

The 153rd Open

Press Conference

Wednesday, 16 July 2025

Mark Darbon



MIKE WOODCOCK: Good morning, everyone. We'll make a start. Welcome to the R&A press conference for the 153rd Open here at Royal Portrush. I'm joined this morning by Mr. Mark Darbon, who's the Chief Executive of The R&A. Mark is going to begin with a few words of introduction and then we'll have time for questions.

MARK DARBON: Firstly, welcome, everyone, to Royal Portrush Golf Club. Thank you for being with us here this week. It's a pleasure to see so many of you here. I really appreciate the role that all of you do in telling the story of The Open Championship and thank you for the excellent coverage that you're already providing and that I'm sure you'll continue to provide through the rest of this week.

I had the chance to chat to many of you at the media day here a couple of months ago. I met some of you for the first time last night at the dinner and I look forward to spending some more time with you as this week unfolds ahead of us.

This is of course my first Open since taking over from my predecessor Martin Slumbers in December, and I'm thrilled to be involved in staging one of the great global sporting events. As someone who's worked on major events in the past, I can tell you there's nothing quite like being involved in these global propositions so I'm very proud to be in the role and looking forward to what's to come this week.

As you know, we're welcoming close to 280,000 people through the gates at The Open Championship, a record attendance outside of St Andrews, and we received more than 1.2 million applications for those tickets. That speaks to the incredible demand that this championship holds. We're delighted to bring it to so many fans this week.

You'll see in that context from walking around the course just how much The Open has grown, even since 2019. I'm looking forward to continuing to work with the very talented team at The R&A to elevate and enhance The Open in the years to come.

Indeed, The R&A has a very unique role to play. The revenues that we generate from this championship play a critical role in supporting our work to invest in developing golf all around the world, a role that we are incredibly proud of.

Turning to this week, the course has been magnificently set up by Graeme Beatt and his team, and I'd like to thank Graeme; Ian Kerr, the chair of the Portrush Championship Committee; Danny Campbell, the general manager here, and the full team and membership base for their tremendous support and assistance in helping us get to where we are.

We have worked really respectfully and closely with the Portrush team to evolve the site to underpin the staging of a modern Open Championship. As I'm sure you'll agree, the site looks fantastic and we look forward to returning here for many years to come.

It promises to be another memorable and dramatic week and I hope you're as excited as I am to see the drama unfold and to crown the champion golfer come Sunday.

Thank you.

Q. I mostly wanted to compliment the R&A and you for taking the decision not to increase the prize money this year and cap it at £17 million. Sustainability is something your predecessor talked about. I just wanted to know how difficult was that decision in today's scenario where everyone is trying to increase the prize money, and can you tell us how much it will help grow the game in other parts of the world by not increasing the prize money?

MARK DARBON: Sure, look, I'm a big believer that the athletes are the stars of our sport and they should be well compensated for what they do. They inspire and excite millions of golfers all around the world. So we're always going to look to strike the right balance between an attractive prize fund that compensates them for their efforts and our wider responsibilities in the game.

We have held flat this year. I think prize fund is still 60 percent up on when we were here last time in 2019. That's strong growth by anyone's standards. We think the choice we've made is really appropriate.

As you know, at The R&A, we have a unique role to play. We take the surplus that we generate from this Open Championship and we invest it back into the game all around the world, so we think we've got the balance just right.



Q. You said in April, I think, that you were really optimistic about Portmarnock and perhaps bringing your championships there. Are you more optimistic now than you were in April, and what is your timeline for a decision on that?

MARK DARBON: I think the first thing I'd say is I've got one venue on my mind this week and it is Portrush, given that it's my first Open Championship and delivering what we hope will be a successful event.

Yes, we are thinking about Portmarnock. We think it's a wonderful links golf course and we've been really encouraged by the support that we've had in principle from the Irish government to work with us to understand whether we could stage an Open Championship there in the future. We're knee deep in feasibility work to help us answer that question fully. We expect to have a clearer picture by the back end of this year.

Q. Mark, you mentioned here evolving the site. Increasingly, some venues are being asked to evolve the course to accommodate movement of fans, of course the distance the ball flies, things like that. Is there a point where the R&A is concerned that you're changing these historic venues in pursuit of just pure numbers in terms of ticket sales, and is there consideration or wariness or understanding of the potential impact for just one week of golf on these courses?

MARK DARBON: Yeah, I think we work really closely with our venues, and there's a few things that I'd say in response to that question.

Firstly, we have huge demand for our Open Championship, and we're keen to service that demand where we can. But it's not about just being bigger, it's about being better. So it's not about just simply the volume of people.

We work really respectfully with the clubs so I think this is a great example this week, the changes that have facilitated the staging of a modern Open Championship have also been changes that the membership base have been supportive of. It's improving and evolving their course for the better, while staying true to Harry Colt's original design here in the late 1880s.

We think we work really respectfully and closely with our venues. It's not just about being bigger, it's about being better, and that will continue to be our approach.

Q. Do you have a timeline for 2028, selecting that venue?

MARK DARBON: Yeah, we do. We have announced that

we're going to Royal Birkdale next year, looking forward to that, and then back to St Andrews in 2027. We're constantly in discussion with courses in our pool of venues. We're lucky and blessed to have such good relationships with such a fantastic array of venues. I would imagine we'll be making an announcement on 2028 sometime before the middle of next year.

Q. There is a magnificent links in Scotland that seems to have been overlooked. I'm curious what is taking so long to go back to Muirfield?

MARK DARBON: I wondered where you were going with that one. (Laughter).

Q. I think it's the longest it's been between Opens, and I'm trying to figure out why.

MARK DARBON: We love the golf course at Muirfield. We're in a discussion with the venue right now. There's some things that we need to evolve at Muirfield, the practice ground in particular is a challenge for us with a modern Open and there's some work we need to do with the venue to facilitate some of the infrastructure that we require, some cabling to enable the scale of the production that we have these days. But it's a good dialogue and we'd love to be back there in the future.

Q. You say you need to change things to have more fans? Is that what it's down to?

MARK DARBON: As I've said, no, it's not just about the number of fans, but there's some other things that go into staging the championship's practice ground and the wider infrastructure that we require.

Q. I'd heard last week there was a possibility there might not be the bunker rakers for the week, the group from BIGGA. Are they employed again this year?

MARK DARBON: No, I think this week we've got the caddies raking the bunkers. It's a change for us but we think a good one.

Q. Why?

MARK DARBON: A number of factors. We just think it's a good model for us here at Portrush.

Q. So the players' caddies will be doing the bunkers?

MARK DARBON: That's right.

Q. I'll follow up on what I think is Doug's point. The other question that I think you were expecting and the other course in Scotland is Turnberry. For so long as President Trump is president, we will assume that you don't have any



particular interest in going back there, but does that mean that when he ceases being President, there might be more reason to go back to Turnberry?

MARK DARBON: I think we've been extremely clear on our position in respect of Turnberry. We love the golf course but we've got some big logistical challenges there. You see the scale of their setup here and we've got some work to do on the road, rail and accommodation infrastructure around Turnberry.

We've explicitly not taken it out of our pool of venues but we'd need to address those logistical challenges should we return.

Q. What plans are you making to address them?

MARK DARBON: So we've had good conversations with the ownership and the venue like we do with all of our venues. We'll continue to assess the feasibility and work collaboratively not just with the venue but with local and national government to understand what may be possible and that process at Turnberry is no different to any of our other locations.

Q. It feels like 10 years ago there was a very distinct Open rota, and now it seems a little bit more blurred, what these guys just touched on. Are the R&A moving more towards a USGA model of core venues? Portrush was only six years ago, Muirfield hasn't been since 2013. Are you going more to a core and fringe venues, or is there still a very distinct rota?

MARK DARBON: I'm not sure there's ever been a direct cycle within our pool of venues. We look at a number of factors when making those choices. We want a great links course that tests the best golfers in the world. We need a venue that can accommodate a modern Open Championship from a logistical and commercial perspective and we want to be at venues that enable us to continue to tell the wonderful story that underpins the world's oldest major championship. So we'll stay true to those principles.

We're doing a lot of thinking right now, actually, on how that plays out for the future, but I wouldn't expect a dramatic change.

Q. As you say, it's not the only issue the practice area at Muirfield, but is it a possibility given that at Hoylake the practice area there is not the one they use normally, that Renaissance Club practice facility could be used for an Open at Muirfield?

MARK DARBON: No, I think we're open minded to solutions. We love the golf course, and we'd love to be back there in the future.

Q. Another thing, it was announced in the buildup that you're going to introduce a winner-takes-all qualifier next

year. Can you throw any light on how the player makeup is going to be for that? Some people are maybe looking at that as a bit gimmicky, but you don't think obviously.

MARK DARBON: Obviously. (Laughter). We were always looking to evolve the proposition here at The Open Championship and we take player feedback. We invest a lot in ensuring that we get spectator and broadcaster feedback and we think it's a great addition to the week.

What I would say about that last-chance qualifier is it will absolutely be true to our broad principles around exemptions and qualifications for The Open. Everyone who hits their first tee shot here has earned the right to be here so it will not be staged, to use your term, in a gimmicky fashion. It will be robust in its approach.

Q. Trying to understand when you have 1.2 million people that are interested in coming here and you're limited to 280,000, so the question is what can you do to monetize that further, and are you looking at expanding in some way, shape or form the amount of tickets or the amount of people that can come to these events going forward?

MARK DARBON: Well, I think our first question, the first question I would ask is not how do we monetise that, it's how do we deliver a brilliant experience because a lot flows from that. So we spend a lot of time thinking about the experience for our different client groups -- our spectators, our hospitality guests, our commercial partners and patrons, the players themselves -- and we try and build a venue and implement our infrastructure plans in that context.

I go back to my point previously, which is it's not about just being bigger, it's about being better. So yes, it's fantastic to be in a position where you have very strong demand and we'd like to ensure that our Open Championship remains just that, open and accessible to golf fans and sports fans all around the world. We'll continue to try to get that balance right into the future.

Q. Have you thought about not limiting ticket sales to just the venue themselves, but outside, trying to do, I guess, umbrella areas or something like that because obviously most people would love to be in the same situation that you're in right now.

MARK DARBON: Yeah, sure, and I think our first priority, actually, is how do we elongate and extend the event week. Obviously traditionally the crowds are much larger Thursday to Sunday.

One of the reasons we've been able to move from roughly 240,000 to roughly 280,000 this week is not by growing the championship days dramatically but it's being able to create a stronger proposition early in the week, where we had nearly

12,000 people here on Sunday, before the vast majority of the golfers were here. Walking around the venue, there are so many smiling faces, people enjoying the activations and the facilities.

The events that we just touched on a second ago to try and add incremental value into those earlier days in the week, we'll support that process as we move forward. You've seen a lot of other sports do that, whether it's Wimbledon or the US Open tennis or multiple other global sporting events looking to elongate that week, and that's something we're thinking about.

Q. Back to Turnberry, you said about the infrastructure feasibility studies and all of that, but you didn't address the owner. Does President Trump's ownership have an impact on the decision, because your predecessor said it did.

MARK DARBON: It's a somewhat hypothetical question in that unless we address the logistical challenges, it's difficult for us to go back.

I met a couple of months ago with Eric Trump and some of the leadership from the Trump golf organisation and from Turnberry. We had a really good discussion. I think they understand clearly where we're coming from. We talked through some of the challenges that we have so we've got a good dialogue with them.

Q. There were reports last week that you were considering moving the tee times back on Saturday because of the march. What's the latest on that, please?

MARK DARBON: Sure, so I think we recognise that when we bring The Open Championship to town we are a guest in the community in which we operate. On many occasions, there are concurrent events that take place around the action that we're very focused on here within the walls of the venue.

So recognising the events that are taking place on Saturday we've worked really collaboratively with the organisers and across multiple agency groups to ensure primarily that both events can run as seamlessly as possible.

We're making a slight tweak to tee times to try and finish -- it's not dramatic. It'll be 15 minutes or so earlier. At the same time, this is an outdoor sport. The weather can play a big role. It's very difficult to be precise on finishing times. But we're looking at some marginal adjustments.

Q. There are reports that you offered £20,000 to the group and it was rejected. Can you comment on that? Are there any security fears? You have a lot of people leaving here around 8:00. The march is due to take place at 8:30. Are there any security measures to ensure everything passes smoothly?

MARK DARBON: On the first part of your question, we're actually contributing some incremental costs to support what I just said, the seamless operation of both events. We try and be good citizens in the communities in which we operate when we come to town.

I think when you're staging a major event, security is always -- security and the safety of your guests and the experience of your guests is always a prime consideration. This is no different. That's why that multiagency approach is so critical.

Q. Mark, last week it was reported by the OWGR that LIV has resubmitted their application. I know you're new to the role with the OWGR, being on their board, but is there anything you can say to that effect? Has it even been looked at yet? Will you talk about it this week? Do you have any feelings on how that might go and what their bid might entail?

MARK DARBON: Sure, we actually had an OWGR board meeting yesterday. An application has been received. I think that's a good thing.

There's a robust process that now exists that the bid will be assessed by the technical committee and then ultimately determined by the board.

I think Trevor Immelman released a statement regarding that recently and I'm sure he'll talk about that in more detail to come.

Q. Can you say if they've made any significant changes that might even begin to appease the OWGR qualifications?

MARK DARBON: I haven't reviewed the technical submission in any detail. That's the process that we'll go through now so it's difficult to comment at this stage.

Q. Just to pick up on the meeting with Eric Trump, has there subsequently been any questions from the government about the situation? We obviously got a visit from the President to the King coming up. Is it likely to become a discussion going forward?

MARK DARBON: Do you mean the UK government? We have an ongoing dialogue with the UK government given that we're a major event that creates significant value into the UK economy. I think this week's event will generate 210 million of economic impact for the region which is fantastic. So we have an ongoing conversation with them.

We've spoken to them specifically about Turnberry and I think they've made it clear that the decision around where we take our championship rests with us.

I would find it difficult to predict whether there will be any discussion on The Open if the President is making a visit here.

Q. How will the dates for the 2028 Olympics in LA impact The Open? Obviously there's a clash. Do you go earlier? Do you go later? Is that having an impact on the selection of the course for 2028?

MARK DARBON: Yeah, good question. So we're working with a group of stakeholders because it doesn't just impact ourselves, it impacts the wider schedule.

I think we're pretty close to a solution on that which I would like to think will be announced over the next few months so we'll bring it to life then.

Q. You're coming into the golf ball debate kind of late to the game. What has the process been for you in getting up to speed on it?

MARK DARBON: You're right, I'm new to that and new to governance of a sport, so I have a lot to learn on that front.

I've spent a lot of time with our team and with the USGA to understand the work that's been done to date and that's cemented in my mind that this was a hugely detailed collaborative process over six or seven years that led to the decision that was announced in December 2023.

We're now really focused on implementation and working as closely with the other stakeholders in the game as we can in a transparent fashion to ensure a seamless rollout of the change in rules as possible.

Q. What stood out that made you feel like this was the right decision to roll back the ball?

MARK DARBON: I think the trend on distance is clear. As a governing body, it's our job to stand in the future and think about the long-term health of our sport. I think the data is unequivocal and supports the decision that was reached.

Q. Mark, you referred to your background. You've arrived trading crowns of glory from the Olympics, and for those of us who love and follow rugby, rugby, as well; what is the biggest thing that struck you or has struck you since the time you arrived in St Andrews about this sport that's relatively new to you?

MARK DARBON: I would say I've learnt pretty quickly that the golf industry loves a good lunch and a good dinner, much more so than the sport that I come from.

More seriously, you're right, I come from the sport of rugby and we talk about the values of rugby a lot. I think it's really

struck me how strong the values are in the sport of golf. Camaraderie and integrity in our game is so critical and that shines through to me really regularly.

The other thing that's really struck me is the health of the game. It's really easy for us to sit here and talk about some of the disruption that we've seen at the very top of the game but look at the trends at that we're seeing more broadly across our sport.

Just these last few days we've announced some new participation figures for golf, excluding the US and Mexico which fall under the jurisdiction of the USGA, there are now 108 million people playing this wonderful game all around the world, 64 million adults, 44 million juniors, 80 percent of those juniors engaging with the sport in non-traditional formats.

There are so many other sports around the world that crave the scale of activity that we're seeing and the sustainable growth that we're seeing and that gives us strong a strong footprint and outlook for the future.

Q. You were saying earlier on you wanted the tournament to be better as much as bigger, and last year at Troon, I noticed whilst I was in a group of women - I wasn't really talking to them - but they were saying they weren't going out to watch because they couldn't see over the heads of these much bigger men, some of them obviously who had had a few drinks too many. Do you know whether the number of women who came to the Open last year had dropped?

MARK DARBON: I don't know the exact data off the top of my head but I don't suspect that we've seen a drop-off. We're very focused, as I said earlier, on the overall spectator experience and that means creating different ways for people to view this wonderful sport live here at the venue and also creating a strong broadcast and content proposition so the millions of people watching around the world get great insight and a great view of the action, too, specifically here at Royal Portrush.

One of the reasons we love this venue is that we've got sites to construct the infrastructure that we require but we've also got so many natural vantage points to showcase the wonderful Dunluce links and its Causeway Coastline. We survey our spectators after every event and we study that data intimately to try and refine and improve the experience year on year. This year will be no different.

Q. Mark, I've been told that starting this year, The Open is making or ramping up its efforts to promote and market the championship much better and much wider in the United States. Considering your report that there are 108 million golfers around the world, not counting the United States, I was just wondering if you're also doing that in markets like Asia, Africa and Australia, or is that something that is in the

pipeline not started yet?

MARK DARBON: I think one of the strengths of the sport of golf is that it's a genuinely global game. That's something a lot of other major sports crave, too, and we have a justifiable position that shows that golf is global and we want to appeal to that global audience.

The US is a really important market for us so we're working very closely with NBC, our broadcast partner in that market. We've embedded for the first time some resource on the grounds to help showcase and tell the story of The Open Championship.

We believe we've got such a unique and differentiated proposition, the world's oldest major, the only major outside of the US, the uniqueness that links golf provides as a challenge forged by nature and that gives us great platform to tell stories, so yes, we're trying to do that in the US, and we will absolutely continue to do that in other markets around the world, too.

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