

AIG Women's Open

Press Conference

Wednesday, 18 August 2021

Martin Slumbers

Peter Zaffino



MIKE WOODCOCK: Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us here for the R&A press conference here at AIG Women's Open at Carnoustie. I am joined this afternoon by Martin Slumbers, Chief Executive of the R&A, and Peter Zaffino, President and Chief Executive Officer of AIG.

We have some exciting announcements to make this afternoon. I'd like to hand it over to Martin to give some opening remarks and lead us off in the press conference.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you, Mike, and good morning, Peter, from New York. I'm delighted that you're able to join us.

PETER ZAFFINO: Thank you, Martin.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: The R&A has enjoyed a very flourishing partnership with AIG as the title sponsor of the AIG Women's Open since 2019, and Peter and his team share with the R&A a passion for and a commitment to women's golf. Together we are on a journey to increase prize money in a financially sustainable way.

Many of you will have heard me say many times that professional golf's a business, and for women's golf to close the gap with the men's game, it requires greater investment and support from golf bodies, sponsors, the media and our fans to grow its commercial success, generating the income and the revenues to make prize fund growth viable and financially sustainable.

Thanks to the proceeds from The Open and AIG's critical involvement and investment in the AIG Women's Open, we were able to increase the prize money in 2019 by \$1.25 million, taking the prize fund to \$4.5 million, which is where it stood at the height of the pandemic last year when we played without spectators at Royal Troon last year.

AIG has consistently continued to make a strong commitment to grow its investment, and this is exactly the sort of backing that women's golf's needs to help it flourish.

That is why we are both delighted to announce today that we are setting a new benchmark for prize money in

women's major golf. We are increasing the prize money for this year by \$1.3 million to \$5.8 million with the winner on Sunday receiving \$870,000.

But further than that, we are jointly committing that next year when the AIG Women's Open is played at Muirfield, you will see a further increase that will, at minimum, mean that we would have doubled the prize money from 2018 before the partnership with AIG, and we are jointly committing that next year it will be no less than \$6.8 million.

We believe that this action to make changes sends a strong signal that more needs to be done, and I believe can be done, by everyone involved in our sport. In addition to the prize money, Peter and I share the ambition for the AIG Women's Open to be recognised at one of the most prestigious women's championships and to further build on its reputation as the most international major played at iconic courses that are much loved around the world, delivering a high-quality experience for the fans, and for the millions watching globally and a real sense OF occasion for the golf industry and our partners. And we at the R&A could not be more proud to work with AIG and Peter and his team to make this a reality.

Peter we are very sorry you can't be with us this year; circumstances of COVID precluded that, but I'm pleased to hand it over to you to talk a little bit about what this championship and increase in prize money means to AIG, and then we'll open it up for some questions.

PETER ZAFFINO: Thank you, Martin, appreciate that very kind introduction. First of all, AIG is very proud to be the title sponsor of the AIG Women's Open. As Martin said, it's one of most prestigious and celebrated tournaments in women's golf and we are very proud to be associated with it.

We are excited for this week's tournament at historic Carnoustie Golf Links. I have to say I've never seen it sunny at Carnoustie but I was really happy to seat weather today.

I know everyone is going to be watching these world-class athletes showcasing their incredible skills and we're anxious to see another great tournament.



AIG is very proud to be allies with women in golf and business in communities where we live and work. We talk about that all the time as a key strategic element for our company. Specifically gender and pay equity and highlighting the achievements of women are core values at AIG, and that's why we are very proud to make the announcement today with the R&A.

Increasing the purse \$1.3 million this year and a million in 2022 is a tangible demonstration of our commitment to those incredible women athletes and women's golf and the issue of pay equity.

As Martin said, this will be the largest purse in the history of the women's championship and by 2022 we have doubled the total purse since before AIG became the title sponsor. AIG is proud to partner with the R&A. As Martin said, this is something we talk about frequently. It's incredibly important to both of us and we want to lead the way in setting a new standard.

But having said that, we know there's more work to be done to fully achieve pay equity, but this is a great milestone and we're on our way.

We're here to celebrate the AIG Women's Open. As Martin said, I wish we could all be there. We have a lot of our U.K. colleagues and clients and stakeholders there. But we in this period of time want to make sure we're demonstrating our commitment.

So at this point, I'll turn it back to you, Martin. It's going to be a great week. I wish the women the best of luck, and we're proud to be part of it.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you, Peter.

MIKE WOODCOCK: I'll start by asking Martin and then Peter just to say a little bit more about where they think this can take the championship, and more widely women's golf in the years to come and just how much of an effect boosting the AIG Women's Open this can have.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: When we became completely responsible for this event, it was a goal to move it up to do two things. One is to have a world-class experience for our players, our sponsors, our fans, and to deliver on that. We are very conscious that this is the only major in women's golf over here in the U.K. Majority of the three of them are in the United States.

So we want to make it a really important part of the calendar, a really don't-miss event. And to do that, we wanted to make it into a very professionally run business,

and sharing that aspiration with Peter. I think we are using it as a platform to allow the athletes to show us how good they are and to recognize that performance financially and then to hopefully keep building year after year after year on success.

MIKE WOODCOCK: Peter, from your perspective?

PETER ZAFFINO: Well. I think Martin said it really well. This has been a journey. Our association with something that is as global as this is really important to us, as well.

We talk about pay equity and highlighting the achievements of women and making sure that those core values are done with our actions but also the global nature of golf, of women's golf, and seeing the representation from all over the world which represents our clients and stakeholders in our business.

It's really exciting to see the progress that's been made and the optimism that we both share for the future.

Q. You've been speaking the last few years about how keen you are to increase the prize fund for this event. How satisfying is it for you to sit here today and make this announcement?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Hugely, Martin. I think from the very beginning, as I said, I wanted to make sure that whatever we did was financially sustainable, and the team at the R&A and our partners at AIG have worked really hard to do that.

And yet it gives me a huge amount of pleasure to be able to say that, make announcement, and hopefully this will continue in the future; and women's golf, apart from being quite outstanding to watch, will have ever-higher rewards which would be something that I would be very proud of.

Q. I just hope you would speak to the ripple effect that you hope this has throughout women's golf and that there's sort of a race between the major championships to continue to raise the bar in maybe what you've sparked here?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you. There should never be a race. This is not a competition. This is about moving in a direction, and everyone's got to move at their own pace. And we've been fortunate with the team we've got, with the championship we've got, to be able to move at the pace that we want to move at.

I know I'm not the only one who shares this aspiration, and I know that there's a lot of people working very hard to move in this same direction. But it does take a lot of

people working together on an event and with great sponsors, as well as great media and getting spectators to come watch to be able to do it.

And I hope we create a ripple, the same as other ripples have been created in the past, but we are very much doing it, this is our pace, and Peter and I have been talking about this for a long time.

Q. While this is an extremely generous announcement in prize fund, it remains only half of what the men's prize fund is. Is it reality that the prize funds could become equitable in the future, or is that just too far away to hope for?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Peter, maybe I start and maybe you might want to add a comment.

Steve, I'm a glass-half-full guy. I think we've closed a huge gap over these few years, so I look at that as a positive. I think the direction of travel is here. But I remain consistently of the view that we need to build the financial wherewithal of women's professional golf, particularly in our championship.

I cannot talk for anyone else's championship and keep building the value of the sponsorship, the number of people who come to watch, the value of the media rights, and if we are successful on that, then we'll continue down this journey.

But Peter and I are totally in agreement that whatever we did, whatever we do together in the coming years, will be financially sustainable.

Peter, would you like to add on top of that?

PETER ZAFFINO: Martin, I think you said it well. I'll repeat some of my earlier comments. This is great milestone and we know the journey is still going to be travelled. We both have huge aspirations to deal with the pay equity gap and look forward to future milestones and making sure we have an impact on the game.

MIKE WOODCOCK: With that, I think Peter, we can allow you to drop off, thank you very much for joining us today. We very much appreciate it.

PETER ZAFFINO: Thank you for including me. I really appreciate it.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you, Peter and we really miss you.

PETER ZAFFINO: Talk to you soon, Martin, thank you.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I just want to mention one more thing. For those of you who have sort of followed things that I've done over the last five or six years for The Open, the first tee shot is very important to me, and I think not only gets the championship off to a good start, but needs a bit of symbolism. And we've asked Kelsey McDonald to hit the first tee shot tomorrow morning, and the reason for asking Kelsey is very personal. It's a tribute to someone who many of us wish was still with us this week.

For those of you who were watching at The Scottish Open last week, Kelsey was the first winner of the Jock MacVicar Trophy as the leading Scottish player for the week, and when I saw that on Sunday what I was watching, I couldn't think of a more appropriate person to hit that first tee shot.

Q. Yeah, that's a nice touch, Martin, thanks for that. Just to talk about the championship, you look out there just now, it's lovely, sunny. There's been a bit of wind. The course looks fantastic. Can you just talk about how it's going to be set up this week and the weather forecast that's ahead?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Yeah, I'd like to say that it's going to be as sunny as this for four days, but it's not. The expectation for Thursday and Friday is to be a bit windy and a little bit of rain, a bit more overcast, and at the moment, the weekend is quite variable.

I think the golf course, this is a fantastic golf course. It is a very difficult golf course. But we've really tried to set it up in a way that will allow as many of you have heard me say before, allows the players to show us how good they are, and identify not just the best player on the week but the best player around at the moment.

It's going to play just over 6,800 yards. We'll move those around depending on the weather. The greens are running perfectly at 10. They are at a nice firmness. They are not too firm, and we'll make sure that it doesn't do that. But I hope the players enjoy the challenge. It will be a challenge but we try to very much give a fair, but a major championship test.

Q. In 2011, I think 17 played as a par 5 and it's a 4 this week. Can you talk through the thinking behind that?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, I think it is a par 4. When you talk about Carnoustie, you think about those last four holes. For those of you that watch championship golf here, 14 is the last chance on Sunday to make a move. We know that. We set the golf course up on 14 to do that, and we will do that on Sunday, as well, but then you have got to hang on.

Arguably one of the greatest holes in links golf awaits you on 17. It doesn't really matter whether it's downwind or into the wind. You're going to have the same yardage for your second shot regardless because carrying the burn on the other side is not really an option.

But it's a proper par 4. It's a par 4-point-something. And I think it will be the hardest hole on the golf course come Sunday night.

Q. This is a massive week to promote women's golf. Is it disappointing that the world No. 1 and oil impact champion is not giving a press conference this week?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: It's going to be a great week for women's golf and I'm looking forward to watching it. I think when you look at some of these players, they have been on the road for weeks and weeks and weeks, and you know, I'm pretty certain the world No. 1, I've been assured, will be doing media interviews after her rounds and be able to answer any of the questions that any of you want to talk to her about.

My sense is that there's been good conversations. I love the press coverage that's been going out. There's some real characters and people with really interesting things to say and there's been some good stories. We're a few hours away. I love -- I always can't wait to this point in a golf tournament because actually what I want to see is the golf clubs take over and we're not far away from that.

Q. I certainly agree with you on that score. Therefore, you sound happy and this is a one-off in the circumstances that she has been doing a lot of media no doubt over the last few weeks and months; so you're happy that she's not shirking any sort of responsibilities by not doing anything pre-tournament?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Yeah, I'm completely happy with that, Phil. I think for players who have been in various bubbles for COVID reasons for the last five weeks, it has been a very, very hard time and I think it's been a very hard year for anyone who has been on the road.

You know, what I think is the most important is that Nelly is fully rested and ready to go come tomorrow. I'm sure she's going to play as well as she's been playing over the last few months and I hope she does because it's wonderful to watch.

Q. You backed her at 9:1, I take it?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We have a no betting rule

(laughing).

MIKE WOODCOCK: We'll draw things to a close and I'll just ask Martin to give us a few closing remarks to finish off with, please.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you very much, everybody. It's great to have you all here. Apologies we are still using virtual but hopefully this is all behind us.

We greatly welcome the coverage each of you give to the AIG Women's Open, but as I mentioned earlier we do need all our stakeholders to play their part in promoting the championship if we are going to fulfill the aspirations, and the crucial element of that is directly acknowledging the role of sponsors in helping to us make that happen.

So I would make a polite request, favour, from me, to if you can, play your part with your editors and make sure that we do call this the AIG Women's Open and reflect that because without people like them, we wouldn't be able to make announcements on prize money and we wouldn't be able to do what is right for these great players. That's just a gentle request from me, and in the meantime, thank you very much, and have a great week and let's enjoy some good golf.

MIKE WOODCOCK: Thank you, Martin and thank you, everyone.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports