

# The 151st Open

R&A Media Conference

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## The R&A

# CEO of The R&A Martin Slumbers

MIKE WOODCOCK: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the press conference for the 151st Open. I'm joined by the CEO of The R&A Martin Slumbers.

Martin will give some opening remarks and then make an announcement. Martin, I will hand over to you please

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Good morning, everyone, and thanks very much for joining us here at the 151st Open at the magnificent Royal Liverpool Golf Club. Scarcely seems a year since we gathered for the press conference at such momentous week at St Andrews last year.

But here we are again on the eve of what promises to be another fantastic championship.

I thought I'd start this morning by covering two topics that I don't really have much to say about before moving on to some things that I do have plenty to say about.

As I'm sure you are, we are waiting to learn more about the agreement announced by the PGA TOUR, DP World Tour, and the PIF on June 6th and the implications for the wider game.

To be clear, we're not party to the agreement, and while we absolutely welcome an end to the disruption in the men's professional game, there is a lot still to be understood.

We will await the outcome with interest. Until then, we intend to focus on what we can control, which is staging our championship successfully, governing with the best interests of the game at heart, and doing all we can to get more people playing golf.

At this point, I'd also like to send my very personal best wishes to Jay Monahan on his recovery, and I was particularly delighted when he messaged me to tell me that he was returning to work this week.

**Q. On the distance issue we are in the middle of our notice**



and comment period and are receiving feedback from throughout the golf industry.

Our role, indeed our responsibility, is to do what is right for the sport when we reach our determination on the way forward. All I really will say at this stage is that I would echo Mike Whan's sentiments when I say that doing nothing is not an option.

We've put forward a targeted and proportionate measure to address a complex issue which we believe is key to preserving the inherent challenge of golf and to ensuring that it has a sustainable future.

I'd now like to briefly turn to what I mean by sustainable future for the game and why achieving that is our principal strategic objective.

Significant increases in prize money in the men's professional game has resulted in the long-term reassessment of the business model for professional golf.

As custodians of the game, we have to balance the prize fund at The Open with ensuring the appropriate investment in grass-roots and new golf initiatives, ensuring pathways are in place from elite amateur golf to the professional game, and most importantly, promoting women and girls' golf, both amateur and professional.

There's no doubt that our ability to achieve this has been impacted by the much more rapid acceleration in men's professional prize money than we had anticipated or planned for.

These are the stark choices which we, and I'm sure the other leading bodies in golf, are facing, and we have to take a strategic approach that is financially sustainable over the longer term rather than just finding short-term solutions.

If you want to know what I really care about and what I think is important for the game, it's the financial sustainability of professional golf. It's ensuring that golf is thriving in 50 years' time, but really importantly, that we maintain and do not forget the values around our game.

It's those values which I believe Arnold Palmer framed when he



said that golf is the greatest game mankind ever invented.

We're on track to invest 200 million in golf over the world over a 10-year period, and are doing all we can to ensure that golf continues to capitalise on the surge in participation that we've seen accelerate post-COVID.

On August the 5th we'll be opening our new community-based, family-orientated community Golf It just outside Glasgow, and we believe we'll be able to make a significant step change in making golf more inclusive, more accessible and appealing to everyone from families, to beginners, through to lapsed golfers, always seeking to provide pathways into the sport.

Above all, we are really focused on the global picture and working to strengthen areas of weakness, and especially the pathways for the most talented players to progress through all levels of the game.

With that in mind, we have something we're very proud to announce this morning. Many of you will be aware of the great success of the Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship that we run with Augusta National and the Latin American Amateur Championship that we run with Augusta National and the United States Golf Association.

I am particularly pleased that out of the past 10 years of the Asian Amateur Championship, 18 players in the field this week and two from the Latin American are in the field this week. Outside of the U.S. Amateur, I don't think there is a better representation in one of the best fields in golf.

I'm delighted to announce that the inaugural African Amateur Championship will be played from the 21st to the 24th of February, 2024, at Leopard Creek in South Africa.

It will feature a field of 72 men competing in a 72-hole stroke play format with the winner securing a place in the 152nd Open at Royal Troon.

There will be a separate invitational event for women amateurs alongside the men's championship with appropriate pathways on offer for the women who are playing.

Broadcast coverage will be provided by SuperSport with four hours of live coverage each day.

I would like to acknowledge the enthusiastic support we have received from Johann Rupert who is a committed new partner in this new championship.

We will also be working closely with the Africa Golf Confederation, Golf RSA, and the Sunshine Tour, as well as the national associations across the continent to create a platform for the most talented African amateurs to come and progress

their careers.

It's a hugely exciting initiative for African golf, and it's the last part of the continent around the world where we don't have our own championships that we now do.

I will close by returning to why we're all here: The 151st Open. I'd like to thank the membership and staff of Royal Liverpool for their tremendous hospitality and hard work in helping us stage the championship here for the 13th time.

The list of champions Royal Liverpool has produced is second to none, and it will provide a true test of links golf.

The course is looking great, a bit greener than I would like, but given the weather the last few weeks that is a credit to the excellent greenskeeping team and agronomists that are working here.

We have the largest galleries we've ever enjoyed outside of the 150th Open at St Andrews last year with 260,000 fans coming this week, and I think I can sense that the atmosphere is building nicely.

As always at this stage of the week, I'm looking forward to seeing the first ball in the air and to what will be a memorable week of world-class golf.

With that, I'll hand over to Mike. Thank you.

MIKE WOODCOCK: We will be issuing a press release regarding the African Amateur Championship later this morning.

Without further ado if you raise your hand we'll get the microphone to you for further questions.

**Q. I'm trying to understand the sustainability and financial awareness that you seem to have in regards to the purses. What is your plan to deal with that, or do you have a plan, and is that a plan that's only for the R&A and The Open, or is this something you've discussed amongst the other majors?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I don't discuss it with any of the other majors, just to be clear, and as a starting point.

We have a -- when I look at the R&A's responsibility, we have a huge responsibility to the game around the world to grow it, to govern it, and to ensure it's thriving, and our one asset which is profitable is this week, and the proceeds of this championship have always gone to be reinvested entirely into the game.

The £200 million that we've committed to making this decade, as I think, Alex, you know, is double what we've made in the previous decade.



So we're balancing up that longer term for balance of the P & L, prize money, and our willingness to invest in the game. And I'm not willing -- we're not willing to compromise on how we see developing the game because that's actually what we think is the most important long-term balance for it.

**Q. What I'm trying to understand is will you slow down the rate of purses if that is what's necessary? And secondly, would you look at some kind of sponsorship of the event if that was necessary?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Certainly wouldn't look at the latter. Certainly wouldn't look at the latter.

I think on the former, we had expected prize money to rise over a five-year period, and it's probably risen three years earlier than we expected it to, so there is a significant change.

I think you're seeing the change in the entire business model of men's professional golf, it being able to be worked, and that's a significant challenge for us when you take into account our desire to keep growing the game and investing all the proceeds we make into the game.

**Q. Just to follow up on the African Amateur, is that in partnership with any other organisations, or just the R&A?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: No, we're doing that one ourselves. Collaborated, but we're doing that one ourselves, and Johann has been fantastic in being able to help us put that and to allow us to use Leopard Creek, which I think, as you know, is one of the finest golf courses around.

**Q. Johann has feelings on the distance issue, as well; on that topic, I know you're in the middle of the comment period, but have you heard some of the comments that players have made recently about the impact that the driver has made, and is there any possibility of revisiting some of the proposals that initially have been put forward regarding the driver?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We've been listening, and if you would sort of bear with me a little bit, I want to be respectful that we're still in the comment period, so I'm being respectful of comments still to come.

But you will recall that when we published our area of interest earlier in the year, we actually had two things. We had a model local rule for the driver to reduce effectively the forgiveness in the driver, and we had a ball change for the whole game.

We heard two very loud and clear pieces of feedback, and I think it's very important as governing bodies that you set out your objectives, you set out how you can do it, and then you

listen.

Two of the feedbacks was around that if you change the driver, you're going to change three, four, maybe five clubs in the bag, which could get hot relative to a less forgiving driver.

A model local rule then had a bigger impact.

And secondly, please don't affect the recreational game, and that's why in our comment we're going for model local rule for the elite golf.

I think it's really important that people understand it's not professional golf, it's elite golf. I've always felt that elite golf is starting at pretty well under 18 boys' level golf where we're seeing the same growth in distance, and it's that piece that we're now working forward to it.

I still keep on the radar longer term around the driver because I do think there is an element of skill and technology that you and I have discussed and we've discussed in this room a number of times. But at the moment we're focused on the MLR of the ball, but I absolutely hear what all the players are saying.

**Q. I think 11 million people or thereabouts watched the Wimbledon men's final on Sunday on the BBC. I know this debate swirls around you every year, but do you look enviously at the platform that Wimbledon receives and the coverage, and how do you rationalise The Open's lack of visibility via that now?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: No, I don't, actually. I look at the fact that there's probably -- we estimate there will be over 600 million people watching The Open Championship come Sunday around the world. I see golf as a global sport. I see The Open as a global asset. I'm more focused on that.

I think in the UK specifically I think Sky have done a brilliant job for golf. The TV coverage that we get for golf has been heavily driven by Sky, who I think have done -- they showcase the stories, they tell the stories, and I think great TV is all about telling stories.

It's not about just showing pictures, it's telling the story, and I think Sky do that extremely well. We're delighted to work with them across our digital panels.

I'll just leave you with one thought in case you have a follow up. You can only consider terrestrial free to air offering if there is one put on the table to be able to be considered, and there isn't one at the moment.

**Q. Given the R&A's growing relationship with Royal Porthcawl, have you revisited the possibility of bringing it into the rota? And given that, is there anything beyond**

**infrastructure that has kept you all from bringing them into it so far?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: The simple answer is no. We're playing the Senior Open next year at Royal Porthcawl. It's an element of the importance about the size of a championship and what is needed. There's no doubt Royal Porthcawl is a golf course that's world class. It's absolutely world class. It's a great joy to play.

But we need a lot of land. We need a lot of infrastructure. We need a lot of facilities for a championship of this size. At present, that is just not possible in that part of the country.

**Q. I'm asking you this question because R&A is considered the custodians of golf all over the world. One of the things that I've heard from a lot of players back home in India, a lot of parents especially of junior golfers back in India and even during your championships at the Women's Amateur Asia-Pacific, is the rising price of the equipment. Everything else has gone up almost twice, thrice the price of what it used to be one and a half years ago.**

So what I want to ask you is are you, not impinging on their business, but are you talking to some of the original equipment manufacturers on doing something about that? Because that is really hampering the game, growth of the game in Asia especially. In the funds that you are disbursing, will there be any element of equipment for these junior golfers in the developing countries?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Lots of sharing of questions this morning, isn't there.

I think in terms of cost of equipment, when you get to the elite level in amateur golf I think it's a different issue. To be able to play elite golf, that's part of the package, and there's lots of -- the national federations around the world do a brilliant job in helping the best players in their country to make sure that they can do all they can to make sure that money is not the reason why they can't play.

I think at grass-roots it's a really good point. But I think people underestimate how much the manufacturers are doing, especially with people like us, in providing equipment that is generic that we feed into the system, and perhaps we need to do more in India specifically to do that.

Having spent 10 years building a business in India got a little bit of familiarity. Got to be able to find different ways of doing it. We can follow up on that one.

But the manufacturers are actually really good because it's in their interest. It's in their interest to help us not have cost as the impediment to young people taking up the game.

They're good in the big countries, United States, here, France, Germany, some Asia countries. Sounds like we need to do a bit more work in that area, so thank you for raising it.

**Q. You referenced your pleasure in seeing the regular tours and LIV working more closely now. Given that and the fact that there are so many qualifying places for The Open available at relatively weekly contested events in Asia, et cetera, would you consider awarding qualifying events, qualifying places at future LIV events?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, if you remember last year, I said very clearly two things on this particular topic. I said one, we're not banning anybody, and we haven't. And two, we will review our qualifications and exemptions. That is exactly what we did.

We did two main things that created and ensured in our opinion that pathways to any players playing on LIV or anywhere else in the world had a chance to qualify this week.

We gave four places into the championship to the Hong Kong Open on the Asian Tour, fully available to any player on LIV to have played in, and a number of them did and tried to qualify, and we increased in final qualifying from 12 to 19 spots.

If you have a look at the fields who made it to FQ, they were probably the strongest final qualifying fields of global players that we've had since we introduced the AQS system back just before I joined.

We will continue to ensure that there are qualifications and exemptions available to ensure the best players in the world tee it up in this championship.

I think we've achieved that this year, and we'll continue to do that.

**Q. Obviously Sergio and other LIV players did make the effort, but would a season-long qualification for LIV not make it more sort of accessible to those players?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think that's one of the options that we have. It's not the option that is top of my list at the moment, but it would be one of the options that is available.

But we're now -- as you said, I welcomed the announcement on June 6th. I still welcome it.

I think where we were last year in this room was extremely tense, and it's disappointing that for our game, the first championship to get to 150th, two thirds of this meeting were focused on the topic which had nothing to do with the 150th.

The disruption being caused by the game is not good for the sport. It's tearing the sport apart. And as importantly, I care about what the perception of this game is around the world. I don't want it to be perceived as a game that isn't available to everyone, that isn't available to boys, girls, men, and women.

This constant discussion about money, which I referred to again last year, was in my opinion damaging the perception of our sport worldwide in the eyes of a number of young people who are saying, why do I want to join that, in the eyes of a number of politicians who help us put on these fantastic championships.

We need to move beyond that, and that's why we welcomed the announcement. But as I said, it's not my deal. I'm not a party. I'm not at the table, but I am very pleased that they are sitting there and figuring it out because long-term that's good for the sport which we all want to either work in or enjoy.

**Q. Martin, have you had any indication from Just Stop Oil of the intend to protest this week? And if so, are you confident generally that you have the security measures in place to, as best you can, minimise any attempt at disruption?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you for that. I will answer your question but I'm going to be very cautious, and I'll explain why. We've had no direct intelligence. I think you're aware that there was direct intelligence last year, and most people in this room don't know that The Open was targeted last year.

We have significant security procedures in place. We work clearly with the law enforcement agencies, and we'll wait and see what happens.

You will have seen that we advised the players, please don't get involved, and I stand by that. We have enough things in place to be able to deal with it.

Beyond that, I think security matters I need to keep confidential, and I hope you understand that, but I assure there's enough sentiment in what I just spoke for your question.

**Q. It's no secret that the USGA loves 280; you guys seem very comfortable with numbers in the 260s. Maybe some day we'll get below that. What is it like for you to watch the tournament unfold when guys are going really low as they did last year?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Oh, in terms of scoring?

**Q. Yeah.**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I genuinely don't watch the score. This is my eighth Open. I can actually only remember one score in

eight Opens, and that was Henrik beating Phil at Royal Troon.

I think the key question and the way I look at it, the answer to your question is these are the best players in the world. We need to -- our job is to give them a test which allows them to show us how good they are. The number is the number.

I think that's what we spend more time thinking about, rather than what the absolute score is at the end. Because I spend zero time thinking about the score, even though it's in the phrase at the end come Sunday afternoon. Then I have to go into scorer's and ask what the number is, to tell you the truth.

I think it's this desire to allow them to play and to reward good shots. I think all of us in this room who love golf, the thing we get most frustrated about is when a golf course gives the same outcome for a good shot and a bad shot.

What we want is to see good shots rewarded and bad shots, they've got a problem. That's what we tried to do this week, and I hope that's what we'll get come the next four days.

**Q. To follow up on the question about Porthcawl, is there anything other than infrastructure that would prevent The Open from going back to Turnberry?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We've been very clear. I made an announcement January of 2021 about Turnberry. We can pass that to you.

The essential statement that we made then was that until we're confident that any coverage at Turnberry would be about golf, about the golf course and about the championship, until we're confident about that, we will not return any of our championships there.

**Q. A number of the American players last week raised issues, trust issues about the leadership of the PGA TOUR, this after the Senate hearing last week. What was your overall thoughts on what was said at the Senate hearing?**

Secondly, you speak about financial sustainability. That appears to be also an issue with the PGA TOUR because they spoke about the financial impact of LIV and the massive amounts of money that they are throwing at the game. Do you have concerns about that, as well?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think on the first part of your question, I'm not involved. I'm an outsider, a bit like you are. I sat and watched.

I find it very unfortunate that our great game was in that situation. All credit, I think, goes to Jimmy and to Ron, the way they handled themselves, and I was very impressed and glad I wasn't sitting in their shoes.

I do think that we have to have a sensible conversation about the long-term financial sustainability of golf, and that, as you say, came up over the last few months.

I want to make sure that -- there's two things. I want to make sure that we leave golf, when I've done my time, in a stronger position than it is. Stronger position for me is more people playing golf. There's a hundred million people now play golf. Never happened before.

Secondly, 60 million of those are outside the United States. Unless you go back to the 1800s when Scotland was the world of golf, that's never happened before.

That's a fantastic thing that people need to talk about. Far more. We now have 30 to 35 percent of people who play golf are women. That did not exist 10 years ago.

Those two things I think are really important, and for us at the R&A that's what gets me out of bed in the morning and what pays for it is this championship.

The second phrase that I keep saying in my own mind, and it was a very wise man who said to me, remember, Martin, you've only got a job because some great person went before you. You're standing on their shoulders, so make sure you hand that on.

I think every one of us who's working in the sport has a responsibility to think like that, including in the business side of professional golf.

**Q. To get back to amateur golf, congratulations on taking golf to Africa. You spoke about putting in \$200 million, which is a lot of money --**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Pounds.

**Q. Pounds. That's even better. When you allocate them to across to the various constituents in the smaller countries, et cetera, what's the kind of monitoring system that you have apart from questions about recoupment that were asked in terms of how the money is spent, in terms of having tournaments, in terms of scholarships, in terms of growing the game as such? Do you have a monitoring system?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I was 30 years a banker. I had lots of recording systems. Yes, we are extremely clear on why we're giving anyone money and what the outcome is intended to be, but every year we get better at it, and I would like to think one of the reasons we have 60 million playing golf outside the United States is because we are getting better at it, and we're getting very focused in it.

What we're investing into now is trying to build platforms, methodologies, and approaches in technology to enable anyone in the world to be able to apply the same methodology to be able to bring young people into the game and get them enjoying the game.

At the end of the day, the real driver is how many people are playing golf and how many elite amateurs are coming through and winning major championships. I think Asia-Pacific should be very proud. In 10 years, 18 people are in the field of one of the best four championships in the world. Extraordinary.

**Q. When you give the money to various people, do you give the plan, also, or does the plan come from the recipients as to how they're going to --**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Plan comes first. Show me the plan; then you'll get the money.

**Q. Can you elaborate on The Open last year being targeted?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We had a very credible threat that came through a -- was reported to us through a journalist that's in this room who very kindly and responsibly informed us that one of the most senior players in the field was going to be targeted by an environmental activist. That's all I really want to say.

**Q. You mentioned earlier that the course is greener than you would like it to be. Can you just talk about how much this rain changed the course in recent weeks, and can you also give us your thoughts on the 17th and what the reaction has been to that?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: That's pretty good. We took 35 minutes to get to the 17th. (Laughter.) About as long as you would probably take to play it --

**Q. I hit the green, actually.**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: If you came here four weeks ago, five weeks ago, the whole of the UK was under a very strong heat wave. The club here were being extremely cautious with our agronomists about how much water we were putting on the course to hold back, to make sure we had enough for this week if that heat wave had continued. We have very strict limits on how much water we're allowed to use on a golf course.

The rain has changed the golf course completely. I was expecting it to be more like 2006 when I was looking at it five, six weeks ago, and I was excited about that. But every time I get excited about a nice brown golf course, Mother Nature comes in.

It shouldn't escape your attention that sort of the logo that's on



the grandstands is Forged by Nature, and that's what it is. I think one of the beauties of The Open Championship and the way I inherited it from my predecessors and the way I do it is we don't fight nature. We just let nature happen. It's rained and it's now green.

But on the other side of it, the rough has come up. When it was brown the rough had burnt out and it was a different golf course. It was going to be a different golf course.

We just let it evolve. We're going to have two or three, hopefully, dry days. It's draining quite fast. My worry is now what the forecast is for Saturday and Sunday, which there's some uncertainty about which way it will go. But it's going to be wet or it's going to be very wet. We'll see.

But I think -- I've been watching some of the players' interviews and some of the conversations, and the challenge they're talking about is not how bouncy it is, it's how to stay out of the bunkers.

There's two things in my opinion that make this golf course fantastic: The bunkers off the fairways and the runoffs around the greens if you miss the greens, which makes the greens much smaller than they actually are.

As to the 17th, we've been talking with the club on and off about that for about four years. One of the, not feedback, but one of the sentiments that was felt after '14, '06 and '14, was that the course could do with more drama.

It's a great golf course. I mean, I absolutely love it. It's one of my top two or three favourite golf courses on the pool.

Can we create some more drama. It was actually the club came to us and said, do you know, with a lot of talk being around flipping around what was 15 up on to the dunes, and we came and looked at it, and we thought, yeah, that could really add some drama.

I am a believer that the best par-3s in the world are short. The 12th at Augusta, 17th at TPC, 8th at Royal Troon. This gave us an opportunity to change that hole to create drama.

It's hard, but if you want to go and do your research go and compare it to the size of green at TPC, Postage Stamp, 12th at Augusta. It's a bigger green, the 12th at Augusta, which I think everyone in this room would probably put in the top three par-3s in the world, and it has a lot of jeopardy in there.

I think it fits well. What it also does, it enabled us to reconfigure the final bit around there. So we got four holes. The final four holes will be 610 par-5, 480 par-4, 136 par-3, 620 par-5. A lot of things could happen on that, and I think that drama will unfold come Sunday.

Whether it's a great hole or a really great hole, I'll wait until Monday morning.

**Q. As it relates to the topic of financial sustainability, if you get to a point where you entertain a sponsor for The Open, would you accept the Public Investment Fund if they wanted to become a partner?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: If I'm very open, we are and do and continue to do, talk to various potential sponsors. I was interpreting the question about sponsors as a presenting sponsor. We're not changing from The Open. That's what I meant.

We have a number of large corporate partners that help us make this thing happen. I think the world has changed in the last year. It's not just golf. You're seeing it in football. You're seeing it in F1. You're seeing it in cricket. I'm sure tennis won't be that far behind.

The world of sport has changed dramatically in the last 12 months, and it is not feasible for the R&A or golf to just ignore what is a societal change on a global basis. We will be considering within all the parameters that we look at all the options that we have.

**Q. This concerns rankings and what you've been speaking many times during this press conference, as well, is how a lot has changed over the last two years. One of the positives obviously is showing that the ranking systems that we have today are not an even representation of global excellence in golf because of how it's constructed. What can the R&A do and what will the R&A do to try and inform and help produce a better ranking system that provides an equal platform for the world?**

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, remember the ranking system is separate from the R&A. I sit on the board of the rankings board, but I'm one of a series of members. We are and have been considering an application for LIV events to be included and have been in active dialogue with them.

What we're trying to work through is rankings, is trying to rank eligible tours. I think a lot of people get confused that rankings is trying to rank individual players. It's eligible tours that are comparable, and then we rank the players within that.

It is a complex problem, and it may be that the world has to change. But at the moment, that's still under work in progress and being reviewed.

**Q. I was not just mentioning LIV at all, but even beyond LIV. Perhaps the whole situation has helped highlight perhaps the inaccuracy in the current system. Is there something**

that --

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think except for that situation, the new model is working well. It is mathematically correct. It works on strength of field, and it works on ability and benefit from winning. Winning gets a bonus through that, but strength of field really matters. It's important if you win in a really strong field, you should get more points than if you win in a slightly less strong field. I think that does work.

One thing I keep coming back to that I really care about is making sure we get it globally relevant. Nothing is static, and everything has to keep evolving.

MIKE WOODCOCK: We'll draw things to a close. Thank you, everyone, and thank you, Martin.

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