

The 154th Open

Press Conference

Monday, 27 April 2026

Mark Darbon



MARK DARBON: Good morning, everyone. Thank you very much indeed for joining us here today at Royal Birkdale for The Open Media Day. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mark Darbon. I'm the CEO at the R&A.

We greatly appreciate the coverage that you will provide of our wonderful championship, and we hope that you'll find today useful as we look ahead to what's coming in July and update you on some of the plans for the year ahead.

Last week we unveiled our new strategy, which sets out the R&A's purpose to open golf to the world. That means building on the positive momentum we're seeing in the sport and getting more people playing and engaging with the game globally. In doing so, we can showcase golf's transformational impact on individuals and communities, highlighting its health, well-being, and social benefits whilst ensuring it remains accessible and open at every level.

The three pillars of our new strategy will see the R&A unite through our role in governance of the sport, inspire through our portfolio of world class championships, and lead positively by shaping golf's future with our partners.

The Open Championship is clearly the foundation of our work to inspire, to engage and excite millions of people around the world. So everyone at the R&A is eagerly counting down the 80 or so days left until the first tee shot is hit.

As we look ahead to what's to come, I'm delighted to announce that at this year's Open Championship we will welcome our biggest ever attendance with more than 300,000 people attending across the course of the week. Once again, we received over 1 million applications in the ballot for those tickets, and that continues to demonstrate the worldwide appeal for our championship.

We take our responsibility to provide an outstanding experience for fans extremely seriously. This year we're therefore introducing a series of enhancements as we continue to evolve and expand our offering.

The Last-Chance Qualifier on Monday will see 12 players competing over 18 holes for the last place in the Championship. We expect that to deliver real drama and excitement at the

start of the week.

On Tuesday we're introducing the Heroes Classic, which will see Jordan Spieth and Padraig Harrington, both former winners of The Open at Royal Birkdale, joined by reigning AIG Women's Open champion Miyu Yamashita and G4D champion Brendan Lawlor and Ryder Cup stars Tommy Fleetwood and Justin Rose, as well as high profile figures from sports and entertainment more broadly, including R&A ambassadors Bryan Habana and Kathryn Newton, and they'll be playing a three-hole scramble on Tuesday afternoon.

In addition, we've listened to feedback from our fans and are introducing more opportunities for them to pick up a club from the championship. We're creating a new skill zone, a short game area which will give attendees the chance to take part in putting, chipping, and bunker shots. We're extending the hours of the swing zone so fans have more time to get free golf instruction from PGA professionals, and we're bringing in a new long putt activation in the spectator village.

There will be additional off-course entertainment throughout the course of the week. For example, through a new sessions program that we're bringing in in the main spectator village. And the excellent Open app has been further enhanced to improve the digital experience fans will have.

Our premium experience model has been redesigned, and we've also introduced a new direct consumer travel proposition, all of which will be in place for this summer's championship.

Of course we also continue to invest in the player experience at The Open. We pride ourselves on the wonderful feedback we receive on the setup and facilities we deliver for the players, but we can't stand still. We have worked closely with Royal Birkdale on the enhancements to the course that Rod's just touched on, and with the club and neighbouring Hillside to expand the practice range and ensure the players have world class facilities as they prepare for this championship. We're extremely grateful to both clubs for their assistance and support.

As you'll see today, Royal Birkdale is in excellent condition and will provide a wonderful test for the players in just over two months' time.



Looking beyond this year's championship, I'm also delighted to announce our 2028 venue. As you know, we've had to work hard to work through a change of dates for The Open in 2028 to avoid a clash with the Olympic golf event. That took some time to resolve, but we confirmed our approach in December, and the championship will be held from the 30th of July to the 6th of August, 2028.

I'm delighted to announce that the 156th Open will be played at Royal Lytham & St Annes. It will be the 12th time the championship has been staged there, the first since Ernie Els lifted the Claret Jug back in 2012. Along with Ernie, Lytham has produced a series of great champions, including Bobby Jones, Bobby Locke, Peter Thompson, Sir Bob Charles, Tony Jacklin, Gary Player, Seve Ballesteros, Tom Lehman, and David Duval. We're very much looking forward to seeing who will join that role.

A great deal of work has been done to facilitate the return of the championship to Lytham, and we're extremely grateful to the club for its members and all of the partnership.

With that, I'll be happy to take questions.

Q. Can I ask you about tee times for the final round? Obviously there's a competing attraction that day. Will that impact on whether you go earlier on the Sunday? Because the World Cup final on the Sunday, will you have to go earlier, or will you change your tee times at all?

MARK DARBON: We're obviously conscious of other events happening on that date. As we approach the championship, we'll ensure we try and avoid that clash wherever possible. Of course some things are out of our control in terms of playoffs and the like, but we will attempt to avoid a clash, yes.

Q. Will it be affected at all by the progress of the two home nations taking part?

MARK DARBON: I think we're all looking forward to an England-Scotland final, so let's see how that plays out.

Q. We saw the code of conduct introduced at Augusta and implemented in the case of Sergio Garcia. There was a suggestion it had only been put in place for the first two majors but would probably be added. Will you be using that code of conduct?

MARK DARBON: No, we are looking to implement a code of conduct as well. We've been working closely with the organisers of the other majors and the tours more broadly. I would expect to see a similar policy introduced this summer.

Q. Just wanted to ask about the Monday qualifier, the Last

Chance, how that idea came around and how long you sort of had that plan in place?

MARK DARBON: We've been thinking about it for a while and a few reasons really. I think one of them is that we have such strong demand for our Open Championship, over a million applications the last few years for tickets that are available, and we're absolutely at capacity on our championship days. We value the experience we deliver for spectators who are here and present.

So like many other events, quite frankly, in golf and other sports, we've looked at means to elongate the event week. Our attendance now on the practice days are really strong, but in order to deliver that high value experience for attendees, we wanted to look at whether there were means to create additional opportunities, additional things for them to see and to do, but to do that sensitively and in line with the context and the nature of the rest of our championship.

So we think the Last-Chance Qualifier, which will give a handful of players an opportunity to qualify for the main event, fits that ambition, so creates an extra attraction that works for onsite attendees and for broadcasters but is delivered in a way that is in keeping with the rest of the championship.

We're looking forward to see how that goes this year, and we'll resolve and refine it into the future.

Q. You've obviously just announced the news it will go back to Lytham in 2028. It's been a while since it's been there. Just wondering why that has been and why it's taken so long. I know there's mention of logistical things and such. I imagine that's all been overcome?

MARK DARBON: As I said, we worked really closely with the club. I'm delighted that Richard, the secretary of the club, is with us today. We have an ongoing dialogue with all of our venues. Lytham is a wonderful golf course, you know that. There's been a series of changes that have taken place over the last few years there, which I think both we and the club feel have continued to elevate that golfing experience.

It's not the easiest of our sites to operate. So we have to be thoughtful about how we manage everything that goes with a modern Open Championship there. Through that partnership with the club and the local stakeholders, we're really optimistic and excited for what we'll deliver in '28.

Q. People will be delighted it's at Lytham. Where does Muirfield stand at the moment? Obviously a lot of speculation about that. Can you give us an idea exactly where you stand with Muirfield?

MARK DARBON: Similar to when we've discussed it

previously, we've got a great ongoing dialogue with Muirfield. I think we're there for the Women's Amateur this summer. As you know, in the same way with many of our venues, there's some things we need to overcome to facilitate a modern Open Championship. The practice ground is one of those aspects, but there's a few on course infrastructural points we need to work on with the club.

That dialogue is a good one. The team from Muirfield are actually with us later in May to further that discussion. As with all of these things, ongoing discussion. Still very much on our minds and a good dialogue.

Q. Talked through a lot of changes here, probably the most changes at any course for an Open in a long time. Is that excitement? Is there apprehension about the number of changes that have been made?

MARK DARBON: I think it's excitement. I think we feel -- we've had great feedback from the membership and from the club based on the changes that have been made. That's always a good sign.

We're excited because the changes are freeing up some of the pinch points that we've had in the past. They enable us to think slightly differently about the infrastructure we deploy to underpin this championship.

I would say it's excitement, and we're looking forward to hearing feedback from the players when they arrive or when they practice here in advance of the championship.

Q. Just to go back to the Last Chance, have you determined yet how the 12-man field will be put together?

MARK DARBON: I think we've published some key criteria, and to keep it in line with how we think about qualification to Open Championship more broadly, we want it to be a highly meritocratic process. We want players earn their rights. Everyone in the field will have earned their right appropriately into The Open Championship.

We can share with you the full list of criteria that play into that Last-Chance Qualifier. It includes the runner-up from our amateur championship, people that have just missed out through final qualifying, people who haven't quite made it on the OWGR list but may be reserves already for the championship. We'll follow our broader principles. As I say, I think we're going to create some drama and excitement at the start of the week.

Q. Just to follow up on the Muirfield question really, is Turnberry still in your thinking? Where are you with that at the moment? There's a lot of noise about that 12 months ago.

MARK DARBON: Turnberry is still in our thinking. Not a huge amount of new news to report, I guess. We really like the golf course. We know that there are some logistical challenges that relate to staging a modern Open Championship there primarily off the course -- road, rail, and accommodation infrastructure. We've got a really good dialogue with the club and its ownership, pretty transparent discussion there.

So much like all of our other venues, that dialogue will continue, but I guess not a huge amount of new news to report since the last time.

Q. Just going back to Royal Lytham, I think we're all delighted to see it back. A lot of us almost assumed it might go in '29 for the 50th anniversary of Seve, the Car Park Champion. Was that a consideration at all? Why this year rather than -- sorry. '28 rather than '29?

MARK DARBON: There are so many factors that go into choices around where we go and when. We're blessed to have this wonderful pool of venues on the rotation. We think the rotation is an integral part of the identity of The Open Championship.

For a whole multitude of reasons, we felt like '28 was right. When we think about our venues, clearly we want great courses. We want sites that can manage the infrastructure of an Open Championship. We like referring to historical story lines and moments they bring, but we can't always do that.

We don't love being back to back in the same region in two successive years in order to leverage the strength of our rotation. So there are a number of factors that played into it. When we took account of all of them, we thought '28 was the right time.

Q. Two questions. One, the 300,000 number, what do you hope to grow The Open at where you're comfortable with a certain number of spectators? Second, can you talk at all about the changes made at The Old Course recently and how they fit into either a player experience or a fan experience?

MARK DARBON: Look, we don't have a target in mind when it comes to spectator numbers. What we know is -- a couple of things. We know we have very strong demand for our championship, and that's a positive. We'd like to try and service that demand where we can, and that means looking for opportunities to grow spectator numbers where possible.

But at the same time, it's a delicate balance because the one thing we want to do, of course, is protect the spectator experience, and we want to manage our crowd sensitively around these wonderful golf courses. So there are, again, a number of things that influence the number of people that we can bring on site, not just on course, but in the surrounding

area too.

Birkdale is a great location for us in terms of that logistical setup to transport and travel links, as well as now given some of the changes of the course, the routes around the golf course that facilitate that movement.

There will be times -- and Lytham is a great example. We will not be close to that number when we're at Lytham in 2028. We'll have a lower capacity because the site is very different, and that's fine for us. So we'll flex our number depending on the nature and setup of the existing course.

There's probably a lower limit for us these days because of that demand and our desire to present The Open Championship in a certain way. So lots of factors go into it, but we certainly don't have a target in mind.

I think the other thing I would say, The Open Championship -- I touched on the R&A strategy. The Open Championship is our biggest commercial driver. So we take the profit we generate from The Open Championship and invest it back into the game. So we have to think somewhat commercially about this championship because it underpins the rest of that wonderful work that we do. So there's always going to be a balance between commercial reality and the desire to keep The Open open and accessible to all.

In terms of changes at St Andrews, I think they've been undertaken for a number of reasons, the day-to-day operation of the golf course for the St Andrews Links Trust as well as a nod being made to our own championship in mind. But I think we feel those changes have been deployed really sensitively.

I haven't actually played the course yet since those changes. I'm hoping to over the next couple of weeks, but we've heard good feedback from people who have played the course, and we think they're changes, again, that will add to the drama and excitement when we return next year.

Q. Portmarnock Golf Club has entered the equation as a possibility of being an Open venue in the future, which will be historic, the first time it will be outside of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Is that becoming any closer to being a reality? There are obviously logistical challenges there, but how are things at present in relation to that?

MARK DARBON: Things are good. We remain excited by the potential to stage both an AIG Women's Open and an Open Championship at Portmarnock. As you know, it's a wonderful golf course and it would be a first for us. Long history of R&A championships in Ireland, but it would of course be the first Open Championship there if we were to go.

It's a complicated venue. So what we've been doing over recent

months is undertaking a really significant body of feasibility work. If I'm honest, it's taken us slightly longer than we originally envisaged, but good progress is being made, and I would say we're cautiously optimistic about the ability to stage major championships at that venue. We're hoping to bring some clarity to that by the end of this summer.

I should acknowledge the wonderful support that we've had from the Irish government in terms of supporting us on that feasibility work and their excitement around the potential for championships more broadly.

Q. Can I get your views on the ongoing distance debate that the Masters talked about? Now is the time something has to be done and talk about golfers being one-dimensional. Can you give us your views on where things are with that?

MARK DARBON: I think we're pretty closely aligned with what Fred said. We've obviously spent a lot of time discussing the topic with Augusta National and other major stakeholders across the golfing landscape.

For us the trend on distance is undeniable. A decision was made at the back end of '23 to make a change to the golf ball. We remain committed to that. The one thing we're working through is the date of implementation given some feedback we've heard from the industry. I would expect there to be a finalised position on that over the next couple of months as we consolidate that feedback we've taken from manufacturers and other stakeholders.

We think the change is important, and so we're committed to it. We know we have a lot of support from across the game. There's some debate on it in certain quarters, but we're optimistic about the route ahead.

Q. There's been a lot of talk recently about the cost of attending golf events by fans. I just wonder what commitment you have to keeping the event affordable to people who want to come?

MARK DARBON: Look, it's a significant commitment of ours to try and ensure that The Open remains just that, open and accessible to a broad audience. Again, there are some commercial realities, right? The cost base of staging these things has grown significantly in recent years; that is undeniable. We have this unique challenge of ensuring that our championship remains open and accessible while also needing to be thoughtful about the revenue and profit that it generates so we can reinvest that back into the game.

I think we've managed that balance appropriately in terms of taking some price increases where we've needed to but in a very measured fashion. One of the reasons we've done that is to maintain our commitment to some initiatives that are

incredibly important to us. We still allow free attendance for under 16s at our championship. We still offer significant discounts for young people age 17 to 24.

If you look around the sports industry -- not just golf, but more broadly -- there are very few major events that are doing that, and it's something we're incredibly proud of, and it's something that's really important to us. We'll strive to maintain that balance between affordability and the commercial reality.

At the same time, I think it's important to not just talk about price, but to talk about value. So we pride ourselves on delivering an experience that is wonderful for the people that come through the gates to watch our championship. It's one of the reasons we're continuing to invest in these propositions to add and enhance to the event week to ensure that we maintain value for all of the stakeholders that we welcome.

Q. I think it's been 20 years maybe since the word female was added to The Open entry form at regional qualifying. I don't think anybody's ever taken that opportunity. Do you think that ship has sailed, or would you still like to see a female golfer try regional qualifying for The Open?

MARK DARBON: I think we're a meritocracy. We have lots of open routes into our championship. The Open is just that, it's an Open Championship. So I wouldn't like to say that ship has sailed. We'll see what the future brings, but a core ethos of our championship is that it is open and accessible.

Q. Obviously you've seen what's going on with the LIV Golf, and you've embraced LIV to some extent to bring their players in here. Do you see that changing if the product changes?

MARK DARBON: Look, I think we can only control what we can control. There's clearly a lot of speculation about the LIV model right now.

We reevaluate the routes into our championship every year. So after this championship we will sit down and formalise our approach to our Open qualifying series and the other routes into The Open for 2027, and then we'll do the same after '27 for '28. It's a constant reevaluation.

We'll obviously want some certainty around what a schedule for golf more broadly looks like as we approach '27 to help us inform some of those decisions, but it's a constant process year on year of evaluating those routes in.

What we want is a strong global field, which is open through meritocratic routes, and we'll continue to build a model that delivers on that premise.

I think we'll call it a day there. Thank you everyone for your

time. Very much appreciate it. We hope you enjoy the course. Play well.

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