

# The 149th Open

Press Conference

Wednesday, 14 July 2021

## The R&A



MIKE WOODCOCK: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the R&A press conference. Thank you for joining us. We are joined by Martin Slumbers, Chief Executive of The R&A.

Martin, can I make a start by just asking you to briefly set the scene for the championship and perhaps say a little bit about some of the conditions in which we've had to stage the championship this year at Royal St George's.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Sure. Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you to those here online and overseas for getting up early in the morning.

After such a difficult time in the last year or so for the whole world, I have to admit we are relieved, thrilled, and a little bit emotional, I suppose, in being able to get to stage The Open once again.

It's a great privilege to welcome the best men's golfers around the world and a large number of fans to the championship.

It has been quite a challenge being able to get to this point, and we're under no illusions of the complexity of the problems that are caused by the pandemic, specifically when you're trying to stage a global sporting event with players from 27 different countries participating and bringing them all into the country.

We have worked extensively with golf and health authorities to be able to make that work, and a lot of that is what's driven the restrictions on the players and all of those who are deemed to be in the inner bubble, which includes myself.

We have seen some player withdrawals, but they have been for many different reasons when you look at it. Some of them actually totally unrelated to COVID.

At the end of the day, what counts is that we'll have 156 of the world's best men players teeing off tomorrow morning, and on Sunday we will present the Claret Jug to the next Champion Golfer of the Year.

Getting here has been a challenge, but I'm really excited now we're a few hours away from the championship starting.

I'm now very happy to talk about The Open and about golf

more generally.

**Q. Can you just clarify if a player does breach one of these protocols, is he automatically out of the tournament, or do you take into account any of those circumstances, or if you could just sort of sum that up, where you stand on that.**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We've set out protocols for the championship. We've talked to all the players. We've made it very clear it is to protect them and their fellow competitors. It's to give them, all the players, the very best chance of all of them being here on Sunday afternoon and able to play.

We have the background of the UK law to deal with, so it's not us creating the rules, it's the UK law, and I expect the players to react and deal with that in a professional, responsible way.

And I have to confess, every single one I've talked to has absolutely understood that and is behaving like that, so thank you to them.

**Q. As you're probably aware, there was an incident at the Scottish Open last week when a spectator got on to a tee and took a club out of Rory McIlroy's bag, et cetera. Has that incident persuaded you to change your security procedures or reassess or just generally think about how vulnerable golfers are out on the course with thousands of spectators around?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, I'll answer the second part of your question first. Yes, we are deeply conscious all the time of the health and safety, particularly the safety of the players, no more so this year than in previous years.

But we're not changing any of the procedures around the tee. As a spectator, you can't get on the tee. We have enough marshals around our tees to prevent that, including a number of Army marshals.

**Q. Can you talk about the way the golf course is? Obviously it's been very wet in this area in the buildup. Are you pleased how it is? Obviously it looks different than maybe you'd ideally have liked it to have been.**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Actually I'm delighted with it. I think it looks absolutely fantastic out there.



You want to talk about microcosms for links courses, and there's definitely one here, and it happens throughout the winter until about May where you get the easterly winds and the grass is dormant.

We set out to have a course which is fair, plenty of room on the fairway, rough that's meaningful, and greens that will run at around 10. They're running at 9, 8 this morning, and they will be up 9.8, 9.9; they'll be up at 10 tomorrow morning, so I think it's just where we wanted it.

**Q. Lee said you might put water on it later in the week. Is that something you're thinking about with the fairways?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We're very conscious that this course has got a lot of very severe undulations in the fairways and in the landing areas. We've been conscious right the way through to ensure that a ball that lands on that doesn't get kicked off at a pace that could take it into deep, deep rough.

It is a bit greener out there than you would have seen at some other courses, and that's purposeful.

**Q. I just wanted to go back to spectators. Obviously missing the tournament altogether is terrible, but can you talk to us about how important support is for the event? And another security related thing, we saw the Wembley breach at the weekend. Have you had to think about that, about protecting the perimeter of the event, stopping people from getting in without tickets?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Yeah, I mean, I think all in all getting the spectators here for us was really important. I think there is something -- I've talked about what I think of The Open in terms of where I want it to be positioned as a world-class sporting event, and big time sporting events need big time crowds.

We've worked really hard with government to do that. We're very conscious of the environment that we're all operating in. There's very strict conditions for any of those spectators to be able to get into the grounds, and they're being held further back from the players than we would normally do. If you go out, you can see the ropes are further back.

But I think spectators play a massive part in sport; no different to the Open Championship. When you wait and see what the 18th is like on Sunday afternoon when the winner is coming down, when the crowds are in the grandstand, that's what the Open is about for us.

In terms of safety, no, we've got plenty of security all the way around the golf course, as we would normally have.

**Q. Can I just check, will the no-readmission policy apply at St Andrews next year?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We will make a decision on that after this event.

**Q. Is there a specific reason why?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, we have introduced the no-readmission policy purely to deter unofficial hospitality, and Portrush showed all the evidence that we've been successful in that. So changes to the ticketing process and unofficial hospitality, and no-readmission has really taken away unofficial hospitality, and that's a good thing.

We want to see whether that continues this week. We believe it will, and then we will have a good long, hard think about it and we'll talk about the 150th after the 149th.

**Q. When the subject of an Open at Royal St George's pops into your mind, what's your immediate thought after that?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, as you know, the south of England is my homeland, so I know this golf course better than I know any of the other Open Championship golf courses.

It is the fairways and the bounces off the fairways that come into my mind. You can definitely hit the ball on one line and finish up in a different place.

But that is what this golf course is all about. It is about being confident on where the lines are. There's a lot of blind shots. There's a lot of shots where you don't see the ball land. You've just got to know what line you're going to hit it on and be confident that it's going to be there when you get there.

I think that plays with your mind, and I think it's wonderful. I think it's a great challenge.

When I listen to the players talking about golf courses, I listen to golfers talking about golf courses, we all have courses we love and courses we don't like as much. But when you see the very best players in the World come to a course, they all find a way for their game to unlock the golf course, and I don't think there will be any difference in the next four days.

**Q. Despite all the cautions in place we are going to have 32,000 spectators a day, 156 players, their teams, et cetera. Are you confident you'll get through the week without somebody getting pinged for testing trace or even testing positive, or do you think it's inevitable there will be one or two cases?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We have thought long and hard of all the procedures that we need to minimise the risk on that. The

most pressing part of it is for the players. The worst thing you can get is a player being contact traced, because as you know over here, if you're contact traced, you're out for 10 days and quarantine and you can't test out of it, so you're out of the championship.

When you go to the heart of all the protocols for the players, it's solely around contact tracing.

For the spectators, it's different. They're here as part of a research programme for the government, and the government will be monitoring all that. They're actually trying to very responsibly understand with these big events how COVID does transmit in the outside, 500, 600 acres of land and wind blowing, and they're monitoring that.

There's a different set of rationales for the players and for the spectators. But I think it's probably inevitable that we will have some problems, and we understand that, so does government, so does Public Health, and we'll work through that.

We must forget we are staging a major event still in the middle of a global pandemic.

**Q. Excuse the slightly frivolous nature of this question. As a matter that provokes a lot of deep opinion, especially on social media, The Open Championship or the British Open, how would you like it to be identified? How should we identify it once and for all?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think it says so behind me, doesn't it? It's The Open.

**Q. With the insurance that The Open had last year, I'm just curious, financially how did the R&A fare? Did you profit from not having an Open, and how were you able to spread the resources that you typically do?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I wouldn't say we profited from not having The Open. I mean, I've said many times that it was probably one of the most difficult decisions we had to make, but we had no choice at the end of the day.

But the insurance that we had in place enabled us to mitigate much of the financial exposure and actually enabled us to increase our investment into the game as part of that, and we launched last year a £7 million, \$10 million COVID recovery fund which went straight into grass-roots golf.

We were able to use the financial insurance that we had to help the game through at that time what was quite a challenge.

**Q. I just wanted to double back on a question you were asked earlier. If a player is caught violating his buddy bubble, if he's seen at a restaurant or what have you, is he**

**disqualified?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think he would be at risk of being disqualified, yes.

**Q. Is there a difference?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: There's always -- I've learnt being in officiating and rules that you want to understand the circumstances, but I don't think that will be an issue. I think players know the risks. They know what will impact. They're all responsible. They don't want to put their fellow players at risk.

I'd like to treat them as professionals in that regard.

**Q. I really don't understand why we can't either answer they would be disqualified or they wouldn't be disqualified.**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think I answered the question actually. They're at risk -- the fact -- I'd want to understand what was the situation that we're talking about. Everything has a bit of a continuum, right.

**Q. So there's mitigating factors is what you're saying.**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Yeah.

**Q. Who makes that decision?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Myself and the chairman of the championship committee.

MIKE WOODCOCK: Martin, thank you for your time and thank you to those in the room and for joining us here on Zoom.

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