

Dubai Duty Free Irish Open

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Thomastown, County Kilkenny, Ireland

Mount Juliet Estate

Irish Open

Press Conference

CLARE BODEL: Welcome, Rory. Welcome back to the Irish Open, and to Mount Juliet. You were out there playing today. Tell us how you got on. How is Mount Juliet looking today?

RORY McILROY: It's looking fabulous. Wonderful weather. Great golf course. It's great. I've never played here before. I've been here to watch when the World Golf Championships were here in 2002 and 2004; we came down to watch, but a little different playing it. And, yeah, obviously vantage point is a little different, as well.

But yeah, it's in great shape. I played the back nine today. I'll play all 18 tomorrow in the Pro-Am. Landed this morning at 5.15 into Dublin, so it's been a long day and pretty tired, but determined to stay up and watch England and Germany here in a little bit and we'll go from there.

Q. Wondering about your memories of those tournaments in 2002 and 2004. Many champions here are major winners. Is that something that you feel that this is a course that maybe suits players of that calibre; that you should be up there this week because of that?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I hope so. I hope to continue that trend, that's for sure.

Yeah, I remember quite a bit. I said to Harry, the last time I was on the 18th green here was during the prize ceremony when Tiger won, and I remember I somehow sneaked my way like under the rope onto the back of the green, and I was standing right behind him and his glove was still in his back pocket. And like I could have reached and got it and ran; it would have been a good story to tell him but I obviously didn't.

It was the first time I ever watched Tiger play live. I remember the first shot I ever saw him hit was a drive off the 5th hole, the par 5, and he hit a 2-iron into the green. It was really cool. I idolised him growing up and to actually see the man in the flesh was pretty exciting.



And then in 2004, I was sort of -- I had sort of made a name for myself in the amateur scene at that point and I had gotten to know Chubby and Darren and stuff, so I was a little more in the -- I remember being in the clubhouse and stuff and meeting Ernie after he won. Had a little more access then because that have.

But yeah, really good memories coming down here watching. It's amazing that it's been 17 years and the tournament hasn't been back since. Glad to be back and certainly a lot's changed in the last 17 years since the last time I was here.

Q. You're working on a few things with Pete Cowen and a couple majors have come and gone. What would be a good second half of the season? You have The Open coming up, the Olympics and The Ryder Cup. What would be a good end of season review if you were looking at it in four months' time?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I think getting myself into contention in another major. So getting myself into contention at The Open would be great. I think having a chance to win both the FedExCup and The Race to Dubai; I think they are two pretty good goals of mine I'd like to try to achieve.

And yeah, like have a great Ryder Cup. Obviously that's very important. There's a lot of golf to play up until that point, but I'd say they are the main goals. Just give myself a chance at The Open. Give myself a chance in both FedExCup and Race to Dubai, and try to have a really good Ryder Cup.

Q. You mentioned getting into Dublin at a quarter past five this morning. Can you outline how difficult or otherwise your travel plans have been, if you had to jump through any COVID-related hoops to get there this week?

RORY McILROY: Not particularly. I just took a PCR test within 48 hours of flying. I dropped the girls up in New York with Erica's parents, and then I flew on from there.

Yeah, it actually hasn't been too bad at all. Because I took a COVID test 48 hours prior -- within 48 hours of flying, I didn't need to take one after I landed in Ireland. Just came



straight into the bubble, and actually it's been pretty straightforward. It's been quite nice.

Q. On a similar note, what do you make of the restrictions coming up for The Open at Sandwich? Obviously some players are not going to be happy. They are probably used to some things slightly easier on the PGA Tour. Has it had any impact on your plans?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I mean, everything's had an impact. Up until last week my family were going to travel with me and we were going to be here for three weeks. My original plan was to play here, take a week off, that week in between which is now The Scottish Open and then play The Open.

But just with travel restrictions and obviously with me being exempt as a sports person and the restrictions not maybe being as heavy as they would be for Erica and Poppy, for example, I just felt like it wasn't fair to put them through what they would have to go through to be here with me.

So plans changed very quickly. We made the decision that I would travel on my own, and because I just -- I mean, I wasn't going to go back to the States for one week in between the Irish and The Open. I thought if I'm here, I might as well play the Scottish. So it sort of went quickly from them coming to them not coming, and then me playing three events in a row.

Q. It's been a while since you've been this side of the pond, just wonder how that feels. And also in a wider golfing context, that was a really encouraging performance at the U.S. Open. So how much does being able to play into Scotland play into your hands and create momentum for Sandwich?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it does. It is nice to get a tournament on a links course before going into Sandwich. So if anything, it's probably all worked out for the best.

And yeah, look, I was very encouraged walking away from Torrey Pines, to have a share of the lead on the final day through a few holes. I gave myself a good chance. Looking back, the one thing that I kicked myself about, it wasn't -- like the double on 12, you're going to get some bad breaks and I got a bad break but it was the three-putt on 11 that stopped the momentum. I made a really good putt for par on 10 and then probably hit my best shot of the day into 11. Great 5-iron into the middle of the green. And then, you know, that three-putt was just sort of -- it was pretty sloppy, and that killed the momentum to go on from there. But I thought the week was a real positive on whole and I'm looking forward to these next three weeks.

I didn't do much last week in terms of practise, knowing I'm away from my family five of the next six weeks. So I tried to spend as much time with them as I could, so I only hit balls one day. So this will be a nice week to get myself back into it and put the head down, practise. Great facilities here to sort of do what I need to do and get some good work done and feel ready to go, not just for this tournament but for the next few weeks coming up.

Q. You were saying at Torrey that you felt that instead of hoping to play well, you actually expected to play well. I just wonder what made the difference and is that a feeling that's been reinforced by the work you've managed to do going into these next three events?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it is. I've said it most of the year. It's me having a better understanding of my golf swing and having something that's just a touch more reliable under pressure. And that's just been with the work that I've done, having a little more control of the clubface, a bit more clubface stability through impact.

So just, yeah, I went out at Torrey on Sunday at least with a plan knowing what I needed to do to play well and have a chance to win the tournament, where maybe previously over the last couple years, it's been more of a wishful, hopeful sort of thing, where I felt like I was more I knew what I needed to do. It was just a much more comfortable feeling.

Q. You made the point, as well, that it had been a while since you felt you really involved in the mix in a major on the final day. Did you feel perhaps surprisingly comfortable when you did put yourself back in there?

RORY McILROY: I did. I felt pretty comfortable. Tee-to-green I played great those first few holes. I missed a couple of chances. Missed a chance on 2 and on 7 and maybe missed a chance on 9, as well.

So I turned in 1-under when I really could have turned in 3 and that would have been obviously a big difference. And then as I said, that three-putt on 11 was a momentum killer. Just from there, I was sort of chasing a little bit, and it's a very hard golf course to chase on.

But yeah, I felt good. I felt going into the final round again, I just had a better understanding, a little more certainty about what I was doing, and that led to being much more comfortable out there.

Q. How much of the good play was down to making a positive start for a change in the majors?

RORY McILROY: I think if you look historically, most of my wins, and certainly my major wins, I've started the tournament well. I felt like I played very well on Thursday at Torrey, and ended up having to birdie the last hole to shoot under par but I felt like I played better than that. I felt like it would have been a crime to not shoot under par with how I played that day.

It was. It was great to get off to a good start. Didn't quite keep it going on Friday. Didn't play quite as well but the round on Saturday got me right back into it. But as you say, you don't want to be starting those things off on the back foot, and it was nice to be able to start well.

Q. I bumped into your dad at the driving range last week.

RORY McILROY: Of course you did.

Q. I think your Mum was looking rid of him.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, that's about -- that's about right.

Q. Picking up on what you were talking about the pressure, I know you've talked about it the last few weeks and trying not to putt yourself under that pressure. This is the first time back at the Irish Open since you hosted it for four years, and that in itself brought a lot of extra pressure. Do you feel a weight is lifted? Does it feel different coming back to the Irish Open?

RORY McILROY: A little bit. I think there's always going to be a bit of added pressure when you come back and play an Irish Open, especially obviously being from here, but also being the favorite for the tournament and all that sort of stuff. So there's always those sort of pressures. But I feel like as long as I just stick to my game plan and my own expectations and try to get the most out of myself, then that's all I can do.

But yeah, I'm looking forward to this week. I feel like the Irish Open that I won at The K Club, it's a pretty similar set up to what it is here. Might be a little firmer this week because of the weather. But decent parkland courses, it's something familiar to me. It's what I've been playing for the last couple years. Yeah, I feel good about my game.

So yeah, there's always going to be pressure there. But I think if I just stick to what I'm doing and put my head down, I'll be okay.

Q. You haven't played in front of home fans since The Open; I know you're excited to play in front of fans

again since things opened up, but I'm sure this will be extra special this week?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it will. I mean, I wish more -- it would be great if more fans were allowed in, but I understand that's not quite possible at this time in this country. But it's at least nice that we are playing in front of somebody, right.

Whenever we started back last year, when there was no fans allowed, it was a tough atmosphere to play in, and getting used to playing in front of fans again in the States has been really nice. It was great to get that win at Quail Hollow in front of a lot of people and being in contention at the U.S. Open with quite a few people there, as well.

This is a bit of a step back from what we're used to over the last few weeks, but it's better than playing in front of nobody.

Q. Have you done any work with Pete Cowen since the U.S. Open and will you see much of him there in Europe over the next three weeks?

RORY McILROY: I haven't. I spoke to him once after the U.S. Open. He headed back home. Honestly I hit balls once last week. I hit balls for about two hours on Friday, and that's the only time I touched my clubs last week.

So did a little bit of work. Enough to sort of keep me from feeling too guilty. But I will; I will see him quite a bit. I'll see him in Scotland next week. I'll see him at The Open next week. Scotland we might work on a couple things.

But by the time The Open comes around, it's just a matter of me doing my thing and basically hopefully giving him nothing to say. At that point I should be playing well, and everything should be on the right track. But I've got a decent week here to hopefully play well and get myself back into the sort of form I was in in the U.S. Open and go from there.

Q. With all due respect, it's probably not quite as high-quality of a field as previous Irish Opens, do you think that could be because it's not a links course and it's at an awkward stage before The Open and The Scottish Open?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it's tough. It's tough to go into The Open having it be your third week in a row. I think a lot of guys feel that. You're not going to get many of the international guys coming over to play, they are not going to play the Irish Open and take a week off and then play The Open.

The date, it's a better date than we had in May, I think, but it's probably still not perfect to have a great field. You see the field that the Scottish Open have next week; it's very, very strong.

So I don't really know what the answer is. It's obviously not as strong as it has been in previous years, and there's a few factors to that, as well. You've got the tournament in Detroit on, PGA TOUR this week. Guys just have so many options where to play and when to play. Some guys are going to make the addition to play here and others aren't.

Q. Thoughts on being back the at Irish Open for the first time since 2018?

RORY McILROY: It's feel like three years. A lot has happened since. I played Ballyliffin obviously in 2018. Made the decision not to play in 2019 because I felt like that was the best preparation for The Open at Portrush, and then obviously last year with the pandemic and everything. Things have started to open back up again, so it is nice to be back.

Yeah, it's been a while. I haven't been home. I haven't been back here for nearly a couple years, and that's the longest time I've spent away for a while. But it is, it's nice to get back. I think if the weather was like this all the time, I'd probably want to come back more.

But it is, it's great to be back and great to be playing an Irish Open again and got a look at the back nine at Mount Juliet today and it's a great golf course.

Q. What did it mean to you to win this historic championship back in 2016?

RORY McILROY: It meant an awful lot. The Irish Open has been a big part of my career. I first played this event as an amateur in 2005. I went to watch Irish Opens as a kid and I think as well, 2016 with the involvement with the foundation at that point, as well, and raising so much money and then obviously winning and having that prize money go to charity, as well, it meant a lot for a lot of reasons.

Personally it was great to win an Irish Open but also it meant a lot another ways, too, which was very fulfilling.

Q. Two iconic shots to close out that tournament on 16 and 18. Your memories of that?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so I think at that point, I was one behind Russell maybe. Or maybe he had went level with him. He might have bogeyed 15. But yeah, I needed to go for it. And he was sort of in trouble on 16, and I knew if I

could just hit the green and make four, it looked like he was going to make par at best, maybe bogey, and he made bogey in the end.

So it was a two-shot swing and I just thought that was such an important shot to hit it sort of under that pressure, knowing that I needed to. That was the better shot.

The one on 18 was like the icing on the cake. I didn't need to hit that shot. But I needed to hit the one on 16, which obviously made it very pleasing.

Q. Having said you didn't need to hit, it just describe for us?

RORY McILROY: So I had the same -- I remember in the Pro-Am, I had a similar sort of shot and I think at that point I carried four wedges, so I didn't have a 3-iron in the bag. So I tried to like rope a 4-iron in the Pro-Am and I think I hit a couple left into the water, and then JP, my caddie at the time said, "Why don't you try hitting a cutty 5-wood in there."

I hit a great shot in the Pro-Am on Wednesday, and then on Sunday, I sort of had the exact same shot, and was like, well, we know what to do here. We've hit that shot already this week and hit the same little cutty 5-wood, and it worked out perfectly.

Q. Give us your impression of the course so far.

RORY McILROY: It's good. I think with the weather, it has the potential to become quite fiery over the week, which is going to make it play pretty short. It's already a short enough golf course by modern standards. But it's going to be tricky. Fairways are narrow. I think it's got the potential to become quite fiddly, a lot of like just putting it in position and going from there.

I think if you're smart, you can play pretty conservative with the par 4s. You can obviously take advantage of the par 5s and make birdie there. But there's plenty of chances out there, and pretty sure the scoring is going to be pretty low.

Q. How are you feeling about your game coming in?

RORY McILROY: I'm feeling good. I played well in the U.S. Open. Had a chance on the back nine. Things didn't go obviously the way I wanted them to but I felt very encouraged walking away and some of the work I've been doing with Pete's really started to bed in. I didn't really do much last week because I'm on the road five of the next six weeks and just wanted to spend as much time with my family as possible because they are not on the road with

me. I think I hit balls one day. So I'm looking forward to getting back into it this week.

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