

The 152nd Open

Press Conference

Wednesday, 17 July 2024

Martin Slumbers



MIKE WOODCOCK: Good morning, everyone. We can make a start. Welcome to the R&A press conference. I'm joined by Martin Slumbers, the CEO of the R&A. Martin is going to give a few opening remarks, and we'll have time for questions afterwards.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Good morning, everyone. It's great to see so many of you here at The Open once again and to be back at the world's finest links in Royal Troon.

We are looking forward to another fantastic championship and to watching how the world's best men's players face this challenge.

As you know, this will be my final press conference of The Open before I step down from the role later this year, but it will also be the final time in the chief referee hot seat for David Rickman. David has been with the R&A since it seems Bobby Jones was in his prime, but he has enjoyed a remarkable 37-year career during which he has refereed many of golf's most significant championships. He's been a wonderful colleague, friend, and I'm sure you will join with me in thanking David for all he has done for the game and The Open in particular.

(Applause.)

MIKE WOODCOCK: I think David's busy on the course at the moment, Martin. But he is somewhere here.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: From my point of view, I hope to see many of you at the AIG Women's Open and the Curtis Cup before I step down. But for those of you I won't see again, I would just like to say thank you for all your support over the last nine years.

I have always appreciated the coverage delivered, and while I certainly haven't agreed with everything you've written, I fully recognise the importance of journalism in providing and helping us tell the story of what we're trying to achieve.

I wish you all the very best and urge you to keep doing all you can to push our wonderful game forward.

Before I hand back to Mike to open the floor to questions, I'd just like to share a few brief, brief thoughts with you. Don't

worry, Doug, it will be closer to three minutes, not 30.

As you know, I've expressed concern in recent years about financial sustainability in the men's professional game. If we take a wider perspective on the game for a second, golf is in many ways riding on the crest of a wave. The golf industry is benefitting from a surge in participation, and more and more people are experiencing golf in all its forms. More than 100 million people experience the game in one form or another around the world.

The latest participation figures for 2023 showed that in the countries we're responsible for, there were 62.3 million people playing golf, which is a rise of 1.1 million on the previous year.

These are very encouraging figures, but we have to maintain this momentum. To do that, we must have a sustainable business model in the long term. If you look at golf as a pyramid, however strong the pyramid is at the top, it can only be sustained in the long term if the pyramid is equally strong at the base.

We see that as our responsibility, and that is why we invest all of the proceeds from The Open back into the sport. We have to be careful to do that in such a way as to ensure that the recreational game is thriving and that the most talented players have a pathway to the top of the game so the professional game of tomorrow flourishes. We can't do that if we neglect the base of the pyramid.

The reason I'm raising this concern is frankly that I care deeply about getting more people into golf around the world and helping them to move through the levels of the sport if they have the talent and the motivation.

While we will always offer a very competitive prize fund for The Open, our wider focus is on increasing participation and improving pathways in golf. We have to make choices about how we allocate resources and make the resources we have go as far as they can.

There are numerous examples of participation programmes and initiatives we support to bring more people into the game and to promote the health and well-being benefits of playing. One initiative is Golf It! in Glasgow. It's designed to bring more children and families into the sport and to break down



barriers to entry. With its driving range and other facilities, we're embracing the wider community of golf, of people who consume golf in numerous different ways, whether it's through TopGolf simulators or pitch-and-putt courses.

It takes financial resources to deliver projects of this kind, and we have to find ways to do more of this if we're to accelerate and maintain the upward trajectory of golf's participation curve.

But perhaps the most important component of all to golf's future success is staying true to its values. What sets golf apart from other sports is its ability to maintain a unique value set. It's a value set defined by integrity, personal accountability, and respect. These are precisely the values that sponsors want their products or services to be associated with and that are fundamental to golf's appeal. These values are golf's secret weapon, and we cannot afford to let them be diminished.

I'd like to close by conveying frankly my optimism for the future of golf. If we can achieve a sustainable business model and really engage in parts of the world where the growth opportunities are emerging, then there is a golden, perhaps once in a generation, opportunity to elevate our sport and make it a more popular participation sport than it has ever been, and I'm convinced that that is achievable.

The Open is one of golf's great showcases and one of the world's great sporting events. This week someone has the chance to become Champion Golfer of the Year and inspire millions of fans around the world. I hope you are all as excited to be part of that as I am for one more time. Thank you.

Q. Martin, can you talk about how happy you are with the course setup this week. Last year there was an issue with bunkers in the first round. Are you confident that won't happen again, just the way the balls were nestling in the bunkers?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: The golf course is -- we could have teed it up this morning. The golf course is ready. We've been holding the greens back a little bit because there was some concerns tomorrow that we might have some pretty strong wind, but the excess wind that was forecast is diminished. So we sped the greens up a bit this morning, and it will be a little bit quicker come tomorrow morning, and then we'll just let it evolve as the weekend goes.

The bunkers here, I understand you found them quite challenging, Martin (laughter). They're hazards. They're deep. They've got big faces, and they're designed to stay out of. We've been looking very carefully at the sand, and I think some of the players have commented how we've pushed them up a little bit to give them a slight chance to be able to get out.

As you know, links golf is very simple -- stay out of the bunkers.

Q. I think we have a 158-man field this week. Did you, A, consider adding one more player in just to -- well, it wouldn't be evening it out, but just to have a full group, as it were? Also, will that prompt you to look again at sort of how you've got to this point, how you have effectively too many players in the field?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, the weekend, we had 159 actually, and then David Duval unfortunately had to pull out.

The target is 156, but it's not the first time we've been above 156. The real reason we slipped up to 158 for tomorrow is we have tried really hard to improve the opportunities in final qualifying, to have more spots available.

We made a commitment quite a while ago that we would give a minimum of 16 spots to FQ. That was on an assumption about who would come in through exemptions and which of our past champions will play.

In prior years we probably would have cut the 16 FQs down to 13, but we didn't. We stayed with our commitment, and that's why we're just slightly over. But we don't want to do this as a matter of course. 156 is the number. It's a long enough day on Thursday and Friday, as all of you know, and it's going to be a little bit longer.

Q. Regarding the prize money, to what extent are you influenced at all as to what the other three majors do? Is there any pressure to keep up with them? Finally, do you see a day where you might have to put a cap on the prize money given the financial considerations and obligations that you have that the others don't?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: There's clearly a market out there. We watch it week in and week out, throughout regular play as well as through the big events. So, yeah, we're aware of what the numbers are, but we're also aware of our own business model and the way we think about it, and as I keep saying, the importance to keep investing.

I look at this in a much bigger picture. It's very easy to get binary and a little bit down a dark alley in this topic. If you think about a pie and that is the financial economic value of golf, and a part of that goes on development, a part of it goes on employing people, and a part of that goes into development of the game. What we're really talking about in the whole of this is getting the balance between particularly the prize money and the investment into the game in a way that we can ensure that the pie grows, and if the pie grows, everybody does better. If you reallocate incorrectly within an existing pie, there's a real danger that the pie will shrink.



So that's the way I think about it. That's the way we try to model it, and I think it's very important for the game to make sure that we think that way if we really want this game thriving 50 years from now.

Q. In reflecting on your time with the R&A, are there any particular accomplishments you're most proud of, or is there anything you wish you had more time to change or redo?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: There's a lot of things. I think I'm very proud how The Open has evolved over the last decade, I think, in terms of its benchmark, which we set ourselves, of being one of the world's greatest sporting events.

I am very proud of the AIG Women's Open and the fact that we've taken that event and turned it with the help of AIG into arguably one of the top two women's professional events in the world.

I am very happy that we're seeing 62.3 million people in our part of the world playing golf. And let's not forget, between 2016 and 2018, golf around the world was declining pretty much every year. And yes, COVID -- everyone goes, COVID was the thing. Well, actually, golf's grown more since COVID than during COVID, and arguably it is the only sport in the world that has grown since COVID.

We should be extremely proud of that as a sport. We should be writing about it. We should be talking about it. And we should be banging the drum. I think that is really, really important.

My only regret is I wish I was ten years younger. If you work in golf, I think I have the best job in the sport. I would love to be ten years younger and having another ten years of fun, but I'm not, and I'm delighted with my successor. Younger person, but same values, same thoughts as I have, a really good sportsman, and I think the R&A is in a really good place.

Q. Since the rollout of the new testing for 2028 on the golf ball, when you dropped the thoughts on pursuing the driver as well, we had many players voice that a lot of the modern drivers are virtually self-correcting for them, and even the players have said, this is not a good demonstration of skill. Have you heard those comments? And can you tell us why pursuing that died? Was it the bifurcation notion? Was it the resistance from the PGA of America and the PGA TOUR? And could it be revisited?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Probably the one common theme through my near decade has been a desire to look at equipment rules and ensure we get the right balance between skill and technology. You and I have talked about that a lot, not just in this forum.

We made a decision to -- we originally, if you remember, put out an area of interest that said we're interested in the ball and we're interested in the driver. The feedback from the industry -- and I'm not going to go any more specific than the industry -- was, okay, but only choose one. We decided that the ball was the most effective way to be able to move forward.

As you quite correctly noted in the notice and comment, the decision that was made at the end of last year, we said we are still very interested in the driver. We believe that there is work that needs to be done to make the driver less forgiving for the best players in the world. We just don't know how to do it yet. So we'll work with the industry.

The most important thing between now and -- is 2028. We work with the industry, deeply conscious of the change that we're putting into the system, and all our focus will be on getting the golf ball 2028-2030, but rest assured we've not lost sight of the driver. We'll be continuing to think about that and engaging with some bright people to think about how to do that.

Q. Under your watch in the R&A, golf in the Asia-Pacific region has continued to flourish, led quite a lot by the Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship and the Women's Amateur Asia-Pacific. Can you talk about how pleased you are to see them progress and how you hope to see them continue in the future?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We've talked a lot about this in our travels around the Asia-Pacific. What do we care about? I talk about more people playing golf. I care about pathways to the top. I'm a great believer sport is all about young people having the opportunity and can get to the top simply by how good they are and how hard they're willing to work. I think sport that doesn't have that isn't sport.

And I believe in global. I think golf is a global game. I'm passionate -- I spent most of my banking life running around the world and spent most of the last ten years running around the world, and I'm sure I will for the next ten years.

So Asia-Pacific is really important. Latin America is really important. We launched this year our Africa Amateur and the Africa Women's Invitational. We've now got all the parts of the world covered. If you look at what's come out of Asia, I think our Women's Amateur, which started on my watch, I think we've had four major champions have come out of that. Not many events in the world have produced that number of major champions in less than six years.

I'm really excited, and we will continue to invest in the global game.

Q. Just in respect to your overall tenure here, is there one



single thing that you wanted to achieve that you didn't or couldn't?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Maintaining my golf handicap might have been one of them actually.

No, when I started to think about finishing, I did pull a piece of paper out from my desk at home, which is the things I wanted to get done, and they were all ticked off. Is there tomorrow's challenge? Yeah, of course there is. There's plenty of challenge. The men's professional game is one of them that all of us are aware of.

No, I feel comfortable that -- I feel that I've done my bit, and I'm looking forward to -- I've enjoyed the benefits, and I'm looking forward to seeing the next decade.

Q. Can we go back to the money, please? You won't be surprised to hear this. Would you describe it as sloppy journalism or perhaps imprecise journalism if we said that there is sort of an arms race going on as one major championship competes with another to top up the prize money and so on? It's all reaching a level -- I'm sure you've read and you know a figure that The Open is now the 28th highest paying major championship. I'm wondering whether, as you leave, you feel that you are a lone voice and whether you are like Sisyphus, really, pushing a boulder uphill. Do you feel you're the only one left in saying these things, or do you feel you've really made a difference in trying to stop what I began by describing it as an arms race?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I'll never have a comment about the quality of journalism, John, particularly when you're sitting in the room.

But I don't think -- A, I didn't know 28, and B, I don't care. That's not what this is about. I think the whole thing -- our responsibility is for what we do and for what we run is to get that balance right and get the choices to ensure the game is thriving 50 years from now. That's the role of the R&A.

There has been a massive increase in prize money. You can look at every sort of number of other sports and things, and you see this going in waves. Do I think it will continue? No, I don't. I think that there is a natural balance that will be achieved, and I think it's important that the R&A particularly -- it's not just because it's my last press conference, but I've decided this year to say what I really think about ensuring that we do not lose sight of that overall pyramid and the importance of the bottom and the top and helping it all grow because without one or the other, it won't.

I go back to my earlier comment: 2006 to 2018 golf declined every single year. I can remember my very first meeting with the media in my office when Peter was still in charge, and

Martin over there asked me quite rightly, what are you going to do about golf participation? And I said, there's no silver bullet, and I don't know the answer.

I don't think we're asking that question now. The question now is how much further can it go. I think that's a testament of how we've tried to balance commercial revenue, commercial expense, and investment into the game.

Q. The latter part, the last part of my question, Sisyphus and the boulder uphill, do you feel you are a lone voice? Do you feel you've had some success? Do you think you're being heard?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I'm not worried about it being a lone voice. Sometimes leadership is lonely. But I do think it's important that we do say our voice, and I think there's more people who are hearing than not hearing.

Q. You're going to have 250,000 fans here this week, but that's 70,000 more than 2016. Is that the bar going forward for every Open venue, and how important has that growth been during your tenure?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think I said in this room a few years ago I think big-time sport needs big-time crowds. It surprised me when I came here in 2016, 170,000 people in a week around this golf course. It sort of felt empty. Grandstands weren't full very often. The image wasn't that great. The weather wasn't terribly good on Friday, was it.

But I think big-time sport is so much better when there's lots of crowds and there's lots of noise and there's lots of enthusiasm. Yeah, I mean, every year since then we've hit a record during my time, and I'm sure my successor will be looking to do exactly the same.

Q. As you know, in lieu of not being accredited by the OWGR, LIV has since been advocating for direct spots into the majors off their order of merit or through some series of events, what have you. A year ago you suggested that you would look at that. Although it wasn't maybe your top choice, I just wonder if that has evolved at all, if there's been any thinking from the R&A about a pathway into The Open for LIV?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We decided the year after last year's event that we wanted to ensure that there was sufficient enough opportunities for all players, whichever tour they're playing on, to get into The Open. We used our Open qualifying series. We picked events that were available for all players. We used the Asian Tour, and we used final qualifying to create those opportunities.

I think we have 18 players from LIV in the field, and I think

we've got all the best players in the world. And that's what we do want to have, all the best players in the world coming through. So I think we've created those opportunities.

Will that evolve in the coming years? I think that depends on how the game evolves. But we will continue to want the best players in the world to be able to get into The Open in an appropriate way.

Q. This is actually following on from Martin's question. This event, we've been very grateful to see this event evolve over the last 10 years and become bigger every year. Where do you see this event in 10 years' time?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I'd like it to be viewed by the players, by the fans, by spectators as one of the top two events in world golf and having the prestige that it deserves.

You may have been around in the pressroom when -- The 150th, and I said, I felt a horrendous, at times, responsibility to reflect 150 years of history. I think we have a responsibility to ensure that The Open is one of the great championships that everyone wants to win.

I'm rather hoping that we start to move back to a conversation about who's going to hold that Claret Jug on Sunday and less about some of the other financial matters.

Q. You seem to be emphasising this concept of the bottom of the pyramid and how important it is, and it occurs to me that there's probably a reason you're saying that. Do you feel there have been missteps, or do you feel there's danger of that momentum being lost for some reason?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think -- I'm not sure missteps is the right word. I think we learn from experiences and events of the last 30, 50 years. I think as someone who loves golf and now has been in a position where I have to run a business in golf, I realize that actually you only have a good business in a sport if people are playing it, watching it, consuming it, and loving it.

That is not just 200 professional golfers. That is 60 million people around the world wanting to watch it. So, yeah, I think we might have taken our eye off the ball 20 years ago, 25 years ago, and saying that the game needs to be more broad, more accessible, more open. I think we've moved the pendulum back on that, and I'm going to keep pushing it, and I think the R&A will keep pushing it.

Q. If I can follow up holding your feet to the fire a little bit, before you took over, Rory McIlroy won two straight majors, including an Open Championship. In your tenure he's won none; it's going to be the 40th major. Is there a Martin Slumbers curse? And with your exit, do you think he'll now be free to continue winning major championships now that

you're gone?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: As a very proud European, if that's what it takes for him to win, I'm fine.

Q. As it relates to future venues, is going back to Muirfield hurt at all as long as the Scottish is next door at Renaissance?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: It Muirfield still an option?

Q. I know it's an option, but how much going back there depends on the Scottish not being next door at the Renaissance the week before. Is that an issue?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Absolutely, we're going back to Muirfield. It's a brilliant golf course. I'll have a little conversation with Mr. Kinnings about maybe moving the Scottish Open from the Renaissance.

Q. And where does Portmarnock stand?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: What we've said about Portmarnock is the club has asked the Irish government for support in putting together a business case to stage our championships on the links, and we are fully supportive of the club doing that, and we are actively engaged in making those assessments. But no decisions have been made because we don't even know if it's possible.

As Brian here did remind me in a newspaper article a couple years ago, I now know it's a peninsula, not an island. So we're learning an awful lot.

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