

AIG Women's Open

Press Conference

Wednesday, 3 August 2022

Martin Slumbers

Peter Zaffino



OLIVIA McMILLAN: Good afternoon, everyone and welcome tomorrow the AIG Women's Open Chief Executive of the R&A and Peter Zaffino, the Chairman and Chief Executive of AIG.

I'll begin by asking Martin to make a few welcoming remarks.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm delighted to welcome you all to the AIG Women's Open. I would also particularly like to welcome Peter Zaffino, as Liv just said, the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer at AIG.

AIG, specifically with Peter at the helm, is our deeply trusted partner, as together we both look to stage a world-class championship this week, and Peter will speak shortly. But before he does, I'd like to just make a few comments.

The AIG Women's Open is our opportunity to shine a light on the immense talent of the athletes that are competing here this week, as well as inspire the next generation of players. I'm hugely excited by what this week has to offer. We have to use this week to highlight the need for a broader engagement in women's golf, and over the past seven years, I've learnt there are a number of things that are needed to make that happen.

Firstly, you need partners, as we have in AIG to share our passion.

Secondly, you need great courses, and here we are at Muirfield.

And thirdly, you need broad and extensive coverage and engagement to raise its profile.

We all have our part to play and we will continue to do everything we can, and I know AIG will do, too. We are very grateful for all the coverage that will be given to the championship this week, and thank you for your commitment to the profile of the championship.

It's very important for us to ensure that we make sure that we give due respect not just to the championship, but to AIG and the coverage, and we would greatly appreciate if we can stick with the full name of AIG Women's Open.

That is very important for us in being able to give the recognition that will encourage other commercial partners to come on board and drive growth.

I've often said that big-time sport needs big-time crowds. But big-time sport also needs big-time venues and we undoubtedly have that in Muirfield, one of the finest links, if not the finest links we have.

This week we are hosted by the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers who have been enthusiastic in welcoming and utterly committed to helping us stage a world-class championship.

Two weeks ago, I spoke about the importance of pathways, and that is no more evident than in the careers of two of our recent champions, Georgia Hall and Anna Nordqvist. These two women share a place in the record books, having won the Girls' Amateur Championship, the Women's Amateur Championship, the Smyth Salver for the low amateur, and then going on to win this championship.

A dream of winning a major is one that will be in the minds of young amateur golfers all over the world. The R&A has a deep responsibility to grow golf globally, and as part of our commitment to the amateur game and providing pathways, we, along with our partners, established the Women's Amateur Asia-Pacific and the Women's Amateur Latin America championships. Their impact, albeit they are only five or six years old, is already very apparent, and I'm delighted to welcome those champions, along with five other amateurs to the field this week.

Last year, we led the way in substantially increasing the prize fund of the AIG Women's Open. It's to be commended that other championships have increased their prize money significantly this year, too.

This year at the AIG Women's Open, the players will be competing for \$7.3 million, which is an increase of 26 per cent on last year, and also sees the total investment in the prize fund increase by just over \$4 million, or 125 per cent



since the R&A and AIG began our partnership in 2019.

But as I've said on a number of occasions, progress in prize funds needs to be commercially sustainable. We are delighted that many of our Open patrons now also support the AIG Women's Open, but we need to unlock new supporters to make sure women's golf is financially viable.

This week is the show piece of the R&A's commitment to women's golf, but it goes much further than just this one week. It's woven into all we do. We need to increase the number of women and girls, not only playing golf, but we also need to create opportunities for women in leadership.

And I am personally very proud of the R&A Women in Golf Leadership Development Programme which by the end of this year, will have seen a hundred women from all over the world complete the Programme, including the R&A's own Zoe Ridgway, who is the Championship Director this week.

This spirit of inclusion is one shared by our partner of AIG, being allies of women in business, sport and society is integral to AIG's values, as you will now here from Peter.

PETER ZAFFINO: Thank you, Martin. Good afternoon, everyone. AIG is very proud to be the title sponsor of the AIG Women's Open, which is one of the most prestigious and celebrated championships in women's golf.

Working with the R&A and Martin, of course, has been a great experience for us. Being associated with such an esteemed organisation has allowed us to bring together the best of both our teams and lead the way in elevating the women's game of golf. We became the title sponsor of the AIG Women's Open in 2019 because of our commitment to support women in business, golf and society more broadly.

We knew when we began this sponsorship, that it would be a journey. We could have never math inned the challenges that would unfold such as the global pandemic. We are really proud that over the last three years, the AIG Women's Open has been played uninterrupted. In 2020 there were no spectators. In 2021, we partially returned; and now in 2022, it feels like we are finally back to a normal championship week.

In addition, with the amazing support from the R&A over the last four years, we have used our platforms to recognise, highlight, advance and reward the achievements of the elite women athletes who compete in this tournament.

We have more than doubled the size of the prize money for the AIG Women's Open since 2019, and today's

announcement regarding another increase in the prize money represents more progress on our journey.

We also appreciate the support of the world-class golf courses that have hosted the AIG Women's Open, the multiple government agencies involved in planning these events, and the golf clubs and their members who have hosted this iconic tournament.

I especially want to thank Muirfield and its members for hosting us this week. They have been incredibly gracious and welcoming to everyone. I'm sure you appreciate the amount of work that it takes to prepare for an event of this size and scale is significant, and the undertaking is also significant.

I'm grateful for everyone's help and support. We are all excited to watch the women play at this historic venue, and it's truly a memorable moment for the women's game. I played the course this week and I can promise you, Muirfield is going to present an interesting challenge for the players, so I encourage everyone to watch.

The conditions and the wind as an American will be enough for me to stay home. I mean, it was really challenging.

I wish all the incredible women who are playing the best of luck.

And with that, I'll turn it back to you, Martin.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you, Peter.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: We'll open the floor to questions now.

Q. Can I take you back to 2016, the initial vote here that was no, and then the reaction you came out with after that, how important was that and how pleased have you been with the advance here at Muirfield and the fact that everyone's here this week?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Yeah, I think 2016, it was an important time for this sport and for the R&A. I had only been in the organisation a few months. We had been working very hard on a strategy for the R&A that had inclusivity very much as a part of it. We were in the beginning stages of merging with the Ladies Golf Union, and frankly, that merger transformed the R&A into where we are today.

I think that when you think back over that six-year period since then, women's golf has really exploded, and it's got a long way to go yet. But I do think that that time will be viewed as pivotal in that change.

Q. I'm just curious about the role that Pro-Ams play at a major championship like this one. I know it's not something we see in the men's game. It might be the cost of doing business in the women's game. Curious the role that you see Pro-Ams play during a major championship week?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I'll say a little bit and maybe Peter. I see two things. One is, and it's part of the commercial model of women's professional golf, and I've not been shy in saying over the years professional golf is a business, and the Pro-Am is a key part of that in the women's game.

But it's also a fantastic opportunity to invite people to see not only what we are doing together, what Muirfield is doing as a golf course, but to then -- for them to be able to take back and say, do you know what, there's some really special stuff going on.

So there's commercial reality, and there's marketing.

PETER ZAFFINO: I believe it's an excellent opportunity for us to engage with the women professionals in a more personal way. You know, what we've learned over time is the more people that get to know the professionals, the more they get engaged in women's golf. We have had several people that have attended this event that have participated in Pro-Ams that actually ended up sponsoring women just because that have level of engagement.

I also think we have to be -- we're very focussed on knowing that it's the day before a major. So we try to keep it moving and we are very respectful of the players, and there's no six-hour rounds or everybody playing their own ball. It's just a way to engage before the tournament, and I think it's been very valuable.

Q. For both of you, I guess, first, Peter. Considering economically the world is in a difficult place financially, GDP is down, recession possibility, so forth and so on, are you comfortable with raising the purse to the level that you did raise the purse? And back to Martin's question in regards to that professional golf is a business. Do you think that if you would have left the purse as is or a small incremental increase, that would make more sense because the same players would have still come whether the purse would have gone to 7.8 or the purse would have gone to 6.2?

PETER ZAFFINO: I'll start. This is very strategic for us to make a difference to women in business, society and in the women's game of golf. So this is a strategic positioning for AIG. So we felt very comfortable with the increased purse

and our long-term commitment to the Open.

The other piece of it is that there's such a multiplier effect what have we do here that is really lives with us for the whole year. I mean, some of the preparations, some of the engagement, and looking forward to whether it's the next tournament or getting to engage with the professionals more.

So we felt that the return on that is significant for us, well beyond just measuring the financial output.

Q. Following up on that, when you've done ROI from 2019 to now, can you share with us how much you've seen out of the commitment that you've put together?

PETER ZAFFINO: We don't look at it that way. We look at in terms of -- it would be hard to do an ROI; we've been in a pandemic for two years. We haven't had anybody here. We really look at it as a commitment. It's part of where we want to position some of the way we brand; the quality in terms of being associated with the AIG Women's Open with the R&A.

And again, we use this as a reference to our own purpose and values within AIG as being allies to women. So this is something that is hard to measure, but we know we're getting a fantastic return.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: And Alex, on the question you raised to me, I think about this, and Peter and I have talked about it a lot in terms of long-term strategy. It's been all about short term; save a few hundred thousand here by holding back on the purse.

This is a long-term strategic goal of ours to drive this championship to be viewed as one of the best championships in the world, and to showcase the talent that is there in the women's game, and prize money is part of that equation, and we are on a path that we are moving financial security of the business, which is The Open and the Women's Open, and the prize money all together. That is very much a long-term strategy.

Q. Going back to the vote on membership here, when it changed and it wasn't in favour of admitting female members, did you strongly feel at this point you had to bring this major here before The Open Championship? Is that a statement that you thought you had to make for the wider good of the game?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. I mean, they are two very independent decisions.

But let me just explain why we brought the championship



here, because I think that's really important that people understand.

The R&A had no responsibility to this championship until 2016, and, in fact, we only got full control of it two years ago. In working and thinking about where do we want to position the championship, relative to all the other work we do on promoting women's golf, and although I've talked often, you've heard me talk about a pyramid, right, the championship at the top.

We absolutely thought, how do we move this towards being viewed as that; present it in a way that we think is world class; and then move it in a way that the rest of the world thinks it's world class, including the talent who are playing.

Part of that, big-time sport needs big-time crowds. You've heard me say that before. But big-time sport also needs big-time venues. When we have talked about where we wanted to go for the next five years, and we made an announcement two years ago. You'll recall we announced five venues in one go; you've never heard us do that before. We were absolutely focussed on how do we get the best venues that we can get that mean the most to golf, and stage the championship there.

And when you look at the history of our game over here, there is no more important golf course other than perhaps the Old Course in St Andrews for that, if you want to achieve that purpose. I think you only have to walk around and listen to some of the athletes playing, and the players and their views; this is something special.

And for those of us who have been privileged to be able to play here before, this is a very special golf course with a very special history, and a course that generally gives rise to the very best player winning it, whether you go through any of the championships.

So this was all about platform. It's all about elevation. I think the fact that quite a lot of stories are being written about it means we got the venue.

Q. Three weeks ago we talked about the possibility of someone going ridiculously low at St Andrews and they didn't. There's no chance of this week, and someone is even saying level par might win this week. Can you just talk a bit about the course and the test you feel has been set?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I will tell you, I played with the winner of our very first Women's Amateur-Pacific Amateur Championship, Athaya Thitikul, she won it when she was 15 in Singapore, the first time we played it. I played with

her in the Pro-Am yesterday, and I was expecting you to ask this question when I told someone that she had just shot 30 from the front nine having missed a three-foot putt at No. 8. So I was expecting that, Martin.

I think the test, this is a tough golf course at the best of times, and it's a big difference playing for fun in a Pro-Am and putting a card in your hand. We are playing it at just shy of 6,700 yards. We have three of the par 5s not quite on the championship tees, but they are not far off the championship tees. The greens are running about the same as they were at St Andrews two weeks ago. They are running 10 this morning, and they will slowly move up. This is going to be a strong test. We are forecast more wind, not as much as this, but from the same direction, which makes some of the closing holes, 12 through 15, really challenging.

But I think they will find a way to score. But you know, we've seen it around here before; you need to play really well to score low around here.

Q. You also made some strong comments about LIV Golf and things going on in the game. Can I ask what the response you feel has been within the game to those comments?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think the reaction to the comments we made are, primarily, I've had a lot of people say, thank you for taking a very strong leadership position and being very clear about what our position is. People might not agree with it; that doesn't matter, but that has been the general feeling that I've been given. Actually, people in the business were pleased that we said what we wanted to say two weeks ago.

Q. This is also based on what you said a couple weeks ago. But you said kind of along the lines of, it is difficult to make decisions for the 99.9 per cent of amateur golfers, as well as make decisions at the same time as the pro golfers, and I'm curious if you could just maybe expand upon those difficulties, like what is hard? I'm sure there's a lot of things, about making decisions for pro golfers like the R&A has to do as well as making decisions for people like myself?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: You look at sport around the world, there are not many sports where you have such a large number of people who play week-in, week-out for fun.

Certainly not when you get older in life. You know, people play football or soccer in your country -- no, soccer in my country, football in your country. But you don't play it when you're later in life.

I think that there is -- what I look at is why do people play golf? They play golf for exercise. They play golf for being in beautiful places. They play golf for fitness. They play golf for being with their friends, and some of us play to put a scorecard in our hand.

But actually deep down, the 17 million people, arguably a lot more than 17 million people if you really pushed me, play it because of the values of the game, and the fact that it's about personal accountability. It's about respect. It's about integrity.

You know, when we are trying to get young boys and young girls to play, that's what we focus on. We focus on golf is fun, it's fun to play, it's good for your fitness and it's great for your friendships. Actually, through golf, you can learn a lot of values in life that will do you a lot of good. And that's why 17 million people play golf.

Pro golf is all about a commercial activity, people playing for their living. I very consciously, when I think about that, I take one hat off and put another hat off, and it's fine. But you have to remember which way you're thinking.

Q. When Tiger missed the cut at The Open, there was some discussion about would he be able to come back and play in an Open at St Andrews. The thought was that it would be back in 2030, which you pretty much said there was no way that could happen. Is it possible, as Peter Dawson did for Jack, that you might find a way to bring The Open back sooner, if that meant Tiger could play in it?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think the situation with Jack was for Jack to be able to play his last one, wasn't it. The world is very different to 20 years ago, when that was the sartorial 18 years.

I was standing behind the 18th green when Tiger walked up, and when I sit back, it's one of my pinch-me moments. It was amazing, amazing to watch.

You know, he was determined to play four rounds, and I think he could have played four rounds. I think Tiger will be back, and it will be great to see him play again.

Q. At St Andrews?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Who knows? Who knows? We haven't announced. We announced out to 2025, and we are not making any comments beyond that.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: On that note, we will leave it there as we look forward to a very successful AIG Women's Open.