good shape. You know, it's nice to stay at home this week and feel a little more I guess relaxed in the surroundings. Looking forward to getting started.

Q. There was a thought a few years back that perhaps the Champion course was becoming too difficult for the players in terms of what they wanted to play this time the year with the rough. Does it seem like they have taken steps to soften the course the last few years?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I mean, I can't speak to the last few years, but this year it's a lot more benign of a setup. The rough has been cut back. There has been a couple of bunkers taken out in certain spots. The greens are soft at the minute. I would like to think they'll get a little bit firmer as the week goes on.

Yeah, maybe it's not quite the test that it was ten years ago. Still you got hit the shots and all the hazards are in the same places.

But, yeah, the rough isn't quite as penal. It seems right now that they're keeping the greens a little softer.

Q. (No microphone.)

RORY McILROY: I think it's just 6, that right bunker. So it gives you a little bit of a bail-out into those moguls in the right rough.

Q. Obviously long history at this event. Haven't played it the last couple years. What compelled you to return this year?

RORY McILROY: So I think that the date in the schedule was a big thing, having that week in between the West Coast Swing and starting to Florida.

So that was a big part of it.

I think as well, you know, the field has or the tournament has struggled to attract a really strong field here the last



number of years. Then with a new sponsor coming in in Cognizant, I thought it would be a good time to step up and show some support for the tournament.

Q. At this point in your career how do you define a successful season?

RORY McILROY: I don't know. I guess it comes down wins and season-long titles and major championships I guess.

I can't sit here and say that last ten seasons haven't been successful because I haven't won a major, but at the same time, I recognize that whenever all is said and done I'm going to be judged on those tournaments a lot. Hopefully among other things as well.

But, yeah, winning is always good, and the more wins you can get the better.

Q. On the note of course difficulty, they gave you guys a break, quote, making 10 a par-5. Some guys laughed at it saying it doesn't matter. Is it simply just you're one score better to par?

RORY McILROY: It's the perception thing. Whether someone shoots 11- or 15-under to win, you're still having to get round in 269 shots over four days. It's a complete perception thing. Par is irrelevant in my eyes.

Q. I'm wondering the last time you spoke to Chubby Chandler and what did you think motivated him to say what he said other than making headlines?

RORY McILROY: I think he's writing a book, so there is that. I spoke to Chubby, might have saw him in the Middle East at the start of the year. Never know. He might know a few things. Who knows.

Q. He started by saying there is a good chance you would go to LIV -- it was 10%. Is there a percentage that...

RORY McILROY: Somewhere in the middle maybe. Who knows.

Q. Does 2012 feel like another lifetime?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, different life for sure.

Q. Do you ever reflect on where you are in your career? Start of the third quarter? Mile 22 of a marathon? What's the right sports metaphor?

RORY McILROY: I don't know. I said that Phil and Tiger were on the back nine of their career and got a lot of s*** for it.

I would say I've been a pro -- I turned pro in '07. What is this, my 17th year? Another 17 I'll be 51. Yeah, I would say I'm pretty close to the turn at this point, if not a little bit after. Maybe on the 10th green or 11th tee.

Q. Do you think you can sustain the same hunger for the next 17 years?

RORY McILROY: For the next 17, no. I would say for the next ten, absolutely. 17 teams like a stretch.

Q. That's the goal, ten more good years?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, yeah. Or a green jacket and just walk away.

Q. I have a two-part trophy question for you. You've collected more trophies as a pro alone than like we have books. How do you display them? Are you like Tiger, only the major trophies?

RORY McILROY: That would look a little sad just having four up there. His 15 look a little better.

Q. Do you do it by how artistic they are? Do you display all of them? Do you need more than one room? How does it work?

RORY McILROY: I've got a big wall in our sort of entertainment room that has most of the trophies in there. Couple of them I think are sitting in Hollywood Golf Club, which is sort of a nice thing as well, where it all started.

But, yeah, I sort of try to group them together a little bit. You've got some sterling silver ones, some gold ones, a couple of Wedgewood ones from the WGCs back in the day. Got some sort of crystal ones.

Yeah, you've got a bit of everything. It's a bit of a mishmash, a random collection.

Q. And in this day and age where your first place prize is just more and more significant, meaningful money, it occurred to me that maybe the trophies are passe. Like why are they meaningful? Listening to you talk about 2012, I'm wondering if that's the value of them, you can look at them and it takes you back to how you won them. For you, what is the meaning of displaying and having those around?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so I know a lot of players give

their caddies the flags from the 18th greens, but I like to keep those, and they're all in my gym sort of more for motivation.

I go in there and I see all the flags on the wall and I want to add flags to those walls. That's my motivation. The trophies are really cool and great to look at them and see all the names that came before you. That's amazing.

But just for pure motivation. And I think it's sort of like a double-edged sword. You look at these things and it's a nice moment to reflect on what you achieved, but it's also really good motivation in terms of what you still want to do in the game.

Q. What does Harry get for a win if he doesn't get the flag?

RORY McILROY: 10%. (Laughter.) No, so Harry actually has -- I think he has in his house framed the four shirts that I wore to win the four major championships.

But, yeah, I mean he's happy enough.

Q. This is inside baseball, but there is a lot of guys from the Korn Ferry TOUR, Q-School category who are in the field this week on their number. About a dozen have gotten three starts in the first nine weeks. About a third of the events for the rest of the year are going to be opposite field events with 300 points to the winner. What do you say to guys that are frustrated they don't feel like they're getting an equal shake at keeping their job at the very least?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, seems like it's getting more difficult to get your card and it seems like it's more difficult to keep your card, especially with this sort of tiered system now we have on TOUR.

But, I mean, I understand it, but then you look the -- what Nick Dunlap did at Amex or what Jake Knapp did last week, I get that you need the opportunities, but when you do get those opportunities, you just need to go out there and play well.

So it's sort of hard for me to speak to it because I've fortunately never been in that position, and it's hard to sit here and be like stay patient, because it's tough. But it's supposed to be tough I think is the thing. It's supposed to be competitive. Supposed to be cutthroat.

And I think that's sort of what we're trying to make the tour, is more like that, so that you try to make the most competitive product that you can.

Q. Kind of a two-parter about Augusta. I can't say it's next month yet. At what point does it start occupying the majority of your headspace when you get to that time of year? And secondly, did you have any reaction to the asterisk comment about that?

RORY McILROY: So I think for me, I'm going to try to get through this Florida swing here this week, Bay Hill and The PLAYERS, and just really focus on those three events and try to play well.

Then I've got two weeks after The PLAYERS, and I think that's when I'll start to turn my attention to practicing and maybe trying to hit some shots that I might need for that week.

Then probably go to Augusta on the way to San Antonio and play for a couple days. Yeah, so I think try to do a good job of not thinking about it for the next three, then after that, it'll be all systems go.

And the asterisk, look, the Masters is an Invitational and they'll invite whoever they think warrants an invite. I think to be fair to Talor, if you read the entire -- the question and then the answer, it's not as if he just came out with that.

I feel like whoever did the interview led him down that path to say that, so I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt there a little bit. He just agreed with what the interviewer asked.

At the same time, Joaquin Niemann got an invite and I played with him a few weeks ago in Dubai, and he went down to Australia and won. He was in Oman last week. He has been chasing his tail around the world to get this, play his way into August or show enough form to warrant an invite. I don't know if the same can be said for Talor.

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