

# NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Tuesday, March 28, 2023

## Notah Begay Brandel Chamblee Rich Lerner Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to our "Live From the Masters" media conference call. Any minute we will be joined by our host, Rich Lerner and Notah Begay III "Live From" studio team. We already have members of our production and on-air teams on the ground in Augusta for what will be more than 100 hours of programming from in and around Augusta National over the next 10 plus days.

We already had Paige Mackenzie Morgan Pressel on Golf Today early this afternoon from Champions Retreat. For the first time Golf Channel and Peacock will provide live coverage of the first two rounds of the Augusta National Women's Amateur on Wednesday and Thursday starting at 1:30 p.m. eastern.

We then head to Augusta National Golf Club for "Live From the Augusta Women's Amateur" Friday at 1:00 p.m. eastern. Final round coverage on Saturday being at noon eastern on NBC Peacock.

One of the best events on the entire golf calendar, Sunday morning, 8:00 a.m. eastern we will have live coverage of the Drive, Chip & Putt finals on Golf Channel and Peacock, and then everything shifts to the Masters with our comprehensive studio coverage originating from Augusta National that begins Monday next week at 2:00 p.m. eastern.

RICH LERNER: Thanks, and thanks for jumping on. Always excited to go to Augusta National. This one, 2023, is as unusual as any I can remember. Potentially even uneasy and uncomfortable because of the presence of LIV Golfers.

I don't think there's any way around it. This would be the first time that I can recall that Tiger Woods will very likely, certainly on Monday night barring any breaking news with respect to his health, first time that I can remember that on

"Live From," we likely, underline likely, will not lead with Tiger Woods, but instead the presence of LIV Golf, the 18 players that are set to tee it up there.

I think, again, at this point not knowing what may be said or how LIV players may or may not interact with PGA TOUR players, without knowing that at this point, our goal going in at this point is to cover LIV at least initially through the competitive lens.

You cannot deny however you feel about LIV. You cannot deny their accomplishments at Augusta and at the majors in general. Six LIV players have won seven of the last 13 Masters, going back to 2010. LIV Golfers have won approximately 40 percent of all the majors played. These are significant figures in the game.

We'll cover it and ask questions, how competitively sharp might they be, how much golf have they played, where have they intersected with PGA TOUR players on the worldwide competitive circuit, the Middle East earlier in the year, things of that nature.

And then we'll have cameras trained to watch for any interactions in the tournament, the practice area. Will they be in the media center? Will Augusta make them available? Assuming they will, but we don't know for sure at this point, so we'll be ready on that front.

Then from there, we cover the Masters and we remember always that -- at Augusta you take a breath. You slow down a little bit. People are tuning in I think because they're curious as to how all this is going to go with respect to LIV, but also because they love the Masters and they want to find out about the changes at the 13th hole.

We'll be in depth from the jump on Monday night. Jaime Diaz has a deep dive on the changes to the 13th hole and I know Brandel and Paul are there as it relates to the distance debate in the sport. We'll certainly look at Rory and his ninth try at trying to complete the Career Grand Slam. High hopes again coming in for Rory.

I've said this before on shows that should he do it, I think he becomes the first bona fide legend of the post-Tiger Woods era. Very first. And then there's Scottie. You cannot overlook Scottie. I think there is tendency to do just that, but I think by Sunday night he could have us all

The logo for ASAP sports, with "ASAP" in large, bold, blue letters and "sports" in a smaller, lowercase font below it. To the right of the logo is the slogan "... when all is said, we're done.®" in a serif font.

rethinking just what we're looking at here.

This is a guy it appears who's built for the long haul, has the constitution and disposition to be maybe a six- or seven-time major champion. He's sitting on one now, but if he walks out with back-to-back Masters on Sunday night, I think that would be a legitimate discussion.

Then Mickelson's presence on the grounds we're going to look at closely, as well. We have a wonderful feature on Sam Bennett, U.S. Amateur champion and the challenges he's faced. We're going to look at the green quadrants.

So we'll be golfy. We certainly won't be all LIV all the time. We're certainly not going to shy away from that, but there's so many other aspects to cover, as Brandel and Notah know full well.

THE MODERATOR: We'll hand it over to Brandel Chamblee. Go ahead.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Rich summed it up perfectly. I personally am very curious to see how the LIV players compete. I have peripherally paid attention to the competitions going on on LIV because to the extent that there are going to be players commingling in the major championships, it's obvious that you've got to pay attention out there and how they're playing.

But I'll be curious to see how they play once they get to Augusta National, to see if they can make the transition to playing on a golf course that is quite a bit different in setup and the grasses that they're playing on, where they'll be playing on this week before they head to Augusta.

That'll be very curious, and I think to the extent the media there this year will be a little bit different. There will be, I suspect, a number of media there who are present just to ask LIV questions, some pointed LIV questions, so no doubt that the players that we see in the media center are going to be asked some difficult questions about the decisions they have made to go to LIV.

To the extent that they get those questions asked to them, to the extent that they answer them honestly, that will, I think, dominate, unfortunately, the talking points for the first three days.

Once you move past that I think you get to some very compelling aspects. First and foremost, our familiarity with Augusta National, at least here in the United States, is give every single shot historical context and adds to the drama, and the fact that it's the first official major championship of the year gives it added weight.

When you combine that with the never (indiscernible) every single major championship is important no doubt, but it's the Masters that is always just a little bit more memorable, certainly here in the United States.

And then of course you have the current and repeated theme of Rory McIlroy showing up with a chance to complete the Grand Slam. I agree with Rich when he talks about the significance and the possibility of Rory McIlroy possibly completing the Grand Slam.

When you start to look at all the players that are missing the third leg of the Grand Slam, there's, what, 12 of them, I guess, something like that. And if you discount the first three, which really happened before there was a Masters, there's really only been one great player I would say who came along with a chance to complete the Grand Slam at the Masters, and that was Lee Trevino, and he had this troubled relationship with the Masters. It just didn't suit his game.

But I think beyond that, there are reasons specific to his Grand Slam why it didn't fit his game, and I think he shared some of those reasons with Rory. I'm going to certainly dive into that as the week goes on, because I think that's one of, if not the biggest, story of the week outside of LIV and Tiger. LIV and Tiger will dominate.

How Tiger plays, I think, will captivate us beyond belief, because what I saw earlier in the year from Tiger made me look towards the Masters with great anticipation. I never, ever thought I would see Tiger Woods play golf again the way he played at the Genesis.

Of course you can look at his finish and say there was nothing spectacular about it, but if you look at the combination of the power that he had there and so many of the iron shots that he stacked up on top of one another, and the fact that he showed some great putts on the greens, it certainly has the world of golf's attention as we enter the Masters.

NOTAH BEGAY: These guys summarized so many great things, and just from a general competitive context, I'm very much looking forward to comparing apples to apples in terms of LIV players and PGA TOUR players. I've been out there the last few weeks covering the PGA TOUR on the ground, watching these events come down to the very end and just seeing how sharp and competitive, how much these events and winning the tournaments means to the players.

There's no question that there will be an element of sharpness to their game as they head to Augusta.

Question marks surround whether or not that same level of sharpness will be available to the LIV players, just not having played as much competitive golf at the highest level against the best players as the guys on the PGA TOUR.

I think that's going to be something that I will be taking a direct look at.

In the broader context, I think that I've always been intrigued by just Augusta National in general, their influence on the game. We're starting with ANWA this week, and then we'll head into Drive, Chip & Putt. You talk about the Latin American Amateur Championship, the Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship, just what they've singularly done, not being one of sort of the official governing bodies of our sport, but sort of a de facto governing body and how they've really utilized their platform and their reach and the influence of the Masters and its brand to grow golf. I think it's remarkable.

I think that these young amateur female golfers that have a chance to come play here is a dream come true, and I think it's something that is going to do great things in a sector of our sport that needs some attention. The growth in the ladies' part of the game isn't, I think, commensurate with other areas of the industry, and I just think Augusta has done probably more so than any other organization in golf to use its platform to broaden the reach of the game and make it more appealing and bring people into it.

The viewership does that. The reach and the broadcasting of the Masters does that. But these little things, these events and the avenues to compete at Augusta in whatever capacity, ANWA, DCP, the Masters itself, have a had a major influence in putting golf on young kids' radar to want to pursue the sport that is just so amazingly hard, that in this day and age of instant gratification I think it's really done a lot to keep a lot of young kids intrigued and involved with the game.

I attribute a lot of that to the Masters and what they've done to appeal to this next generation of young golfers.

**Q. Curious to ask you about the changes to No. 13 this year. Seems like there are only two schools of belief right now. It's either that the changes have cheapened the hole or they've restored its architectural integrity and significance. I'm curious to get your thoughts on that. What do you think?**

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: If you go back and look at the history of that hole when Alister MacKenzie and Bobby Jones first walked that property, that was the very first hole they found on the property.

Bobby Jones gets the credit for really discovering that hole and looking at it and saying, this is going to be the first hole -- not the first hole as it's played, but the first hole they could find.

But it was always intended when they designed it -- Bobby Jones was not a fan of par-5s -- that it took three shots to get on in regulation. So he was always a big fan of the in between sort of par-5s where you could get home with two good shots.

So even from the beginning that hole was meant to be sort of an in between, not quite a par-4, not quite a par-5.

If you look, here we are ninety years basically down the road and you look at the border behind you, they just really didn't have anyplace to go. They were never going to move that green. So the hole was kind of landlocked.

So them being able to negotiate with Augusta Country Club and get that piece of property behind it and extend that hole I think is going to add some luster back to that hole, no doubt.

Look, as much as I'm against rolling the golf ball back, there were a few holes in the game of golf that when the pros played them, I did kind of wince. It did bother me. It does, to see players cut that corner and have a wedge in there.

Even though, look, Jack Nicklaus at his height hit 8-iron in there. He hit 8-iron into 15, going back in the '60s. The longest of hitters have been able to, under certain conditions, absolutely destroy those holes from the philosophy that underpins them.

But as Rory said last week, we're not going to be able to cut that corner unless it's in a big way downwind. He said he'd basically just hit it straight out, which means you're going to have at the very least, it seems to me, a mid iron for the longest of hitters and long irons and maybe even some hybrids and woods into that green for these sort of middle-tier hitters.

I'm looking forward to it. That's a change I felt like needed to take place for a long, long time. I'm very happy that it was able to work out, and I think it will restore some of the luster to that hole.

NOTAH BEGAY: Just sort of echoing Brandel's comments there in terms of seeing the greatest players of our game come through there at early points in our career, I was with Tiger in his first Masters.

Like I went with him in '95, played as an amateur, and I

think the biggest thing when he walked off after his first round was the fact that he hit pitching wedge into 15. Jack had an 8, Tiger hit a pitching wedge. I think the greatest players have always demonstrated sort of slightly better skill in certain areas than their counterparts.

But with regard to 13, when I played it, it still required -- the last Masters I played was 20 years ago in 2001, and it still required a little bit of shape off of the tee. A lot of players were still hitting 3-wood, then a mid iron, and if you really were able to sling it around the corner at times when the conditions were a little firmer, you might get a short iron in there.

But I just think it's restoring the hole back to sort of what we saw -- I would maybe go back to the early '90s where guys would come in there occasionally with a long iron, but it's usually a 5- or a 6-iron, something like that, and it's just a hard shot. It's a very hard shot to a small target with the ball above your feet. In most cases, that's calling for a left to right shot, and I think that's great that they've been able to restore it, and hopefully we'll see more skill required than blasting something out there and then hitting a short iron in. I'm looking forward to it.

RICH LERNER: I would just add quickly, I think so long as on Sunday afternoon when it really matters we see, to Notah's point, the 5-iron, maybe the 4-iron from the hanging lie, 230-ish, 225, 230, something on the order of what we saw -- you think back to David Duval in 2000. He had the swirling winds and he backed off the shot a few time.

It was 196 that day, but that was one of the few poor shots he had hit that weekend where he played really well, and it cost him the tournament.

I think Brandel and Notah could back me up, 13 is certainly one of the most consequential holes in the history of the sport, and so long as it feels that way and we feel the weight of that shot right there, then I think it will have been a success.

Jones always said -- called it the momentous decision whether or not to try for the green, and I would share with you I had a conversation with Ben Crenshaw not long ago, and Ben told me, and this wasn't specific to 13, he was just talking about Augusta, but it's most pronounced at the par-5s certainly and on the second nine on Sunday, "No one has ever played safe and won the Masters." You have to risk. The golf course goads you in spots. That's a spot right there for sure.

I think so long as it's a middle iron, I think Brandel said depending on the conditions you might see 6 or 7 if you get

it downwind, but so long as it's a middle to maybe long iron, then I think the integrity will have been restored.

**Q. Notah, already got a great answer from Brandel about Tiger. I'm curious what your takeaway was from seeing Tiger play, and maybe you could offer a little bit of color on what he's been up to of late?**

NOTAH BEGAY: Well, I mean, for good or for bad, I've had a ringside seat to this whole thing the last 10 years, and the fact that he was able to play at the level after basically being on the bench for six months, to come out and make a cut, I just can't even get my mind around that. I know he's Tiger Woods, but it is the PGA TOUR, and that's a high degree of play is required to compete at that level.

For him to go out and do that tells me a couple things, that he's working on the right things. He's got a good -- one thing that I think goes in his favor, the work that he did with Chris Como allowed him to gain a really strong understanding of his body mechanics and how he could generate the type of forces or club head speed, reducing certain types of stress or strain on his body.

Even though they did part ways a few years ago, I know Tiger has taken so much away from every single coach he's worked with that I believe that's really helped him in this next phase of another comeback, and just having a good clear understanding of just what pieces need to be strengthened, where he can increase stress, where he has to decrease stress in his mechanics to produce the types of shots.

He's told me that there are certain shots that are not available to him anymore because of the stress that it does possibly put on his back on his leg, so he's had to sort of eliminate a handful of shots that just kind of don't fall in line with trying to maintain the sustainability that he has to have.

He can still win. I mean, let's not forget that. It's not a question of ability. It's a question of can he get through 72 holes and still maintain some strength and mobility in his leg on that final day. I think that's the biggest question.

He was very tired after LA. Took him a few days to recover. Coming out of that, I think he got a good sense of, okay, just how hard he could push himself going into the Masters in preparation and just kind of how to pace himself during the week, and I think you're going to see a nice measured preparation next week when he does arrive on the grounds as he sort of just tries to figure out when and where to push himself.



**Q. How much do you think what Chairman Ridley says about the golf ball will determine the direction that things go?**

RICH LERNER: He's enormously influential. I'll make way for Brandel and then if I feel I have something to add to it, but that certainly would be one of the most if not the most -- that's saying something because LIV is there, but the most anticipated of all the Monday through Wednesday press conferences would likely be Chairman Ridley for what we anticipate he's going to say about the model local rule and then also what he'll say about LIV. But I'll step aside for Brandel here.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Well, I agree with what Rich says, monumentally influential, obviously with his prior ties to the USGA, and you just look at these gentlemen that are involved in this in the governing bodies and you look at Augusta National, and they certainly have the best interest of the game in mind.

I don't know that anybody is wrong here on either side of this issue. I don't think that anybody could clearly say that anybody is wrong. If you're in favor of a rollback, there's reasonable arguments for it. If you're not in favor of it, I think there's reasonable arguments on that side. On one hand, people will say we want to protect the integrity of design, and I certainly understand that.

On the other end, I would say you want to protect the integrity of the game, which is that it's never been bifurcated. You can't do one without doing the other.

It's a matter of do you think going forward -- I listened to Michael Whan the other day on the Michael Breed show, and he talked about Rory's kids and his kids' kids wanting to play a game that -- I think his sentiment was that wasn't dependent on brute strength, where you didn't have to lengthen golf courses. And that point resonates, no doubt.

But on the other hand, it is nice to think that Rory's kids and his kids' kids might be playing, or could if they wanted to, play the same equipment as Rory.

There's two sides of this issue. Then at least in my view, and again, I said it earlier, there are a few holes in the world where it's not fun to watch the best players in the world get up on the 12th hole at St Andrews and drive the green, and those bunkers down there that were such an integral part of that design and so genius and so stupefying as you stand there, and they don't even have to contend with them. I understand that, and unfortunately they can't move that tee back. I think there's an estuary behind that tee. That is unfortunate.

Look, I make -- nobody is suggesting that they'd never go back to St Andrews again, but there are loads of golf courses that they don't play major championships on again and they've moved on, but there are a handful of holes that it's just tough to watch the best players in the world play. I think it's a very small number of holes and it's a very small number of players that because of the way they play those holes, it threatens to undermine what at least I think is one of the most important aspects of the game.

Essentially, and I think Mark Broadie's research bore this out, what it takes to win hasn't changed, and the influence of power is overestimated in the game, at least that's my takeaway from reading Mark Broadie's research, and I tried to read it as unbiasedly as I could.

So it's an interesting debate. I've got a lot of friends, and I listen to the governing bodies, and I certainly listen to Chairman Ridley, and I have respect for them. I don't think either side is wrong.

But if they do roll the ball back, it will favor -- statistically speaking, it looks like it's just going to favor the longer hitters because effectively it's going to make the golf courses longer, so that's going to disproportionately reward the longer hitters.

NOTAH BEGAY: I'm against the rollback for a couple reasons. I think not enough credit is being given to the athletes themselves, and the percentage of players that can swing over 120 now is much higher than it was 30 years ago. Everything that's been put into the evolution of the athlete, as well, I think is being a little bit overlooked here.

It's not solely due to technological improvements in drivers and balls, although that does kind of have a little bit of impact in terms of what the overall outcome is on a particular drive that's hit at 120 miles an hour club head speed, precisely like a PGA TOUR player can hit it.

So that's sort of my take from the player standpoint, but also from the romantic point of view, I think our sport has always been one where the average golfer can directly connect with the players that they look up to. We can go the Monday after the World Match Play, and if you're lucky enough and you know somebody at Austin Country Club, you can play the course from the same tees, you can use the same equipment, you can play in a pro-am if you're lucky enough and get next to somebody whose game you admire.

I think there's always been this amazing connection between an everyday player and the best golfers in the world that really doesn't exist in any other sport, and I think

by rolling these things back and separating the two groups -- not only will it bifurcate the rules, it'll bifurcate a lot of golfers that love putting the same ball in play that Rory plays or Tiger plays or using the same driver that these other guys use because at what point do we stop.

I just think that we've done enough to this point to maybe not allow it to increase more, but I don't think we need to roll it back.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Right, they drew a line in the sand in 2004. They initially did in 1998. I think they overlooked COR in the 1990s. I don't think they had any idea that the Callaway Big Bertha was coming, and they didn't, I don't think, have the proper diagnostic tools to appropriately measure the COR in that, so in 1998 they established a COR limit, and then in 2004 they sort of changed their judgment, changed it to characteristic time, they put a line in the sand for MOI, put a line in the sand for the overall distance standard.

So from 2004 to now when you look at that difference in distance, it is too often contributed to technology and not often enough contributed to younger, taller, better athletes who are optimizing their launch angles.

RICH LERNER: I don't think the governing bodies are suggesting that it is only the technology. I think that they absolutely acknowledge the work that's been put in with respect to speed training, and they're saying that if it continues at this rate, they're just going to run out of land and that it would be irresponsible -- I'm paraphrasing the governing bodies there, it would be irresponsible in their view to kick the can down the road, and if there are small measures that could be taken, why wouldn't you in order to have a more, a better environmental footprint and to protect the cathedrals of the sport. I think that's simply what they're saying.

I don't think they're overlooking the athleticism. I think they're staring the athleticism right in the face.

One other point I would say with respect to playing the same equipment. I think I can hold a golf club in my hand and it could be the same make and model, but I would no sooner be playing the same equipment than I would be driving the same Mercedes-Benz that they use in Formula 1. I think that sort of romantic idea in my estimation has been overplayed a little bit.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Well, no, the Mercedes you're talking about in Formula 1 is meant to (indiscernible). The driver that you have is meant to optimize your speed. I don't think that analogy holds.

I would say looking forward that for them to assume the increases in distance that we've seen in golf over the last 40 years with unprecedented leaps and bounds in optimization of equipment, rebound effect and a solid core golf ball technology with unprecedented leaps and bounds in fitness I think is, at least in my view, not warranted.

There are limits to how young players can get on the PGA TOUR. There are likely limits to how tall and still be able to play equipment, especially when they've made the length of a driver shaft maxing out at 46 yards, so there are physical limits to what can be achieved in the game, and of course now there are technical limits to what can be built in the game.

So the idea that the leaps and bounds that we've seen in driving distance will continue unabated into the future, I personally think is unfounded. I just don't see that happening.

But what I will say is that what we have seen is an undoing of improper training in the golf swing. So players now are going back to an era of the '40s, '50s and '60s with regard to how they swing the club. The '70s, '80s, '90s and 2000s was such an impoverishment of technique that it was mindblowing.

So they are now returning to the more athletic golf swings of the '40s, '50s and '60s, and it is like they've found the recipe for the pyramids again, and all of a sudden they're building these majestic golf swings again, and so they're unleashing the athleticism that's been dormant for four decades.

RICH LERNER: Adam, I know one thing for certain, Brandel, you'll back me up on this; we are going to be hearing "Wrap!" "Wrap!"

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: They're going to be bookending me on the set with their views of a rollback.

RICH LERNER: I'm with you, Brandel. I think there are -- it's nuances, and there are strong arguments on both sides. I don't think it's black and white, but I think what we haven't really discussed, nor do we have time but it's enormous, is the commercial viability of all of this. I mean, I don't have to tell anybody on this call how complicated that part of it could be, would be.

THE MODERATOR: Just wait until "Live From" next week.

**Q. Rory has been on a tear this season. I was wondering how you would compare him to his previous seasons, and what chances do you give him of winning the Masters this year?**

NOTAH BEGAY: If I didn't get a chance to see him play this week -- I watched two or three of his matches. I don't think he's putting well enough right now. Now, he put a new putter in play. He did see some signs of life in his putting at times.

But I think that is going to be the singular key. Everything else from the tee to the green is top shelf. There's no question he is playing as good as anybody in those key areas. But there were just some key putts in certain situations at critical times in the match, and they weren't difficult putts.

I don't know if he just wasn't quite -- stroke wasn't feeling right. I know he had changed the way he was lining up his putts. He was using a line on top of his ball for the first time in an effort to possibly get more athletic when, in fact, I felt like it made him less athletic. It made him less reactive and a little too mechanical, methodical, however you want to characterize it. But that's going to be it.

As far as Rory is concerned, he's got to find just a little bit of magic in the putter, because as Brandel referenced through research, the core ingredients to winning major events hasn't changed. I know power is what we fixate on because it's fun. Home run hitters, we love to watch because they're fun. We could name the last few home run leaders in Major League Baseball, but you probably couldn't name who led the league in batting percentage. It's just fun.

But yeah, it'll come down to putting a little bit above his normal average. Last week he was ranked 175th in strokes gained putting, and he's still eighth in strokes gained total, which tells you how good everything else in his game is.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, I think that's reasonable. I thought it was awkward looking to see him using a line last week and setting it up and walking around and having to get in and readjust the line and so forth. Even though he did putt better last week. He made -- he would have made dozens of must-make, in quotation mark, putts, and a few late that were absolutely must-make.

So the stroke overall looks great. I love the fact that he went to a blade. I've seen the data on forgiveness in mallet headed putters versus blade. On paper mallets win 7-6, but I like the feel of a blade. I think it just plays into the intuition of a golfer better.

Having said that, I think there's innumerable -- there's still a lot of hurdles for him to be able to win the Masters. The first one I think is just mental. Going up against the best

players in the world is one thing, but going up against the history books is another.

If you look at his first-round scoring average at the Masters prior to him having a chance to win the Grand Slam, 2009 to 2014, his first-round scoring average was under par, significantly under par, and then from 2015 to 2022 -- in 2015 was the first time he had a chance to win the Career Grand Slam when he shows up at the Masters, and from that moment to last year, he's averaged over par.

Now, 72.4 is his first-round scoring average, and historically speaking, if you get off to a poor start at Augusta National Masters, there's really not much chance of you coming back because the golf course so quickly identifies who's on their game, and then you just carry on playing great golf.

Last year he shot 73, the year before 76, the year before 75, the year before -- these are first-round scores at the Masters, and I attribute that to nothing more than the pressure of trying to complete the Career Grand Slam. He's got to get over that mental hurdle in round number 1.

It could be as simple as the first round is more important than the final round. He has got to get off to a great start and that's been, at least in my view, purely mental. In that same time period he's averaged under 70 over the course of his PGA TOUR career.

So you can't say enough about the importance of the first round for Rory McIlroy, and then look, from a his swing standpoint and how does his swing match up to that golf course, it's not a perfect fit, not at all. If you look at the players that dominate and have dominated at Augusta National, they are either very upright or they come over the top of it.

And Rory is not upright anymore. He swings much flatter and deeper, and he comes almost underneath it. That's why I alluded to earlier the only player really great player that had a chance to win the Career Grand Slam that didn't complete it because of the Masters was Lee Trevino, and Lee Trevino aimed left and pushed. He swung underneath it. His best finish ever at the Masters was 10th; mind you, he skipped it in some prime years because he just didn't like the place.

So it's not a great fit for Rory on paper. Having said that, he's monumentally talented and can get around these hurdles. But the first round is the most important day of the week for Rory next week.

RICH LERNER: I would just jump and put a button on this. With Rory, there's always more. He's sort of asked to

defend the established order, not just win the Open last summer but defend the established order because we pretty much knew Cam Smith was on his way out. So defend the established order at the Open, and he couldn't quite do it. Be a hero back home in Northern Ireland, the Open in 2019, the weight of that was just a little too much or simply just win another major, now we're working on almost nine years, so this comes with the territory.

When you get to his level, even with as much as he's achieved, you're asked to do what few have ever done. No one has as much historically riding as Rory. My hope is -- I say hope because we are in the story business, root for the great stories, is that Rory is better equipped to handle this now. This goes to Brandel's point, sort of the principal concern would be the mental and emotional strain.

I feel like Rory is a little bit better equipped to handle this, what with how he's reacted to LIV, how well he's played. Paul has called him -- Paul McGinley knows him very well, calls him an inspirational player. He's quite inspired at the moment to kind of carry the mantle for the PGA TOUR.

My sense is he's better equipped, but all that said, Rory is still -- as great as he is, he's still the heart breaker. Brandel and I were talking about this on Sunday. He was 2-up with three to play in his match against Cameron Young, and I don't think Rory is alone in this, but he's measured against what Tiger did and how Tiger closed, and no one closes or ever will likely, like Tiger. So you're less feeling at times disappointed as we were at the Old Course, where he didn't play poorly, he shot 70 in the final round, but he didn't do enough. He didn't make enough happen.

Again, he's won 23 times now, which is a lot. He's one from Gary Player and Dustin Johnson on the all-time wins list.

Yeah, he's always asked for more, and I think he's handled it well on the whole. Disappointing in terms of not being able to finish, but just in how he conducts himself, how he handles his interviews, transparency, honesty. I think that's why he's so well liked and there's just this enormous wellspring of support and sentiment for Rory.

You know, a fun little game to play is what would be the most popular Masters win. Probably start with Tiger would be yet another comeback for all times, and then probably Rory would be next in line. There's a case to be made for a Jordan Spieth win being super popular. But Rory continues to fascinate me.

He's 33 now. There's two ways to look at it. One is he's running out of some time, running out of time here. The major window is shorter than people realize.

The other side of it is that Mickelson, if I'm not mistaken, won the first of his six majors beginning at the age of 33 in 2004. Maybe this is the start of a great run for Rory. His game certainly looks like it's close if not all the way there.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I would just say, at least it's my opinion, that the fact that Tiger Woods and Rory gave (indiscernible) LIV Golf the Heisman is one the best things that's ever happened to golf. I think it may have saved the PGA Tour, but it most certainly protected the integrity of professional golf, which is that there is -- it's a sport based upon merit. You know, with like the city of Manhattan, a great many bridges to enter and a star system that feeds the development tours and underpinned by philanthropy.

What I would say is that Rory may go on to win the Grand Slam. He may win the Masters and be a part of that group. But I would say what he did in turning down LIV and being a voice for the future of the PGA TOUR and legacy and the merit of professional golf at the highest level is far more important historically to the future of the game than what him winning the Grand Slam would mean to the record book thing.

NOTAH BEGAY: No argument from me on that.

**Q. Notah, did Tiger say anything about 13 when he made his trip up there back in March?**

NOTAH BEGAY: No, I hadn't really discussed any of the changes that were made, so no. Sorry for the quick answer.

**Q. You walked all those matches last week. Is there a guy under the radar we are missing who you think could do something next week?**

NOTAH BEGAY: Well, I mean, gosh, I think I walked almost 40 miles last week in covering all those matches, especially the first three days because you're just doing this rotation from 12 to 18, 12 to 18. Obviously when matches ended you just go back to the rotation.

Anybody that made it to the quarterfinals, you'd sort of have to give them a little bit of an improvement in their prospects of -- and of course it's through the field, of whether or not they could contend and possibly win, because to get out of your group is extremely difficult, and then to go out and win another match against other players who are playing extremely well, and you saw in those last three matches, the semifinals and the final, it's coming down to a putt or two on one specific hole that really completely turns the matches around and the momentum that most players are dealing with in trying to win those



specific matches.

Yeah, I mean, I would give a nod to sort of anybody that made it into that quarterfinals section certainly has an improved chance of contending at Augusta.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I would say Jason Day. To Notah's point in that quarterfinals is Jason Day. I would certainly be looking at Jason Day heading into the Masters.

RICH LERNER: I'm a huge fan of what Jason Day is doing now. Brandel and I had quite a few discussions on Live -- not "Live From," on "Golf Central," from the Match Play last week, and Brandel can speak to it a little bit better about some of the changes he's made, but I think we shouldn't dismiss the fact that he was a great player at one point. I understand that was a fairly long time ago.

That was almost six years, seven years ago at this point, but the same respect we would give to any other former No. 1 in their comeback back bid I'm not sure has been fully extended to Jason. I'm not sure why. He had fallen all the way to 175 in the world last October, and you get that far down it's easy to dismiss a guy. But as he's played better, I'm reminded of how competitive he was, how physical he was and is on the golf course, although now I think -- and Brandel can back me up, there's just a little bit more nuance and softness to the overall package which I think suits him at this point in his career what with the injuries he's going through, but let's not forget just how good he was and the level at which he won.

He would be my No. 1 guy I'd say. Tony Finau has a good record at Augusta National, was close the year that Tiger won. I think he would be an enormous breakthrough star if he were to win at Augusta of all places.

I think if you're looking for a darker horse at this point, he's a little bit older but experienced, can benefit the player and he has shown some form in '23 on the comeback trail would be Justin Rose has had some close calls at Augusta. I would look at Justin.

Then I think back to where Notah was, it's hard to dismiss Cameron Young, as long as he is, and he appears to be adding some polish to his raw power. I would think he's worth a look, as well.

THE MODERATOR: Well, thank you again for joining us, everybody. Really appreciate it. Just a reminder that we will have a transcript of this call on [NBCSportsGroupPressbox.com](https://www.nbcsports.com/group-pressbox) later this evening.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

