

# AIG Women's Open

Press Conference

Tuesday, 28 April 2026

**Mark Darbon**

**Peter Zaffino**



— ROYAL LYTHAM & —  
ST ANNES 2026

OLIVIA McMILLAN: I think that looks like everybody in. Good morning, everyone, and thank you both to those in the room but also those joining us on Zoom. Thank you so much for being here at Royal Lytham & St Annes for the AIG Women's Open Media Day.

We have a number of exciting announcements for you all today, but these are under embargo until 2:00 p.m., so we really appreciate your discretion until this time and also your continued support of the championship.

First to set the tone for what will be our 50th anniversary of the AIG Women's Open, I hand you over to Dame Laura Davies in this short video.

(Via video:)

LAURA DAVIES: The AIG Women's Open is for women who dare to defy convention, to reshape the sport, to shatter expectations, women who dare to play, to compete, and to win. Half a century ago, British women dared to build a championship that would garner the best of the best, amateurs and professionals alike, to declare to all, this is our game, and we were born to play it.

Generations of pioneering players have dared to make their mark. Memories a lifetime ago, I just wish I'd kept that sweater. Champions who set new standards, competitors who played legendary shots amid storied careers, women who threw open doors and inspired new generations around the world to pick up a club and play.

50 years on, we unite to celebrate the athleticism, ingenuity and daring of our players, and shared love of the game that has fueled our play for centuries.

To grow from humble beginnings to the award of major status in 2001, to knock down barriers, play our game on our terms on the best and most renowned courses in the world.

To build a movement around our sport as we welcome new fans, new players, and new champions yet to come, so that

one day they might look back to us and say, that's what inspired me to play. This is our legacy and our future. This is our championship, and this is our game.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Brilliant. I personally found that very inspiring, so I hope you did as well.

To continue with all of that good information, today we are joined by Mark Darbon, chief executive of the R&A, and Peter Zaffino, chairman and CEO of AIG.

Mark, I'll pass to you for some opening remarks.

MARK DARBON: Good morning, everyone. Thank you all for being here with us at Royal Lytham & St Annes. It's great to see so many of you with us today. I would like to thank you all for the job that you do in helping us tell the story of this magnificent championship.

We're also delighted, as Liv has touched on, to be joined by Peter Zaffino, who is live with us from New York. Peter and the team at AIG have been outstanding partners to the R&A, and the progress we've seen in the AIG Women's Open over the period since they came on board in 2019 is a direct reflection of that collaboration.

The growth, investment and level of enhancement of this championship simply would not have been possible without that partnership in place.

The best relationships in sports are rooted in shared values and shared ambition. Collectively, we've had a particular focus on three areas around the AIG Women's Open.

Firstly, playing this event at the very best courses to provide a wonderful stage for the world's very best female athletes.

Secondly, elevating all aspects of the player experience around the week of our championship.

Thirdly, growing the audience which follows the AIG Women's Open in person and across our digital and broadcast channels. In doing so, our intent has been to elevate the women's game more broadly. I would like to thank Peter personally for his wonderful commitment to the AIG Women's Open in pursuit of those aims.



This year is a particularly special one as we celebrate the 50th edition of the AIG Women's Open. It's a moment to reflect on a championship that has consistently pushed forward, driven by players who dare to compete, to win, and to redefine what's possible in women's golf.

We will celebrate this anniversary further during the buildup to and during this year's championship, but today is primarily about looking ahead and specifically continuing to take the AIG Women's Open forward in a number of ways.

In that context I'm very pleased to confirm that the 2026 prize fund for the AIG Women's Open will increase to \$10 million. That's the sixth consecutive year of growth and another clear signal of our commitment alongside AIG to continue to elevate the championship on the global stage.

We are also expanding our broadcast coverage significantly this year with the introduction of a new early window across the opening rounds. We will deliver a 20 percent increase in the live broadcast hours compared to 2025, giving fans all around the world more opportunity than ever before to watch the very best players compete.

Lastly, with the support of AIG, we are making a series of enhancements to the player clubhouse facilities at the championship. This includes improvements to our catering and performance nutrition offering with the introduction of a grab and go facility at the practice range and an expanded offering of international options to better reflect our diverse field.

In the performance and recovery area, we are introducing a second cold plunge pool and an enhanced sauna facility, creating a dedicated recovery space in the locker room and expanding the provision of our women's and mental health services.

We're very proud to have won the LPGA's Gold Driver Award for the best player experience for two consecutive years, and we pride ourselves on offering all of the players present at our championship the best experience possible. We will continue to make strides in this area into the future.

Now looking even further ahead, I'm delighted to announce the venue for the 2028 AIG Women's Open will be Sunningdale's Old Course, truly one of the finest and most historic venues in the game and a course that has produced some truly memorable championship moments.

We know it will provide an outstanding venue in two years' time, and the players will relish the test that it presents. It'll be the fifth time that the championship has been played there and the first since 2008.

All of this reflects a clear ambition to continue to build the AIG Women's Open as one of the leading women's sporting events in the world. As we celebrate 50 years, we're proud of what's been achieved but even more excited about what's to come.

Thank you, and I will now hand over to Peter.

PETER ZAFFINO: Thank you, Mark. The AIG Women's Open means a great deal to all of us at AIG. We value our partnership with the R&A, which has been invaluable, and we appreciate your leadership. As we enter our eighth year as title sponsor, we're very proud of the progress we continue to make to elevate this major championship.

The AIG Women's Open reflects our commitment to advancing women in business, sports and society. Each year we work closely with the R&A to identify impactful ways to elevate the championship's significance, then increase interest in women's golf around the world.

Over the years, we've strengthened the player experience, delivered meaningful progress on pay equity, and expanded the championship's rotation to world-class venues. With the news that Mark just shared, you can see we're making important strides.

We increased the championship prize fund to \$10 million, as excellence should be rewarded at the highest level. We extended live broadcast coverage to reach an even wider global audience of fans to inspire future generations, and we added Sunningdale as a host venue in 2028.

The Old Course at Sunningdale is an exceptional venue that will challenge the elite field of golfers, and it's one of my favourite golf courses in the world. It will captivate fans and deliver a memorable championship experience.

Since the start of our title sponsorship in 2019 we worked closely with the R&A to present the AIG Women's Open on golf's most prestigious and iconic stages. With Royal Lytham & St Annes hosting this year, Royal St George's in 2027, and Sunningdale in 2028, the AIG Women's Open will be contested on the world class courses that have traditionally hosted the men's championships, reinforcing its place as a premier championship among the five majors in women's golf.

On behalf of everyone at AIG, I want to thank Mark and the R&A for their continued partnership, leadership and efforts to elevate the AIG Women's Open as one of the top sporting events in the world.

AIG is proud to stand behind this championship, and we're



not done raising the bar. Back to you, Mark.

MARK DARBON: Thanks, Peter.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Thanks, Mark and Peter. Some exciting news indeed. We'll take questions from the room.

**Q. Can I ask a quick question of Peter. I think since your involvement with the tournament, the prize money has doubled. Can you just explain a little bit about -- you've breached the subject a little bit, but the importance of such a significant rise in the prize money and how you feel you fit within the entire LPGA schedule.**

PETER ZAFFINO: Well, I think we've tripled the prize money since we started, so we're really proud of that. We work very closely with the R&A to do this in a very methodical way, which is that we're going to continue to elevate the prize money but do it over time so it's sustainable.

Also, as Mark outlined the very important parts of our partnership together was player experience and player venues. So I think when you look back from when we started, we actually had a shared vision that this was going to be the day, someday where we'd get the prize money to \$10 million, we'd have a great lineup of venues, and that the players would find this to be the tournament they enjoyed the most.

I feel very gratified it aligns with AIG's values, and we have not had a partnership like the R&A for sports at any time that I can remember at AIG.

It's just been terrific, and we believe the best days are ahead.

**Q. Mark, if I could just ask you a quick one. I know Charley Hull has talked about the setup at this tournament being one of the best on the LPGA. If you could explain why you've made such efforts to make the off-course experience so strong for the field.**

MARK DARBON: We think it's so critical, right? I see our job as providing a stage for the best athletes in the world to perform. We think the major championships should deliver an elevated experience, and we believe that the investment we've made over time is setting that context.

I think great courses, great facilities around the venue, an amazing experience not just for the player, but for their caddies and their teams who increasingly play a part in their ability to perform consistently. So we're proud of that investment, and it's set to continue.

**Q. Mark, I wanted to ask a question about growth of the event. Are you expecting to see that growth continue in terms of attendance, and how do you plan to sustain that going forward?**

MARK DARBON: Yeah, good question. We're really proud of the growth that we've seen in terms of both live attendance and the broadcast and digital audience over recent years, and we look at both of those things as being critical to the proposition.

We're expecting this summer to have comfortably more than 50,000 people here. That will create again sustained growth for this proposition. We've got a great catchment area close to the venue here, but we know that we put on a global audience more broadly, people travel to this event from all across the UK and beyond, and to bring that to life, we're also alongside our investment in the player experience, we continue to prioritise the spectator experience that we deliver on-site.

So we want people to come here, see the world's best golfers perform, but also wrap that experience to create a memorable day more broadly.

I remember being at Porthcawl last year, the way we set up the village with the range and the practice facility at its heart, a chance for young people to pick up a club and engage with this game, building on the momentum and the inspiration that they see on the course itself.

That investment will remain for us, and we continue to expect audiences to grow over time.

**Q. For Peter, firstly, thank you very much for getting up so early to join us. What would you describe as the most significant achievement of AIG since you became involved with this event?**

PETER ZAFFINO: There have been a lot, but the one that I'm most proud of is the momentum we have. As being a title sponsor for eight years, sometimes you peak early or sometimes you don't necessarily fulfil your original aspirations for your objectives, and we've stayed aligned, and we have continued momentum, which is really something we're very proud of but also encouraged by because we know working with the R&A, that we just want to try and set a standard for the women's game of golf across the world and continue to improve it each year, which we've done.

It's very gratifying. And also the player experience Mark just detailed, so I won't repeat it, but the fact that the women enjoy what we're doing and how we're trying to

elevate it each year really permeates through our company and aligns with our values. So again, it's something we're very proud of.

**Q. Just touching on that point of sustaining growth in the women's game, a couple of years ago we saw Nelly Korda doing Tiger-like things. She was at it again at the Chevron. Do you think that is perhaps what we need to take the next step, a really standout player who can win sort of several majors in a row?**

MARK DARBON: Look, I think the women's game is in good health. One of the things that I love quite frankly is if you compare the top of the women's game to the top of the men's game, there's some interesting differences.

I think right now if you look at the top 10 ranked players in the women's game, the average age is just under 26 years old. I think there are eight nationalities represented in the top 10. For the men's game, I think the average age is around about 34, and there are three nationalities represented.

So we've got this emerging crop of highly talented young players from all parts of the world emerging through the women's game, and I think that's really powerful. Golf is a global game. That's our perspective at the R&A. So having these wonderful role models demonstrating their talents on a global stage is so important.

I think we also, to back that up, we have a shared responsibility across the players themselves, event organisers and operators, partners who are investing into the sport to tell the stories of these wonderful athletes. There are very few sports these days that thrive unless you're telling stories that permeate beyond just what's happening on the course.

So part of what we're going to continue to do as we elevate this championship is tell those stories, talk about the talent, talk about the stories of the players involved to try and grow the game.

**Q. Today's announcement about the 2028 venue means there will be four years in a row it's not in Scotland. Is that a sign of the selection of venues you've got it's not anti-Scottish at all, just a sign of the venues available? And do you see this event going to Portrush at some point? It's obviously become a big venue for the R&A.**

MARK DARBON: There's certainly no anti-Scottish sentiment here. I recently moved to Scotland, so that would be the worst thing I could display. No, no anti-Scotland sentiment.

We're very proud of the pool of venues we've got for this wonderful championship. Peter has touched on some things that guides where we take it from year to year. We will return to Scotland in due course; that's a given.

We are considering the pool of venues as we look to the future. Portrush is a magnificent championship venue, and we've got a great relationship there, as you know. We're also looking at Portmarnock, and we think that as part of that dialogue and our conversations with the Irish government and with the club, that there's a great opportunity to stage an AIG Women's Open in Ireland at some point.

We'll continue to assess our choices, but we're very proud of that pool of venues.

**Q. In the Dame Laura video she spoke about legacy, and you've mentioned the fan village and experience. How are you going to use this championship to boost participation long-term in women and girls, particularly in this area?**

MARK DARBON: Yeah, sure. So we talk a lot about at the R&A as part of our new strategy about the role that our championships play, particularly our elite professional championships, and we use the word "inspiration."

We are believers that showcasing the world's best athletes on a global stage can inspire and excite millions of people all around the world, and there are countless stories of young females, in the context of your question, engaging with watching our Women's Open and then getting a club in hand and progressing through sports on the back of our championships.

We invest in partnerships with national federations all around the world in programmes that are specific to the development of women's and junior golf, and we're very proud of the growth that we're seeing in that space, too. We will continue to invest in those programmes.

I think the final thing I would say is the pathway is critically important, too, so the other area that we invest heavily are into elite amateur events to give emerging talent the opportunity to perform on a stage and prepare themselves for the transition into professional golf.

You're going to hear from Mimi Rhodes today, what a great example: Excelled through an amateur career; participated in one of our major events, the Curtis Cup; and transitioned into the professional stage. So we know that pathway is working, and it will continue to be a focus for us.

**Q. You mentioned yesterday at Birkdale about The Open being the financial driver for the R&A. I know on the women's side, at the U.S. Open, they've never had a U.S. Women's Open that's been profitable. Is this event profitable at all?**

MARK DARBON: At the moment it's not profitable. We treat it as an investment into the game, but an absolutely critical investment for all the reasons that I've just touched on.

We think it's incredibly important to provide a platform for the best athletes to perform, and we believe that that translates into our ability to inspire and excite millions of young people to pick up a club all around the world. So we'll continue to make that investment. We're looking to enhance it.

We're very focused on the things that flow from that, providing audience growth, providing participation programmes, and that will remain the case.

**Q. So if you scheduled out at some point in the future, do you have an idea when this could get to the point where, outside of the sundry things you've talked about, that it could actually be profitable?**

MARK DARBON: Our focus actually is more around audience growth. We think if we're going to be true to that notion of inspiring millions of people around the world, we need to grow the audience for this championship and the women's game more broadly.

So we've got a great dialogue with -- there's been some change in leadership across golf. We've got a great dialogue with Craig Kessler at the LPGA, with Tom coming into the LET role, there's a lot of thinking going on across the women's game about how do we grow the audience.

In sport if you grow the audience, the commercial side will take care of itself. So our focus at the moment is more eyeballs on this wonderful championship, our ability to tell stories along with our partners to grow and elevate the women's game more broadly.

**Q. Mark, you've talked about the three aspects of this event in recent times: venues, experience and prize fund. I'm curious with conversations with players, which of the three is the most important to them?**

MARK DARBON: Well, I think what I would say is I think our investment into the player experience has been validated through the feedback that we get. I've come into the game relatively new, so I've been meeting many of these players for the first time.

When I ask them about their experience with the Women's Open, the first thing they come to is the experience that we provide week on week. The players vote for their best experience of the year, and that relates to this Gold Driver Award from the LPGA, awards that we've won for two consecutive years. So they're feeding that back not just to us, but more broadly across the sport. We think that player experience is absolutely critical.

We also believe, as Peter has touched on, in rewarding these athletes. We want to reward the stars of our sport. We have to do that in a sustainable fashion, too.

**Q. When can we get the golf writers to get their cold plunge?**

MARK DARBON: That is not a visual that I wish to leave this room with.

**Q. Just on that broadcast thing, could you illuminate further on the enhancements that you're going to be making and any innovations or anything of particular interest for a viewer?**

MARK DARBON: Well, I think we would pride ourselves on the quality of the production, the quality of the coverage that we've deployed against the AIG Women's Open in recent years, and one of the points of feedback we've had is that people want to see more of it.

So this year the focus has been on directing that investment to extend the number of hours that we're covering, and we think that will translate into further growth in audience and further strong feedback in terms of that broadcast experience over time, too.

**Q. Peter talked overall about the reason -- we always talk about equal pay and things. Is that a kind of dream, to get the AIG Women's Open -- is the sky the limit in terms of prize fund?**

MARK DARBON: Well, I think as I said a second ago, we are very focused on rewarding the athletes. There's the stars of our sport; they have a disproportionate impact on the way the game is received and perceived all around the world, so we want to recognise and reward them for the talent they're displaying.

At the same time, we have to think sustainably. There is a commercial reality. We're investing collectively, AIG and the R&A, significant sums into the championship, and we want to do that in a responsible way. So we're not in a position to have equal prize funds at the moment, but we will look to continue to elevate our prize fund over time.

**Q. Could you just explain the R&A's rationale when it comes to selecting inland venues for the AIG? Obviously you don't leave the seaside for The Open?**

MARK DARBON: Yeah, The Open and the AIG Women's Open have their own discrete identities. We don't treat them as one, and therefore we don't treat the venue selection process as one either.

We are very focused with the AIG Women's Open on taking this wonderful event to what we regard as some of the world's very best courses. Historically we've been open-minded as to whether that represents links golf or inland golf across the UK, and we'll remain open-minded for the future.

**Q. Could you update us on where you are with Carnoustie for this tournament and also for The Open?**

MARK DARBON: Yeah, we have a wonderful relationship with the venue at Carnoustie. They've obviously been through some ownership change in recent times. We've got a good dialogue with the owners and investors. Carnoustie is very much a course that remains on our mind for future R&A championships.

**Q. I think you've implicitly made this point, but you could, I suspect, make this championship profitable, but to do so, the spend would be much reduced and the potential and your aspirations for impact would be much reduced. Just explain that clearly rather than implicitly.**

MARK DARBON: Yeah, I agree. There are a number of things that if we were focused on -- if profitability was our No. 1 ambition for this event, there's a number of things we could do to put us on a path to achieving that result.

At the moment, profitability is not a principal target for us. We want to deliver brilliant venues, wonderful experience for the players. We want to have a meaningful and growing prize pot, and we want to deliver a spectator experience both live and through broadcast and digital channels that inspires and excites people. That's where our priority lies.

**Q. When you mentioned Portmarnock earlier, it made me think about how the USGA put together a Men's and Women's Open back-to-back at Pinehurst, and since Portmarnock is very interested in having you come there, would seem like that's a place to do it if you could negotiate a deal. Would that be something you'd be interested in doing?**

MARK DARBON: It's not something that we are thinking of deploying in the immediate term. We're interested in what the USGA are doing, and we'll watch that closely. They've obviously done it once before, but they've got plans to do it again in the coming years, too.

I'm not sure doing it at a brand new venue would be the right move for us anyway if we were at Portmarnock, but as I say, we're open-minded for the future, but that's not one of our priorities right now. We're focused on the things that I just described.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Thank you very much to Mark and Peter for joining us. We'll let you carry on with your days. Thank you very much.

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