

The 149th Open

Press Conference

Wednesday, 14 July 2021

Darren Clarke



MIKE WOODCOCK: Good afternoon, everyone. Delighted to welcome the 2011 Champion Golfer of the Year, Darren Clarke. Darren, after all the emotion and drama of Portrush, we're now back at a venue that obviously has very special memories for you. How does it feel coming into this week?

DARREN CLARKE: Yeah, it's obviously great to come back to any golf course where you've played well before and especially won, but then to come back to an Open venue where I've played at and won before is even more special.

The golf course is different this week. Wind direction is the opposite to what it was the last time we were here. The golf course is a little bit softer than the last time we were here, so a bit of a different proposition. There won't be so much chasing the balls into greens; more flying them in there. It's a different golf course.

Q. Even though it's 10 years ago, because the tournament hasn't been held at Royal St. George's since, is there almost an element of you're defending here this week?

DARREN CLARKE: No, I wouldn't -- 10 years is a long time. Lots of Opens have come and gone. But obviously I was the last winner here at Royal St. George's. To come back as the guy who won it the last time is still a huge privilege.

My name -- all I ever wanted from a young kid when I was practising was to get my name on the Claret Jug, and I was able to do that here, so this is always going to be very special to me.

Q. I followed you a bit today. You looked like you were really enjoying yourself.

DARREN CLARKE: Yeah, we were having a laugh, a wee bit of fun.

Q. Louis giving you a bit of advice on some of the irons? You giving him any advice on how to handle himself around -- he's not struggled, he's won tournaments obviously, but he hasn't won a major for a while.

DARREN CLARKE: Well, we're both -- because I haven't been back in the UK since November 2019, so for playing schedule and obviously COVID, everything going on, so I haven't been

able to spend any time with Pete Cowan, and I was able to see him this week. And Rory, as you know, was working with Pete, as well. So that's what we were discussing out there.

Any time you get a chance to play with Rory, I really enjoy it. I've known Rory since he's been a very young kid coming through my foundation, playing with him and stuff, and then to see him develop into the man he's become and the golfer he's become has been wonderful.

So when you get an opportunity to play with him -- we did the same thing 10 years ago here on the Wednesday morning and we did it again today.

It's great to get out there and spend a bit of time with him. He's working away on things, and as you say, it's been a while since he's won one, but he's unquestionably got the talent to win many more of them. It's just a case of, I think, things kicking into place for him. I know he's working diligently and doing a lot of work with Pete to try and hit the ball the way he wants to hit the golf ball.

This week there's going to be a premium on keeping it on the fairways, as you can see out there. That long stuff is really long and thick this week.

We'll see. He's working really hard. He hit some great shots today, hit a couple of maybe ones he didn't want to hit, but that's part of working on it. Today is the day to do it. Today maybe you'll hit a driver that you won't hit tomorrow or over the weekend, so I think he was doing that today, as well. We'll see.

There's no questioning his talent. I think he's one of the most, if not the most, naturally gifted player in the world, so it's only a matter of time before he starts winning again.

Q. Looking back again to 2011, can you remember your mindset coming into the tournament? And do you think that Royal St. George's is a course for outsiders?

DARREN CLARKE: My mindset coming into the tournament, I played really well the week before we were in Castle Stuart playing the Scottish Open, and I played really well the first couple of days.



I think we had one day washed out. I think it might have been back to a three-round tournament. My last round I didn't play particularly well, nor did I putt very well, so my mindset coming here was more frustration than anything else.

For the people that know me, that's a pretty common thing, was a common thing with me. And it was the same. My ball-striking was really, really good here. I spent a bit of time with Dr. Bob Rotella on the putting green on the Wednesday prior to the tournament and he cleared my head, because if things aren't quite going well I tend to go back into technique, and that's not always the solution to scoring.

Dr. Bob cleared my head a little bit, and I found a little bit of rhythm and a little bit of feel with my putting stroke, and all of a sudden it became a much easier game again.

You know, that week, my whole attitude that week changed when I thought I could hole a couple of putts. I was very relaxed. I didn't look at the leaderboard on Sunday until I walked off the 16th green, which was a nice thing to look at when you've got a four-shot lead.

I didn't know that at the time, but I was just trying to do the best that I could possibly do that day. My whole mindset was very accepting, because this golf course you can hit really good shots, but because of the undulation, like any links, but here maybe a little bit more, especially if it's firm and fast, you can get some funky bounces, should we say.

That's part of playing links, but here sometimes it can get a little bit worse. I was very prepared to accept it that week.

In terms of outsiders, Royal St. George's has produced some of the greatest winners -- we've had some of the greatest players and there's been a few surprises. In terms of myself, I've been up there with numerous chances to win majors, all the different majors, and didn't quite manage to do it. But at 42 would I have been somebody who you thought would've had a chance? Not particularly.

But I'd won a month before we came here in Spain so I knew I was playing well. My years of experience, I guess, helped me during the week, and I was ready to step across the line and win the biggest tournament that -- the biggest and best tournament in the world and the one that I always wanted to win.

Q. I just wondered, is there any advice you have given or could give to Rory about dealing with the understandable growing frustration that the longer you go waiting for a major, the more you get so determined to do it, it might get a bit more frustrating?

DARREN CLARKE: Yeah, well, that's understandable, but who am I to give Rory McIlroy suggestions on what he should

be and shouldn't be doing.

The guy with the amount of talent, he's one of the best players in the world, and I've been fortunate to play with a lot of them: Ernie Els, Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson, Rory, all the greatest players in the world.

So it would be a little bit ahead of myself if I was to try to give him advice. But in saying that, I have been frustrated for the majority of my career. At the end of the day you've just got to believe in your own ability and believe to your own talent and trust that it's going to happen, and that's the bottom line.

Q. Sometimes a voice from a different angle can --

DARREN CLARKE: Of course.

Q. -- from the oddest source.

DARREN CLARKE: Of course.

Q. Makes the penny drop.

DARREN CLARKE: Exactly, but he's been doing a little bit of work with Bob Rotella too, so any stuff that I would probably be saying to him would be coming from Bob Rotella, as well, sort of the same sort of thing.

It's a fine line, professional golf, between the amount you do on technique and the amount you do on the mental side of it. Everybody here this week is obviously -- technique-wise they're incredible players otherwise they wouldn't be here. The mentally strong are the ones that usually come out on top at the end of the week.

If you have the right mindset then you allow yourself to perform, and I think Rory has been working really hard on that aspect, as well.

Believe me, I spoke to Rory many times when we were playing, and his desire is incredible. He wants to win major tournaments. He wants to perform and he wants to play well.

If I was him, with his amount of talent, hell yeah I'd be frustrated with not winning tournaments. But with that being said, as I just said there now, the flipside of that is because the talent that he does have, it's only a question of time before he starts winning.

Q. Just one thing you mentioned there about coronavirus and it's really affecting. But how does it affect yourselves in terms of your preparation for this tournament from a player's point of view? We all know how it factors in our day-to-day lives.

DARREN CLARKE: It hasn't really affected me that much because on the Champions Tour over in America where I've been playing the majority of my golf, it's almost like they're over coronavirus or COVID over there.

Things have opened up a lot more and I've been practising, working really, really hard. With that being said, to come back over here and play links, I haven't been home since November 2019, so I haven't played any links golf. This is my first time back to it.

Down in the Bahamas where I live now and spend most of my time it is very windy, but the turf is different down there at the Abaco Club. So to get back and get a little bit of preparation, first couple days been trying to reacquaint myself with playing links golf.

Again, the golf course is a little bit softer, so some of the chances that I played it in 2011 trying to run the ball and chase the ball into the greens are not really an option so far this week because they've had some heavy rain.

We will see if the course dries out a little bit more, and then hopefully some of that growing up playing links stuff is all going to come back to me, and hopefully I'll have another good week.

Q. As a former Ryder Cup captain, I was wondering is there anything you would do to deal with the Bryson DeChambeau and Brooks Koepka feud?

DARREN CLARKE: Oh, could really drop myself out of here with that one.

No, I think that's for Captain Stricker to sort out over there. I think the two of them are two of obviously the best players in the world, and I think when it comes to Ryder Cup week, I think they'll put their differences aside and come together for the benefit of their team.

You know, as a former Ryder Cup captain and a European through and through, if they were to keep this little thing going, that would be very positive for possibly the European team, but I'm sure Mr. Stricker will ask them to leave whatever differences are, leave them outside the team room come Monday when they all get together, and if they want to pick it up again on the Monday when they leave, then c'est la vie.

But I'm sure he will have a plan to deal with them.

Q. You worked with Bob Rotella obviously before your win in 2011; Rory is now working with Bob Rotella. Just wondering what you think that might do for Rory in terms of winning more majors, how it might help him? And given the Rotella connection, how shocked would you be to see

Pádraig Harrington six weeks before he turns 50 winning a third Open?

DARREN CLARKE: Well, Dr. Bob with Rory, Dr. Bob talks a lot of sense. There's no mystical stuff in there. He talks a lot of sense. But because of the nature of our sport, sometimes sense gets thrown out the window. We don't actually think the right way and getting ahead of ourselves and thinking about outcome instead of staying in the process and hitting balls. You've heard these cliches. But that's really what it's all about.

As you know, we all know in here, Rory is so gifted and talented that if it's just one little thing that clicks in his head and it works for him and he gets out there and he frees up and goes -- he tried to do it at the U.S. Open for a while. I think that was his words. Wasn't he said he was trying to free things up and go and play.

He was doing great until Sunday on the 11th when I think he three-whacked the par-3. Was it the 11th he three-putted? His mindset was a lot freer there, and let's hope it's the same Rory McIlroy that's here this week and frees up and keeps on doing it.

In terms of Pádraig, I think you take a look at Pádraig, I saw yesterday he was up there in the driving distance. They keep track of stuff on the range. With his recent play, it was very impressive. Look at how Pádraig played at Kiawah Island; he played really, really well there, along with Shane Lowry.

But Pádraig has the experience. If you were to pick any tournament in the world where possibly an older guy could maybe take on the young guns a little bit more, a links at an Open Championship would probably be the one, because I think it's the tournament which tests you the most, both mentally -- more mentally than anything.

And a little bit of experience, a little bit of guile helps you, and there's not many more people that are more that than Pádraig Harrington.

Q. Is this your favourite course, Open course?

DARREN CLARKE: This golf course offers me one of the best memories I've ever had in the game of golf.

Now, would I prefer to play Royal Portrush every day or Royal St. George's every day? I'd play Royal Portrush every day. Would I prefer to play St. Andrews or Royal St. George's? I'd play St. Andrews every day.

It may not be my favourite course, but this course has been very, very good to me. This is almost as tough a golf course as we play on The Open rota. Carnoustie when it was set up the year Paul Lawrie won, that was absolutely brutal, but Royal St.

George's is as tough a test as we play.

The other Open venues I think give you more opportunities to score than what Royal St. George's does.

I think Royal St. George's -- I've played the past three days, going around the golf course just thinking, how did I ever win here. The course was playing that difficult in the breeze. But I did. So this will always be one of my favourite golf courses.

MIKE WOODCOCK: Darren, it's great to see you back at Royal St. George's again. Best of luck this week.

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