

Dubai Duty Free Irish Open

Wednesday, 30 June, 2021

Thomastown, County Kilkenny, Ireland

Mount Juliet Estate

Graeme McDowell

Press Conference

CLARE BODEL: Welcome back to the Irish Open, you must be very looking forward to playing this we can after unfortunately not having an Irish Open last season.

GRAEME McDOWELL: Yeah, thanks, Clare. Listen, any time you're not playing an Irish Open, something's going on, and obviously it's been an incredible 15 months for everyone. Great to be back here at Mount Juliet. The Dubai Duty Free continue to support us, and having people watching us will be great. Golf course is in fantastic condition. I think it's a course that sets up pretty well for me, as well. You have to hit the fairways and keep the ball in play off the tee, and you have a lot of short irons in your hand and perfect greens. It's going to be a low-scoring affair and definitely got to come out of the gates hot tomorrow hopefully. Excited to be back, and looking forward to a good week.

Q. Been a tough run of form of late. What do you need to do to turn it around this week?

GRAEME McDOWELL: Yeah, it's been a really tough 12 months. It's been certainly one of the tougher 12 months that I can remember in my career. Because the disappointing thing was, going into the time off, I was actually really starting to get a heed of steam up. I won in Saudi, finished well in Hawai'i and played well in the first round of THE PLAYERS Championship.

Like the dream of playing a Ryder Cup was starting to be very real all of a sudden, and I felt like I had a pretty good spell during my time off. Worked on the sort of physical side of my game. Worked out quite a lot. Felt pretty good.

And then got back on the golf course and things started going sideways. Kenny got sick two weeks in, got COVID and took another couple weeks off after that and he couldn't caddie for me when we came back because he was still testing positive. Two months later I'm missing cuts left, right and center and then you start scrambling. You start searching, looking, trying and grinding. Started working with a new coach in December. That went sideways very fast.



The last couple months has been about trying to reset, reflect on where I'm at, the mistakes I've been making the last 12 months and realizing that 25, 30 years into a golf career, I'm not really going to be changing my pattern much at this point, and I need to do the things that I do. My basics need to be done better. Just do the small things better. That's been starting to turn the corner the last five, six weeks.

But then it's just the mental side of the game that's just not there. My confidence is low. My expectation levels are high, so really trying to adjust that. At this point, I really should be out here playing golf tournaments, enjoying myself, everything else is gravy from here. If I wasn't to hit another shot here, it's been a great run. It's been a great career.

But I'm not ready to walk away. I've got things that I want to achieve, and it's about kind of just refocusing on what does success look like for me now. It's different from what it looked like ten years ago and just making sure that I do a better job and give myself the ability to go on the golf course, relax, enjoy, the old cliché, get out of my own way. That's kind of where I'm at right now. The game is probably closer than it looks on paper. Just not really putting numbers on the board, but I don't really feel like I'm miles away.

Q. You've always been one of the most positive players, and also mentally strong. Does it surprise you that it's taken as long to get that?

GRAEME McDOWELL: Yeah, I think it has. You know, listen, obviously the past 12 months have been very difficult but the last four or five years have been difficult, as well. I've sprinkled a few wins in some pretty sort of barren period that maybe kind of polished things up and maybe made me look like I was playing better than I was.

The game feels difficult sometimes and other times it feels easy. It's a little bit of -- unfortunately it's sort of -- when you start getting on that downward spiral and you start playing badly it becomes very hard to stay loose. Playing well self-perpetuates but playing badly also self-perpetuates a little bit because all you can see is the bad. You're out there waiting for stuff to happen.



I think having spent the last three or four weeks having a little bit of a soul search as to where I am at, in reality what I need to do is come back and play The European Tour a couple years and get my confidence back, maybe. The PGA TOUR, it's a very harsh, harsh place to play golf when you're a little off. Good golf, I've always said it, good golf works both sides of the Atlantic. If you play well, you can win anywhere in the world.

If you play badly, you get exposed very fast in America I feel like just because the fields are just that little bit deeper. I feel like here in Europe, average golf, you can maybe make some weeks and maybe some 15th and they can be 20th positions that make you feel a little bit better about yourself rather than Friday night, flying home, going, here we go again, type thing.

Like I say, coming back to this tour for two years, I just -- I have young kids. I just can't do it. I'm in a little bit of a quandary right now where I need to find that right balance. So hopefully weeks like this week and next week, I can start finding that little bit of feel and confidence that I need. That's the little bit that's just missing right now with my game is that little bit of confidence.

Q. You said a moment ago, "I'm not ready to walk away." Do you actually say that at your young age of 41? Has it crossed your mind? To come out and say that, part of you must be thinking, that must be an option.

GRAEME McDOWELL: I think on your darkest day, you're think, you know, is this it. I think that's where I'm coming from. It goes without saying, I'm exempt on the PGA TOUR through the end of next year. I'm exempt on this tour for the next four or five years. It's not like I don't -- if I continue to play the way I'm playing, it's not like my playing privileges are going to go away. I have the ability to continue playing.

I guess when I say it like that, "I'm not ready to walk away," I'm not ready to walk away like this. I'm not ready to finish my career like this. I feel like I have the ability to continue to compete and play at a high level again. So I'm probably not sort of verbalising that correctly.

But it's more like I don't want to, the last 12 months is not how I want -- whether it be two years or five years, this is not how I want the next two to five years to go. There has to be a better mental approach and there has to be a better physical approach so that I can at least when it's over, I can have a smile on my face and think, you know, that was a good time rather than grimacing and frustrating myself into the end.

Q. And you joked before I came on about The Ryder Cup and the wine list, but you want to be at The Ryder Cup, you want to be there as a player and you've been there four times and you're now vice captain twice. You're involved probably not the way you wanted to being involved, is that fair to say?

GRAEME McDOWELL: Listen, March of last year, I felt like I could play in The Ryder Cup team at Whistling Straits. You know, pandemic got in the way. Like I alluded to, whatever I did wrong during those few months: Did I take my eye off my golf game just a little bit; did I drop 15 pounds and not know how to swing a golf club? I don't know what I did wrong. But something went haywire during that time off.

And when I came back, there was no one watching. I missed that energy. I missed -- there's no point making excuses. Guys weren't winning, picking up a trophy, just the same as they always do, so guys were getting it done. I just didn't get it done.

So as I sit here, obviously I'm very honoured to be one of Pádraig's vice captains. I wanted to be on the team. But the way I played the last 12 months, I know that I'm not good enough to be on that team this year right now.

I'm excited to be part of it. It's inspiring to be around The Ryder Cup environment. We had a little get-together last night. It's just inspiring to think, you know, look at these players, think about who is going to be on the team, visualise what's going to happen, get the old memories flooding back from what I've done in the past.

And Pádraig, him and I were just talking about pairings in the past and kind of what they are going to look like this year. It's exciting. For a guy like me who needs a serious shot in the arm of something, being around the Ryder Cup environment this week, being at a course like Mount Juliet which suits my game, being home in Ireland at Portrush for a couple nights, talking about getting back to basics, this is the stuff I need right now. It's good.

I don't want this to be a completely negative conversation that we're having here, because like I say, everything's gravy from here. So within myself I'm trying to verbalise what I've been thinking about the last month because I want to kind of reset and move on and telling a better story than the one I'm telling right now.

Q. Looking at a few of the guys that have won this year, Phil, Jordan Spieth, guys that have gone through little bits of foul periods. Have they been any inspiration to you? Have you chatted to those guys

are looked at their stories? Anything you can take from that that might help?

GRAEME McDOWELL: For sure. Definitely haven't had a chance to chat with guys like Jordan and Phil. But certainly always watching them. It is an amazing sport that we can still compete into our 40s, into our early 50s, like a guy like Mickelson who you could argue might be as physically healthy as he's been in 20 years and performing at a very high level.

Obviously you can stay physically fit is one thing, but it's the mental side of the game, as well, which is usually important; that desire, that motivation, that ability to want to get out there and grind and want to do it and make yourself better.

I feel one of the mistakes I made the last 12 months is searching too deeply and trying to do things differently rather than focusing on the things that made me great to this point and trying to get better at those again: My putting, keeping the ball in play, my wedge play and innings this like that. But it is inspiring. It's inspiring to see that guys can dig themselves out of holes. I've dug myself out of a hole a couple of times the last four or five years. There's no reason why I can't do it again.

Like I say, I miss being over on those shores and being around these guys, and being around the memories is more important. The PGA TOUR, I don't have as many emotions and memories over there as I do from my young days back here where I cut my teeth and I grew up as a player and won events and being around these guys. Like I say, it's nice and motivating to be back in this environment this week.

Q. Talking about inspirational golf, Johnny Caldwell won recently his first event at 37. I don't know if you knew him much, but I'm sure you were delighted for him.

GRAEME McDOWELL: I haven't bumped into him yet this week but I've been following his career. As a Northern Irish player, I'm proud of him. I remember him from a little ways back and yeah, it's great to see him popping up and winning an event. It's definitely good stuff and I wish him well this week.

Q. I know you were up playing Portrush the other day. There's a lot of rumours going about at the moment that The Open will be returning there in 2025. We all saw how successful it was in 2019. I'm sure you of all people feel it merits coming back so soon.

GRAEME McDOWELL: Listen, it would be fantastic for

Portrush to get The Open Championship back. It's disappointing for the whole island of Ireland that we have not had the financial knock-on effect of The Open Championship in 2019 with everything that's happened with the pandemic and being up there in Portrush there at the weekend. They are starting to get some guests coming back to Portrush, but the financial impact certainly hasn't been the way we would have looked it to have been.

Hopefully with The Open Championship returning back in 2025 that will reinforce Ireland as the golfing destination that it should be. Be a huge economic driver for the whole island.

Q. You have an afternoon tee time tomorrow. Do you think that's a good time for you to set out on the course?

GRAEME McDOWELL: Really depends on what the weather God say. It looks like it could be a bit of rain tomorrow at some point. You know, in this part of the world, tee times are very much dependent on what the weather looks like, and you can get good draws and you can get bad draws.

Yeah, I'm looking forward to playing with Richard Bland and Thomas Pieters; Richard having played so well at the U.S. Open a few weeks ago. Thomas Pieters is a very talented player, so I'm looking forward to being out there.

Q. With the added feature of fans, not that many, of course, but there are some Irish fans that will be cheering you on more than other golfers. Do you think that will help your confidence, as you said, you want to build it up?

GRAEME McDOWELL: Yeah, it's a sorry time when an added feature is fans. But listen, it will be great to be out there and have people out there watching us. I guess I've learned about myself the last 12 months that I'm a guy who likes the energy. I need the energy. It's not that I like it, I actually -- I need it. I think I'm a guy who can be flat when the world feels flat and I can be energetic when the world feels energetic, and I kind of feed off the environment a bit too much. Haven't done a good job creating my own intensity too much the last 12 months here.

Looking forward to being out here in front of the Irish fans tomorrow. Like you said, 2,500, whatever, Rory is in front of me. Should be a good buzz out there. I'm excited.

Q. And the golf course itself, you mentioned it was pretty good. You enjoyed it in the Pro-Am yesterday on Tuesday. Have you noticed anything tricky? Any holes we should look out for?



GRAEME McDOWELL: I think the golf course is really well set up. It's not particularly long but it is very narrow and the rough is pretty penal in places. You have to get the ball in the short grass off the tee to have a chance to attack the greens. It's kind of firmish. I'm hoping we don't get too much rain to soften the place up too much. With the firm greens, it really continues to be a premium on accuracy after the tee.

I think tough holes to look for, I think 18, the finishing hole, is probably the stand-out tough hole on the golf course, a drive and medium iron into a long and tough green. It's a great course and really enjoyable. Great venue. A lot of players staying on site. Great hospitality. We are very much enjoying it so far.

Q. I was going to ask you about the International Team which landed just before the start of the interview about you creating some kind of Irish whiskey with an American finish, but I have no idea what that means.

GRAEME McDOWELL: All right.

Q. I'll ask you instead about Open places up for grabs the next couple of weeks. How important is that on your radar, getting into The Open?

GRAEME McDOWELL: Yeah, obviously that's a massive target here the next two weeks. Just coming back, had a four-week kind of reset, and coming over here, targeting these two events as events which are important to me to get the confidence back, shoot some scores and get on leaderboards and get up there.

Of course, getting into The Open Championship at St. George's, having missed the first three major championships this year, and importantly, missing the U.S. Open was very disappointing and these are the little things that kind of give you a kick of motivation and desire. Like I said, love to make this into a three-week trip.

And I was going to go to The Open qualifier at Lytham yesterday but then when they brought in the three spots here and the three spots in Scotland, I thought that preparing well for these two weeks was probably my best way in. Definitely excited and definitely be out there trying very, very hard to be at The Open Championship.

My Irish whiskey --

Q. What does an Irish whiskey with an American finish taste like?

GRAEME McDOWELL: Well, it's an Irish whiskey finished

in an American oak barrel. I'm a big bourbon fan and I've partnered up with a great team in Canada. We're going to make an Irish whiskey with a little bit of a bourbon flair to it. Watch this space. We'll send you a bottle or two.

Q. Rory was talking to us yesterday about the travel that he went through coming from America back to Ireland. Just wondering how your travel was coming back to Northern Ireland and down to Mount Juliet?

GRAEME McDOWELL: My G5 was in for maintenance actually. So I had to -- I flew American Airlines (laughs). Typically when I go to Portrush, I fly Orlando-Dublin and I just drive up to Portrush. But there's not even an Orlando-Dublin or an Orlando-London at the minute.

So I flew Charlotte-Heathrow-Belfast and drove up to Portrush from there. It was like going back in time 10 or 15 years ago. I couldn't remember the last time I've taken three flights to get to somewhere.

No, it was great. I got home at Portrush, Saturday lunchtime. Spent a couple days with the folks. Great to see them. Spent a couple days out at Portrush and hitting some balls and practising and the weather was beautiful, and the course was in great shape and it was great to see everyone.

Didn't really get a chance to get out and about and have a pint in Harbour Bar or anything like that because we were just off the plane and had to behave ourselves and stay indoors, etc. But it was awesome to be up there and like I say, see my folks.

Q. Just something you were talking about, trying to get a bit more confidence, how much of a boost is it to be something as simple as being in one of the marquee groups for the first two rounds?

GRAEME McDOWELL: Are those are all the small things that I was trying to allude to at the start of this conversation where, like you say, being in marquee groups, being in the TV slots, having people watching you, feeling like you're one of the key players in the tournament, those are all the little psyche things that are really important to a player. When you're not getting those nice draws and you're on the other side of the golf course from the big draws and stuff like that and you're playing first off or last off, I mean, you just feel like sort of an also-ran in the tournament. It's just the small little mental edges that are really important.

I'll be enjoying the atmosphere, enjoying the environment being out there tomorrow, and hopefully hit some good shots. Just start kind of building it all back up together again. Like I say, having some fun, just enjoying being

here.

CLARE BODEL: We will let you get on, Graeme. Thank you very much for your time. Good luck this week.

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