

AIG Women's Open

Press Conference

Wednesday, 21 August 2024

Martin Slumbers

Peter Zaffino



OLIVIA McMILLAN: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am delighted to be joined this afternoon at the AIG Women's Open by Martin Slumbers, chief executive of the R&A, and Peter Zaffino, chairman and chief executive officer of AIG.

Before we get things underway, I'm going to hand over to Martin to make a few opening remarks.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Thank you, Liv, and good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us here at St Andrews for the AIG Women's Open. We're looking forward to another tremendous championship here at the Home of Golf.

As many of you know, this will be my last professional championship with the R&A, and I couldn't think of a more fitting way to draw things to a close before I step down.

A lot of people have been asking what I feel have been the main successes of my time in my charge and how I'd like to be remembered here.

I tend to reply that it's for others, really, to judge that, and it's certainly more about the many people in the team here who have worked extremely hard rather than any one individual. But I am particularly proud of the progress that's been made in women and girls' golf and in developing the AIG Women's Open.

When I took up this role, we at the R&A were only responsible for men and boys' golf. The merger with the Ladies Golf Union enabled us to take responsibility for the women and girls' game as well as specifically for this championship.

With AIG coming on board as sponsor and the outstanding backing we've received from Peter and his team, we've been able to achieve a step change and take this championship to new levels.

There are many metrics which we can use to measure the progress, and I hope you'd agree that the staging of the

championship, the player and fan experience, the enhancement of the spectator village, and the addition of the Saturday evening concert have been significant steps forward.

Prize money has also tripled since we first began our partner with AIG in 2019, as you'll see from the prize fund announcement we have just made this afternoon.

Above all, the performances we've seen from the top women's players have been truly world class, and it is a joy to see them compete on the finest golf courses we have.

But there's always more to be done and more that can be done. It's a huge opportunity to build on the success of the AIG Women's Open and make it one of the strongest and most distinctive of the women's major championships.

We do, however, need a lot of things to fall into place if that's to happen. AIG play a key role in this, and last year's announcement of the extension of our partnership through 2030 is so important and so greatly appreciated. We're working hard to find other sponsors.

As you know, financial sustainability has always been critical for me. We need the players to continue to demonstrate just how good they are. We need the fans to get really behind women's golf, and all of us together need to have the print, the online and the media, continue to tell the story of this great championship far and wide.

The Curtis Cup at Sunningdale next week will be my penultimate event in this role, and for me that will be a real barometer of what we can look forward to in the years to come, with the next generation of extremely talented young women amateurs progressing to the professional ranks and going on to compete in major championships.

Strengthening these pathways has always been one of the key goals of the R&A, and they lead to the pinnacle of the women's game here at this great championship. I personally am very optimistic about the future of women and girls' golf.

Peter, thank you for your outstanding support of women's golf and for your friendship. I know we are both looking forward to seeing the AIG Women's Open continue to go



from strength to strength.

Thank you.

PETER ZAFFINO: First of all, St Andrews is an incredible venue for the AIG Women's Open, and we're all very excited to be here this week.

Our objective has always been to be the standard, as Martin mentioned, for women's professional golf and major tournaments. I think we've made a lot of progress. We're very proud of what we've been able to do in partnership with the R&A as the title sponsor for the last six years.

Martin mentioned the prize fund but also bringing the championship to world-class venues and investing in the player experience and to be the benchmark forward for major tournaments, and also our commitment to 2030 is exactly as Martin said, to be able to make more longer term decisions that are going to promote the game and actually move forward.

Before I hand it back to Martin, I do want to say a few words about Martin. He's been a tremendous leader for the R&A and for the world of golf. He's made a lasting impact on the women's game as we shaped its future from his leadership. We're deeply grateful for the partnership and very proud of what we've accomplished together with the AIG Women's Open.

You mentioned your legacy. I think it's going to be profound when people talk about your leadership. You've had to lead in a very complicated time with the men's game as well as the pandemic, as well as being very focused on investing in the future, and it does take a long-term vision to have a lasting impact, and we've been able to expand golf's reach to new geographies, age groups and audiences. So I want to thank you, Martin, for your leadership and commitment. You've made a huge difference, and I wish you nothing but the best in all of your future endeavors.

AIG is excited for the championship week, and we're going to wish all the athletes -- as I said to Martin earlier, a little bit of wind, not a ton of wind, but it looks like it's going to be a real test, and we wish them all the best of luck.

Back to you, Martin.

Q. Talk a little bit about how concerned you are about some of the winds that could be on their way.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: So the forecast is sort of settling down to being pretty windy tomorrow, particularly tomorrow. There is a small but a realistic chance of 40, 45

mile-an-hour winds tomorrow.

But the met office who help us here have been forecasting this for a while now. We have slowed the golf course down quite a bit. We've raised the height of cut on the greens. We've put a bit of water on them to help them grow a little bit. We've got some pretty good ideas about where we can put the pins to actually protect it as much as we possibly can.

Most importantly, we will set it up in a way that the players can play. The good news is the wind is forecast all four days to come from pretty much the same quadrant, so we can -- we know where we can put the pins to give them some room.

There is a risk that we'll have delays in play tomorrow, but we'll deal with that. I think the best players in the world want a bit of a hard challenge. I just hope it doesn't blow so hard that we can't play.

Q. The championships under your tenure, how excited are you about a Women's Open with Nelly Korda and a new Olympic champion in Lydia Ko and also Catriona Matthew making her final appearance in this event?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think what is really good and what I'm really excited about is for all the hard work we put into building this championship. We've come back to St Andrews, and for those who have not spent as much time here as some of us have, there is something special about this place and to hear the players talking about it, and I'm sure you've been hearing that.

But what has really surprised me is how few of these great women players have never competed over these links. We take for granted that the men have played here since they were young boys playing in international events.

Nelly has never played a competitive round around here. I think I'm right in saying that 30 of the top 50 have never played a competitive round around here. I'm excited to see them. This is the Home of Golf. It is arguably the most important golf course in the world. I think we're going to enjoy watching them play.

Q. Is the women's golf in an easier place than the men's in that the LIV money isn't descending right, left and center on them?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I mean, the way I'm thinking about it, I think the men's game and the women's game are in two completely different places. Completely agree. But for the women's game, the issues that we're trying to really think about and focus on is how do we push it forward and



elevate its profile? How do we take it to the great courses? How do we give them the opportunities to show how good they are and not really get caught up in all the difficulties that have been going on in the game.

I think it's important that the R&A tries to avoid all of that noise and just focus on putting on a great championship.

Q. What would cause a suspension? Balls moving on greens? Is there a number with the wind or is it not as simple as that?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: No, it's not as simple as that. I think some of you will well remember 2015. The wind was making the balls move on 13 at that point. The exposed greens are out at 11, 12, 13. It would be balls moving and therefore that we can't play.

The rules of golf that we changed in 2019 are going to help an awful lot here because once the ball is marked on the green, that's its position. That's the big fear.

Q. Just on future venues, I think it's only decided until '26; is that right?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: We've announced out to '26, yes.

Q. With what you've said about St Andrews, would it make more sense to come here more often like you do with the men?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Well, we're going to your favourite golf course next year, so I know you'll be there.

Yeah, I think we have historically gone with the men's game to St Andrews more often, and I think you'll see us come back here more often, as well, with the women's game.

Q. Spinning off of that with the rotation, do you have any idea of how many courses you would like for a set rotation? Do you see that happening for the women's game?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think you're going to increasingly see us use exactly the same venues as we use for The Open, with one exception that we will probably want to have periodically a championship in the London area, for reasons -- it's primarily linked to one of the byproducts of this is trying to grow young people to play -- more women to play golf, and there are more women golfers down in the south of England than in Scotland, so we'll take advantage of that to lean into. But you're increasingly over the years going to see the same venues that we use for The Open Championship, and I think that is entirely appropriate.

Q. Could we maybe see it here every five years?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: It's not a number I'm using, but periodically.

Q. Peter, can you expand a little bit more on Martin's role and where this event is now and women's golf is through the work of the R&A during his time in charge?

PETER ZAFFINO: Well, Martin from day one shared a long-term vision to what I outlined originally, to make this championship the highest quality, and it was never comparing it to anything else but trying to set a standard. So we always had long-term objectives, whether it was in venues, the purse.

But I think all the things that we've done around the game, promoting more people getting involved and making sure that his 2018 women in golf charter was a big part of why we were so committed to -- values are similar to AIG. I always say with Martin and the R&A, we have shared values. What we do in business is what we're doing here in partnership with the game of golf.

We've made, I think, more progress than I thought we could make in a six-year period, but we've always been shooting toward these milestones, and without Martin's leadership, we would not be here today.

Q. You mentioned that lately more women and girls are playing golf and there's more opportunities. It can't have escaped your attention, the story about Turnberry last week with its £1000 green fee next year. Meanwhile at the base of the pyramid, council courses continue to be under threat. In Dundee there's currently a consultation to close down the last remaining public course. That's the fourth in Scotland. Playing opportunities are getting more expensive at the top of the pyramid, but the base of the pyramid playing opportunities are disappearing. How concerned are you about that, and what, if anything, should be done about it?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I'm actually very concerned about it. We talked quite a bit in Troon just a few weeks ago about the importance of the pyramid for the game and being able to invest in the bottom of the game.

Golf has had an unbelievable eight years of growth. If you look at the R&A's jurisdiction, we have 62.3 million people consume golf at the moment, 5 million increased between 2016 and COVID, and 5 million more since COVID. We are going to need more facilities.

But I think it's paramount on us and many others to actually prove to the councils who are under incredible tensions and pressures in their own businesses that keeping these golf courses going is important, and it does add value to society. It's something that the golf development team led by Phil Anderton are very conscious of and talking about a lot. Yeah, I take this point very seriously.

Q. I know it's not your job to tell local authorities what to do and how to do it, but do you have a message for them in a broader sense?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I think it's work with us a little bit more and help us explain that golf is good for people's health, which has a benefit to the council in terms of national health spending. It's good for the economy. It's good for society. It's good for the environment. And how we can stack all that up.

But they have a very difficult job balancing their priorities, and I feel for them. But we want to work and help them make some of those choices.

Q. You talk about you slowed the golf course down. Could you give us an idea of what that means number-wise?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Numbers-wise, we're mowing the greens I think 4.75 mill, and we've put a little bit of water on the greens.

Q. I don't know if you use a stimpmetre here or not or any kind of speed to tell us what it would have been and what it's going to be?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: You know, the Old Course, we publish the stimp numbers every morning to the players, so we're going to be somewhere around -- I think this morning they were at 9-foot-6. Yesterday they were at 9-foot-7. I doubt if you'll see them any faster than that for tomorrow, and then we'll see what the weather is going to do on Friday, Saturday, Sunday. We can speed them up quite quickly. These are great greens. We know how to speed them up.

Q. In 2001 this tournament was considered a major championship by the LPGA. Prior to that it was not. In your mind is that accurate, or should that be something that should be addressed?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Why it wasn't?

Q. There's winners like Karrie Webb, Sherri Steinhauer, players that played before 2001 that won

this championship and it's not considered a major win.

MARTIN SLUMBERS: I view them as having won a major. I think this is a major championship. I think it's really important that there's the U.S. Women's and our Open Championship.

I wasn't aware that it wasn't a championship before 2001. I'm not quite sure. But I've always viewed it as one of the most important championships.

Q. What was behind the decision to go to split tees, and what did you wrestle with knowing there could be delays but also now there's more players playing in kind of the worst of it tomorrow?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: So the reason we went to split tees was driven by the fact that this championship is two weeks later than we would ideally have had it, so the Olympics -- everyone has just come back from the Olympics, so we have less daylight, so we start later and we finish earlier than we would have done, and the two tees is the lowest rink way of getting round in the light that we're going to have through Sunday. So it was a daylight issue, and I'm pleased we're doing it given what we're going to face tomorrow.

Q. In the course of answering questions about the evolution of this competition from it being held last in St Andrews in 2013 until now, the players were very complimentary of AIG's position in making it a bigger and better event. What does that mean to you in significance to AIG, and also those comments coming at St Andrews, which is obviously an iconic golf course?

PETER ZAFFINO: Well, thank you for the question. It's terrific for AIG. We made the commitment, as I said, in 2019 to partner with the R&A to build the highest quality experience and highest quality major championship, and every year we try to find ways to build upon that. It's different than other tournaments because we're not at the same venue every year, so we have to take our learnings and apply them to the next venue.

But it was a big part of Martin's objective strategically to make the player experience and how they feel about the tournament, in addition to the venue, feel different than other places they go. So for us it's incredibly rewarding. It's what we wanted. It's what we want in our own company is just for it to feel different and to have that quality permeate everywhere. So we're really proud of it.

Q. To go back to the weather, is this the worst forecast that you've had going into a tournament in



your time that you can remember?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: 2016 Troon wasn't very pretty on Friday and Saturday. Last Saturday at Troon just a few weeks ago wasn't very pretty, either. This is pretty high winds for us. I think this is at the top end. I think we'll all be pleased to get through tomorrow.

We will do everything we can on the golf course to make it playable, and we'll keep the girls playing for as long as we possibly can. But there is the integrity of the whole championship between front and center in our minds.

Q. Are you a glass half full man or glass half empty man when it comes to stuff like that?

MARTIN SLUMBERS: Oh, I'm 100 percent glass half full.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: On that note, we will wrap it up. Martin and Peter, thank you very much for your time, and I hope you both enjoy the championship.

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