

The 150th Open

Press Conference

Wednesday, 13 July 2022

Martin Slumbers

The R&A

MIKE WOODCOCK: Okay. Well, good morning, everyone. We'll make a start. Welcome to The R&A press conference here at the The 150th Open. I'm joined here by Martin Slumbers, the chief executive of the R&A. We are very happy to answer any questions you might have this morning. But Martin has some opening remarks. I'll ask him to begin.

Martin, would you like to lead us off.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you, Mike. And good morning, everyone.

I know that most of you have covered The Open for many years, and I'm sure you're every bit as thrilled and honoured as I am to be part of this very special week in the history of golf.

The 150th Open is a true milestone for our sport, and it calls for celebration in so many ways. I'm delighted to welcome you to St Andrews, and I look forward to reading some of the stories I expect you'll write during this outstanding championship.

You know, at heart I'm a golf fan, and I would be lying if I said that I'm not feeling goosebumps on the eve of the first day. I don't think I can wait to see Paul Lawrie hit that first tee shot tomorrow morning and finally, after a lot of -- three or four years of very hard work, we'll finally get underway four days of world-class golf.

It's a pleasure to welcome so many fans, 290,000 in all from around the world, to the home of golf. Particularly, the 20,000 children and young people who will be attending for free.

We should not forget that The 150th Open is as much as about looking to the future as it is about celebrating the past.

Before we get the press conference underway, I would like to briefly address a topic which is no doubt on most of your minds.

We all know the disruption that men's professional golf is facing and the potential impact it could have on the structure of the game. We've been saying for some time now that our purpose of the R&A is to ensure that golf is thriving in 50 years'



time and that it remains strong at all levels, from grassroots through to the professional game.

We've seen significant growth in the sport over recent years. The R&A invests the proceeds from The Open, this championship, in developing, nurturing and strengthening golf around the world and ensuring that talented players have pathways to progress as far as they can in golf based simply on their own ability.

I firmly believe that the existing golf ecosystem has successfully provided stable pathways for golfers to enter the sport and develop and realize their full potential.

Professional golfers are entitled to choose where they want to play and to accept the prize money that's offered to them. I have absolutely no issue with that at all.

But there is no such thing as a free lunch. I believe the model we've seen at Centurion and Pumpkin Ridge is not in the best long-term interests of the sport as a whole and is entirely driven by money. We believe it undermines the merit-based culture and the spirit of open competition that makes golf so special.

I would also like to say that in my opinion the continued commentary that this is about growing the game is just not credible and if anything, is harming the perception of our sport which we are working so hard to improve.

We believe the game needs to focus on increasing participation, achieving greater diversity, and making sure that golf is truly open to all, rather than this narrow debate involving a small number of players.

As importantly, it detracts from what makes golf, as Arnold Palmer stated, the greatest sport that mankind ever invented. Golf is far more than just professional golf, and we should all remember that.

I have often talked about the 99 percent who play golf for love. And I believe that the vast majority of the 70 million-plus golfers do so because of the values of golf, which to me are integrity, personal responsibility, and respect.

Looking ahead to The Open next year, we have been asked



quite frequently about banning players. Let me be very clear. That's not on our agenda. But what is on our agenda is that we will review our exemptions and qualifications criteria for The Open.

And whilst we do that every year, we absolutely reserve the right to make changes as our Open Championships Committee deems appropriate. Players have to earn their place in The Open, and that is fundamental to its ethos and its unique global appeal.

With that, I'd like to get back to what we are all here for, The 150th Open. As you've seen already, this week's a celebration of the incredible history of golf's original championship and the remarkable impact it has had on the sport we all love.

As part of that celebration, I'm delighted to announce that three of our most renowned champions have accepted invitations to become honorary members of the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews. Tiger Woods, Rory McIlroy and Paul Lawrie have achieved great success and have been hugely influential figures in golf over many years. We could not be more thrilled to recognize them in this special year and to welcome them to the club. A news release is being sent to you as we speak.

Let me finish as follows: On Sunday night, it will be my privilege to announce the Champion Golfer of the Year in the 150th staging of this wonderful championship. That player will have his name carved in history on the Claret Jug, and what could be more special than that?

I would urge you all to keep that in mind and enjoy The Open as much as we will. It will certainly be an occasion to tell your children and your grandchildren about for many years to come. Thank you.

Q. Martin, given what you've just said in the opening remarks, the fact that Greg Norman was asked to stay away, it seems like contradictory that you didn't look at the qualification criteria for this year. I mean, is this something that happened perhaps too late for you to have looked at those criteria this time?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I mean, we always ensure that we follow the integrity of what we've said in the media and the press and the announcements about the championship.

We published the conditions of competition for The Open back in January/February. Everyone knew how you were going to get in the field for this week, and we stick by that.

I think that's a completely different issue. That's an exemptions and qualification in the championship. It's a completely different issue to an invitation to a celebration

dinner.

Q. Martin, when you said that you reserve the right to review the qualification criteria in future years, did you mean that as a threat? And are you worried The Open brand will be devalued in the future if the best golfers can't play here just because they're with LIV or a rival tour that the golfing establishment don't agree with?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I never said the best golfers will not be able to play. We will hold totally true to The Open being open to anybody. But we may well look at how you get into that, whether it's an exemption or a need to qualify through our qualifying process.

Q. Martin, on a technical point, do you believe LIV should be afforded World Ranking points?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I'm here as the CEO of the R&A. I'm also a board member of the OWGR -- and the board meeting was yesterday, by the way. And that question will need to be addressed to the chairman of the OWGR.

And the OWGR made a statement late last night, I think, about the application from LIV. And I have nothing further to add to that point and will not add to anything more on that point.

Q. You talk about the exemptions. Can you expand a little bit as to how these may change? And will they be designed in a way to ensure that as members of the PGA TOUR, members of the DP World Tour, that they will be allowed access to play? And will the exemptions possibly be looking at ways of how LIV golfers can't get access?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: So I think you need to step back quite a long way in history. And despite what I just answered to you, and remember that the OWGR was formed -- I mean Mark McCormack was instrumental in creating the OWGR for the majors to be able to identify the best players in the world.

And when we will look at exemptions and qualifications, we will do so in the context of what is going on in the men's professional game, how is the men's professional game being structured, and how do we create the right balance of exemptions and qualifications to enable the best players in the world to be teeing it up next year at Hoylake.

Q. Martin, Greg Norman had not been invited to the celebrations. Have you thought it might take away from the 150th celebration? Can you tell me what were your fears and what you would expect him to do in return?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I come back to the point, this is a very important week for golf. This is the oldest championship. It's the original championship. I keep going back to remembering

why in 1860 we played it, and that was because of the death of Allan Robertson, who was the best golfer in the world in 1859. And for 149 times it's been the Champion Golfer of the Year on Sunday.

We are absolutely determined to ensure that this goes down in history as about The 150th Open. We decided that there would be, based on noise that I was receiving from multiple sources, that that was going to be potentially unlikely.

We decided that we didn't want the distraction. We wanted to ensure that the conversation was all about this week and playing golf and balls in the air tomorrow and the Champion Golfer on Sunday.

Greg hasn't been here since 2010. He didn't come in 2015. In fact, it's many years since he's even been to The Open. So there would have been another reason for that. So it was very clear to protect the integrity of this week.

Q. Martin, on the much lighter topic of distance, could you give us some feedback at least on what you've gotten from messaging from the manufacturers at this point? And how much does The Old Course and the way it plays this week influence The R&A's position and thinking on the topic?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I thought you might bring that up. So, you know, we have published the area of interest. This is a very technical process we're in, that some may be familiar with and some aren't familiar with. And in that area of interest, we've laid out the areas to do with the golf ball and to do with the driver that we are now interested in.

More importantly, as you've picked up in many of your articles, it's the interests that we're not interested in pursuing. I always said we wanted to work this through in a collaborative and broad dialogue with all stakeholders, of which equipment manufacturers are just one piece of that. And we are working through that. And I have to admit that has been a very good, challenging, thoughtful, intellectually stimulating series of discussions.

I think I've said before, this is a serious time on a serious problem, and it needs serious discourse. And I think we're definitely getting that.

We will receive in September, which is when the period for the area of interest closes -- I think we are very clear in the area of interest what we're interested in. And we will then take some time to review, analyse, consider the feedback we get, and then we'll move to the next stage.

Q. The impact this week of just kind of how the course plays, is that any part of the thinking?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I'm not sure how many times I can say it. We're agnostic on one golf course. We're not building equipment regulation for the oldest golf course in the world. We're trying to build equipment regulation for our sport.

There's lots of other courses that could be categorised that way -- this is not about the Old Course.

Q. I know that there are serious discussions and topics going on in the world of golf. But coming from the area that I come from, from the Asian countries, who depend so much on the R&A and The Open and that this is the tournament for them. Not only you being the world governing party for all those countries but the kinds of grants that you give to the countries, what kind of messages have you received from these smaller nations on the eve of the The 150th Open? What are they looking for? What are they asking from an organisation like yours?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: You know, the most important thing that nearly all the affiliates we work for look for from us is leadership and guidance and advice. And that's what we spend a lot of time doing.

Let's be positive about it. Golf is in a really good place at the moment. We have benefited from the pandemic in the very terrible couple of years the world has had. But golf's in a really good place. And I'm passionate about making sure that we capitalise on that really good space, keep driving it.

And let's not also forget that the area you live in is probably the biggest growth area. And, by the way, it's growing. And there's massive opportunities, particularly in India and China, for very large-scale growth in our sport.

So, you know, we spend -- the best thing about COVID being over for me is I can get back on the road and spend more time in Asia, and spend more time with the people who are driving this game in various countries. And we will do everything we can to ensure that we're able to support both intellectually, with coaching and with money, all the countries around the world that are affiliated to The R&A.

Q. Martin, there's been talk and buildup to this event about 59 potentially being on the cards. Do you feel that's a possibility, or has Mother Nature given us a course that's going to make that difficult for someone to shoot?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I'm going to deal with that in a couple of ways, if I may. We've spent three years getting this golf course to where we are today. The one thing I've learned in the last seven years is you need two things to be happening Open week.

One is very skilled green-keeping staff and very hardworking

staff, and we're privileged to have that team here.

And the second bit is luck and luck with Mother Nature.

And I think the golf course is exactly where we want it to be. If you go out there today, it's a lot firmer than it was yesterday. We've been holding the greens back because we had very hot weather early part of this week. We wanted to make sure that the grass was good come Sunday.

The fairways are firmer than the greens, and they're running really hard. And Mother Nature at the moment is not destined to give us any rain and probably not going to give us as much wind as we like. But we've got other ways of being able to set up the golf course. And my philosophy has always been I want to set up the golf course fair, challenging, and let these guys show us how good they are.

Now, let me make a comment about 59 because I'll put that back to you. 59 is 13-under par around this golf course. There's 7,300 yards. It's got greens that are running at 10 1/2 to 11. It's got fairways where the ball is bouncing 50 yards if it's hit and more if it catches the downslope.

13-under par around that, I'll tell you what, if someone shoots that, I will be the first person on the 18th green to shake their hand because they have played outstanding golf.

Q. Martin, you were very emphatic that you wanted the focus this week to be all about the The 150th Open and the Champion Golfer on Sunday. There's clearly a distinct possibility that Champion Golfer could be one of the defectors to LIV given two of them are former Open winners. Would that in some ways be the R&A's worst nightmare?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think if -- whoever wins on Sunday is going to have their name carved in history. And I'll welcome them onto the 18th green. This is a golf tournament. The Open is about having the best players in the world playing, and I want to see who shoots the lowest score come Sunday night.

Q. We're talking about growing the game. Everybody seems to be wanting to grow the game. But how is -- it's something that we, in the other part of the world, in Asia, where it's actually growing a lot, we lost three crucial years because of COVID. A lot of tournaments didn't play. The amateurs, many amateurs actually gave up the sport because they didn't have an avenue to play. The R&A and the Masters have given us two amazing tournaments in that part of the world, the Asian Amateurs and the Women's Amateurs. When we talk about growing the game now, is R&A going to do something to make up for the lost time for 2 1/2 years that we had in terms of paucity of funds, paucity of tournaments, even clinics for rules and regulations, which that part of the

world desperately needs? Anything on that would actually be very beneficial for countries like India, Thailand, Singapore, whatever, and that whole area.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think catching up on 2 1/2 years is going to be a real challenge, if we're honest with ourselves. But we will not back off from all the work we used to do and hopefully business as usual.

But to pick up your point, where do I think the growth of the game is? I think the growth of the game is driven by three things.

One is perception, and primarily a perception that this is a game for the people and it's a game that is good for your mental health and your physical health.

Two is it's about getting families to play golf. And many of you have watched over the last seven years what I've been driving from the R&A. If you look at it and put it all together into a puzzle, it's about families. It's about mothers, fathers, children, grandchildren all playing golf together. That's the future.

And thirdly, it's about short-course facilities, public facilities, open to the public, relatively low cost, and introduce people to the game. Because all the research that we do shows that our problem is getting people to try out our sport often because of perception and often because of cost.

But once they try it out, the hit rate on them staying with the game is huge. Our problem is getting them through the door. And that's the problem for golf.

Q. Martin, you mentioned earlier that obviously you're the chief executive of the R&A but also a board member of the Official World Rankings. Is that not a conflict of interest? And will you therefore have to recuse yourself from the process of deciding the World Ranking points for LIV?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think I said earlier I'm not willing to answer any more questions on OWGR. Sorry.

Q. It's not a conflict of interest? It lays you open to the accusation from LIV, if not just from me?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: The question of conflict of interest will be a matter decided by the UK Companies Act.

Q. Martin, you keep mentioning the ecosystem and that it's in peril obviously from the insurgency. Outside the fact that they're pumping large amounts of money into golf, which is what's being done by all the organisations that are in the ecosystem, what other issues do you have with the ecosystem and the concern about the ecosystem with this new group?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: My primary concern about the ecosystem is we spend multimillions every year, the proceeds from this championship on grassroots and amateur golf, from bottom, bringing people into the sport and playing elite golf.

I know that I can look you in the eye -- because this is men's golf we're talking about at this point -- I can look in the eye of any boy or any parent of that boy and know that, if he comes into the game and wants to get to the top, wants to play this game, that there is a pathway to the top totally based on his ability and his willingness to work hard.

And that has been fought for by our sport for 100 years, that pathway from picking up a golf club to playing at the top level. And I think that is something that is fantastic about our sport. And I think it's worth fighting for. And that pathway is the biggest piece of the ecosystem for me.

Q. And the perils?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think the pathway that we have today works extremely well. It doesn't need to be changed.

Q. Will it be in peril?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Possibly. Let's see how it develops.

Q. Given your opposite number at the USGA said, at the United States Open, that he conceived that there would be a time when they would consider excluding LIV golf members from the United States Open. Is this a coordinated approach? Are your remarks made today purely by The R&A, or is there a coalition of forces involved here where you are consulting about this -- and obviously the two main world tours, DP World Tour and the PGA TOUR with their position? Is it a coalition of forces?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: No.

Q. It's purely individual?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We have great relationships. We have a common objective about improving the game and developing the game. But we all have our own independent agendas.

Q. It's a question about free-to-air television coverage of golf, this championship. There's now no live coverage of free-to-air television. In fact, there's pretty much no live coverage of any golf on free-to-air television. Is that not a concern that the next generation of sports fan, potential sports fans just aren't seeing enough of this game?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We've been having that debate for about 25 years. I think that it is not as simple as being free to air

to actually get people to play golf. I think it's a much more complex and multifaceted problem and the solution in what we do.

We do have highlights on the BBC, and the BBC play a fantastic role in being able to show that. They have a brilliant radio station, which if you can't watch TV, is about the best way you can cover golf. And I think it is being able to hit and cover our sport in so many different ways.

The world is very different now to what it was 20 years ago. People don't sit down and watch golf for six hours. They just don't do it. They've got all the social media. All the other ways and channels -- I always laugh when I watch my sons. They've got at least three devices on their lap when they're watching any sport.

So I don't think that just pure free to air is as important as it was 25 years ago, and actually I'm very happy with the balance we have. I think our Open is being covered brilliantly. We get an enormous amount more coverage, and I think we're in a really good place.

Q. You say that, but over 7 million people watched Novak Djokovic win Wimbledon. You're going to get a small fraction of that in terms of television figures in the UK for this tournament. And if I look at the television schedules for this coming weekend and highlights of the third round on the BBC are at 10:00 p.m., that's not a very family friendly time as I can see it. Is that too late for you?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think you're making an overly simplistic point about number of people watching and number of people who are going to then play the sport. I think it's a much more complex piece on that. And I think we get our coverage, if you look at it in terms of broad digital and linear coverage, on a global basis, I'm very happy where we are.

Q. Aside from the political implications around LIV, do you have a position on the morality argument with Saudi Arabia and the human rights record?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Let me be very clear: Abuses of human rights, acts of terrorism cannot be condoned in my mind in any shape or form. They're abhorrent and unacceptable. I totally understand why you're asking the question, but I'm very clear on that part of it.

But for us, I'm looking at it in terms of the broader picture about how the game grows and how many of the positive things that are happening in golf.

Q. But do you think golf should be welcoming money from Saudi Arabia and given what we know about sports watching?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think that's a too simplistic way of looking at it. And if you look around the world, we have a responsibility to work with many countries around the world that are affiliated to the R&A and are responsible for golf in their country. And we will continue to work with those countries all around the world.

Q. Can you just clarify, what's simplistic about it? It's fairly clear-cut. We know the situation in Saudi Arabia, sport, not just golf, sort of F1 for all we've seen, this rush to Saudi Arabian money. We know why they're doing it. What's your position there?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think my position on human rights is very clear, and I just made it, which is at the heart behind your question. So on that matter, I've answered your question.

Q. But you're comfortable with golf taking that money?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I'm very comfortable in golf globally growing in terms of more and more people growing and the sport being a force for good, yes.

Q. The purse increased 22 percent this year. How much concern do you have, if any concern, about the kind of purse growth we're seeing around the world? And how much of that is attributable to responding to LIV versus just inflation?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, the purse is up 22 percent year over year and up 60 percent since 2016. So it's a big increase. What I'm concerned about on purse growth is that The R&A's responsibility is much broader than just a purse in the championship.

And I spend a lot of time trying to balance up how do I make enough revenues to be able to move with the times on how the sport's growing and also continue to invest and increase the investment into amateur golf, the AIG Women's Open, bringing up equality of pay, and being able to balance all of those is an increasing challenge.

MIKE WOODCOCK: Martin, thank you for your time this morning. Thank you for joining us for the press conference.

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