

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

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Rich Lerner
Brandel Chamblee
Notah Begay
Johnson Wagner

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to the NBC Sports Live From the Masters media conference call. Today we'll be joined by our Live From the Masters host Rich Lerner and analysts Brandel Chamblee, Notah Begay and Johnson Wagner. We already have members of our production team on the ground in Augusta for what will be more than 100 hours of programming in and around Augusta National over the next 10 plus days.

As our coverage of the Augusta National Women's Amateur began today with Anna Jackson, Morgan Pressel, Paige Mackenzie and Steve Burkowski calling the first round of action from Champions Retreat this afternoon.

This is the second year we are showing live coverage of the first two rounds from Champions Retreat. That will be followed by Live From the Augusta National Women's Amateur studio coverage on Friday and Saturday on Golf Channel and Peacock, culminating with final round coverage at Augusta National Golf Club live on NBC and Peacock live on Saturday afternoon.

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

Just as a reminder, we will open this up to questions from the press momentarily but we will begin with some opening remarks from our speakers. We're going to begin with Rich Lerner.

RICH LERNER: Thanks to everyone for jumping on. I'll briefly touch on a handful of big storylines going in.

We'll start with Rory. Always fascinating to me when one tournament can so dramatically alter one player's legacy. Rory without a Masters victory is still one of the best players of his generation, but Rory with a Masters win is one of the best of all time, as he would be just one of six to have won all four.

Jon Rahm returns not simply as defending champion but as the guy who jumped, leaving the public conflicted, certain that it loves the Masters but uncertain who in golf loves (indiscernible).

Tiger, the spartan recent record leans towards it's over, but for those in the category best athletes of all time, the possibility of one more is never easily relinquished.

Also with the struggles of the top players in 2024, and I think Brandel is going to expand on this, you have to consider the idea that for the first time in 45 years, a first-timer will win, and there are two that really jump out more than any in recent memory, Wyndham Clark and Ludvig Aberg.

Lastly, Scottie, you don't worry about Scottie Scheffler as a player and as a person. If Scottie were your doctor, if he were your kid's high school basketball coach, you would feel good. The not-quite-reliable putting makes him not quite a lock to win, though I think we would all agree he is a lock to contend.

With that, I'll turn it over to Brandel if he's with us or to Johnson if he's here.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I agree with pretty much all that. More generally I'll just say it's exciting to cover the Masters. It's the most anticipated golf tournament in the world for obvious reasons. There's the longest time span between the last major played and the first major of the new year and the familiarity that everybody has with the golf course, both players and spectators alike. Every shot has instant context and historical meaning.

That makes the Masters unique in the landscape of professional golf.

What further makes it unique is the exciting layout, the back nine. There's no better stage in the world for the best



players in the world to show off, and historically it has given us I think the highest and most reliable sort of drama.

It's also the fact that we wait the longest for it but they give us the least of it. There's no other major championship where we see so few of the shots and wait so long to watch the golf. So they have us all standing there salivating waiting for whatever we end up getting to see.

You put all that together, and it's the most compelling event, and in this landscape today, it's one of four events where all of the disparate strands of the game of golf come together: LIV players, PGA TOUR players, DP World Tour players. They all come together. So it's added -- we can debate whether or not that's good, but you cannot deny that it's compelling.

There's a sense now even a further heightened sense with more than a dozen LIV players coming back. Nobody really would have seen them play for the large part of this year, so there's a sense of great anticipation at what kind of games they're going to have and what kind of controversy it's going to stir up.

You put all that together, and it's a pretty compelling event.

I think Rich already hit pretty solidly on Scottie Scheffler and Rory and Rahm and the first-timers. I couldn't agree more.

But I think more -- I think one of the biggest mysteries going on in the world of golf right now is why so few of the best players in the world are playing well. That's true on the PGA TOUR, and it's also true on LIV.

I've gone back and looked at every single LIV player that is playing at the Masters. I've looked at all of their records and looked at all of the data from when they left to LIV and compared it over a comparative amount of time before they left, and almost every single one of their games has fallen off. People will say, well, they played well in the Masters last year, and that's certainly true, a few of them did, and Brooks Koepka won the PGA last year, and he certainly did, but if you compare the amount of majors that they've played in since they left and then compare it to the amount of majors, an equal number of majors before they left, almost every single player out there is worse off. Their games are worse.

There's one whose game is marginally better, and that's Cameron Smith, and I'm counting the Open Championship where he won as him being a LIV player because everybody knows he had already decided to go to LIV when he won the Open Championship.

It's true on the PGA TOUR, it's true on the LIV Tour, so few of the best players in the world are playing well, and it's opened up the landscape more wide open than it's ever been, and I would say that's interesting because the Masters is the most predictable major championship. It's the most predictable golf tournament in the world to predict a winner.

But this year I would argue that it's more wide open for all of the reasons I've listed and what Rich touched on.

THE MODERATOR: We'll hand it over next to Notah Begay.

NOTAH BEGAY: Thanks, Jamie, and thanks, everybody, for joining. It's certainly great to be with you all. I think one of the most intriguing things for me in my attraction is the Masters is just the opportunity to compare records, historical records, performance records, whatever they may be. I think that's one of the reasons I love Olympic track and field is the stopwatch and the measuring tape are the same pretty much wherever you go, and with the Masters it's the one time where year after year we sort of get to compare performances.

I know the course has changed in certain regards, but Jordan's historic win to Tiger's historic win to other great players that have sort of gone through Augusta National and won the Masters, and looking at this year's event isn't any different. I don't think in recent history you've had a player coming in that has been so good in contrast to the rest of his peers than Scottie Scheffler, and I believe Tiger is the only player in history to have won THE PLAYERS and the Masters in the same year, and Scottie gets a chance to do that again for the second time.

Those are neat things to keep an eye on because this is a place that will haunt you. Just ask Greg Norman and Rory McIlroy. Not only do they have to face the challenges of the golf course, they have to face all the demons ahead of can I actually do this, when both of those players came ever so close and can sort of feel one arm in the green jacket at some point down the stretch.

Then it brings to life other players. You've got three different players, one that hasn't played, one that's playing very average, and Jordan would be sort of -- out of the Jordan-Mickelson-Tiger bunch would be the one playing the best, but those guys seem to find some sort of magic when they get to the practice ground there at Augusta and their games sort of find a way.

I disagree with both Brandel and Rich in the sense that a first-time winner may be imminent this year. I still think the golf course is like trying to take the MCAT with two days to

study. You're just not going to get it right. But I'm looking forward to whatever comes our way, and we'll certainly as a broadcast team be ready to cover it.

Thanks.

THE MODERATOR: Last but certainly not least we'll get some thoughts from Johnson Wagner.

JOHNSON WAGNER: Thank you so much, everybody out there. Really looking forward to being at the Masters and covering it for the first time. I had the pleasure of going down and shadowing for radio last year, so I got to see the inner workings of the press building and sort of the back roads access, and you can't be more impressed by a place than I was last year, getting a whole new perspective.

I echo everyone's comments on Scottie Scheffler. It seems like after a year of tremendous consistency, how can this guy get any better, but he continues to get better, and I'm of the belief that a guy like Scottie Scheffler, who is not on social media, who is seemingly unfazed by anything going on around him, I think we're on the precipice of a historic run that we've already seen the beginnings of with him.

Then I agree with Notah. I don't think we're looking at a first-time participant winning this, but I think we're looking at -- if it's not Scheffler, I think we're looking at a first-time major winner in a guy like Will Zalatoris. He's had a great career. He finished second in 2021, sixth in 2022. He's back, he's healthy, he's playing great golf, and I'm really looking forward to watching his play this week.

Q. This is kind of directed at the former players in the group. No offense, Rich. For Brandel, Notah and Johnson, you've got a lot of guys going into a tournament like this with I don't want to say baggage, but they're in pursuit of something, a first thing. Rory has talked about the fact that he hasn't won in 10 years, a major, and the next one is going to feel like the next. You've got Cam Young who hasn't won a tournament at all but has done so many things well in the last two plus years. You've got Xander Schauffele who's been seven times and has been close but still hasn't won that first major. Rickie hasn't won a first major. What do you guys think is most difficult out of all those three, winning your first tournament, winning the first major, or a guy like Rory who's got the weight of the world with him with the Grand Slam hanging over him?

JOHNSON WAGNER: Well, I think it's got to be Rory McIlroy. I think history is going against him. This is his 10th attempt to complete the Career Grand Slam, and I think of the five previous that have completed it, none have

taken more than, I believe, four or five years to do so, and the only person to do it at Augusta National, correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe it was Gene Sarazen, and that was in either the first or second editions of the Augusta National Invitational before it became really the Masters.

I think for me it's Rory McIlroy all the way has the most pressure.

NOTAH BEGAY: I think winning your first major is harder, only because you're usually playing the toughest courses against the toughest fields under the most extreme pressure with the most coverage.

The one thing I really love about golf, and you've seen it these past couple weeks, is a win for a player, it changes your life.

Some of these players that have gone on to win their one major a handful of majors, it just completely validates all of the struggle and the pursuit. For some it's kind of everything they expected and more, and for others it didn't quite live up to what they expected, but it's always different for each person, so in the context of what is harder, I think that in and of itself is probably the hardest thing.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I would say, look, I certainly agree Xander Schauffele and Patrick Cantlay are certainly facing a lot of pressure. There's evidence they are feeling it. There's objective evidence they are feeling it. But I think there's stronger evidence, to Johnson Wagner's point, that the person who's under the most mental duress at the Masters is Rory.

You go back and you look, and there's a pattern. Every time he seems to play his worse golf when it means the most, in other words, in the first round when he's got to get off to a good start. His last five Masters he's averaged 73.8 in the first round. That speaks to not being in the right place mentally.

But whenever he is in a good place -- when he does manage to get himself into a good place, say in 2018 he was second after 54 holes, he shot 74 Saturday. In 2016 he was second after 36 holes, and he shot 77 Saturday.

He plays his best when it means the least, and he plays his worst when it means the most. Now, we can dive in and parse out technical reasons why that is, but the larger landscape is it's just mental. I think him trying to get over that hurdle and become the sixth person to win the Grand Slam is mentally the most compelling thing that will take place at the Masters.

Q. A quick one for Notah and then Brandel. What did

you make of Justin Thomas's decision to part with Bones and especially the timing of it? What kind of unique challenges does that create for next week?

NOTAH BEGAY: Well, terrible timing. Anytime you have to walk away from a trusted relationship -- the premise of a caddie-player relationship is predicated on trust. You're trusting somebody to interject their opinion into critical decisions, especially around a place where your attitude can either enhance your chances or end your chances of winning the golf tournament.

For him it obviously has to be the right choice because things just weren't going his way. Had the third single worst strokes gained putting round in that third round at Valspar. That's certainly not a reflection on the caddie, but maybe just a new look, a new feel, a little new energy might sort of get things moving in the right direction.

I don't think it's an overall solution to bad play. Sometimes it does help get things moving back in a place that you feel like you can put up some decent scores.

Q. You mentioned how compelling this event is because we finally have all the top players in the field again. Are you optimistic that we're inching our way out of this period of uncertainty and do you think the economics of the sport are sustainable in any way?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Do I think we're inching our way out of this controversy? I'm not optimistic that there's going to be a merger between the PGA TOUR and LIV. I think the litigation ending and the discovery ending was important, but I'm not optimistic at all that there will be a merger between these two groups. Even if they agree upon it, I'm not convinced that the DOJ will allow it.

So no, I don't see these groups coming together, and I think the quickest way for these players to find their way, the LIV players to get back on to and playing PGA TOUR events is when and if LIV dissolves, and if that happens, then I think there will be a process that would allow them to come back for different players.

I think that's drawn out.

For at least the next two, three, four years, majors will be about the only time we see these players join forces, which is compelling. Again, it's really hard to dive into these LIV events. It's hard to take them seriously from a competitive standpoint. It's hard to divine out of them any sort of data. The data is elementary and dubious if you go on to their website.

So the only real objective data that we can use is how do

they play when they show up and play in the majors. Are they better or worse than when they left? Are they better or worse? By and large, they're worse. The vast majority of them are worse.

They've done themselves a disservice competitively and historically. They're richer, but they've done themselves a disservice.

Then by the same token, players on the PGA TOUR, most of the best players on the PGA TOUR are distracted, and they're playing worse, too. That's why we have so many lower ranked players in the world doing so well on the PGA TOUR this year would be my argument, and that's why I look at the landscape of the Masters and say, is it likely a first-time winner could win? No, but are the chances better than they've ever been or better than -- I would say better than they've ever been. Yes, I'd say they are.

There's a sense that the Masters is more wide open this year than it's ever been on the one hand. On the other, you have to go back to the Tiger Woods days to find a player who's dominated the PGA TOUR the way Scottie Scheffler is and who arrives there with every facet of his game, the most important facets of his game needed to win the Masters. Nobody has even come close to having them in the order, not even Tiger Woods, in the order that Scottie Scheffler has them.

The most important parts of winning the Masters are approach play and scrambling. Well, he's first in approach play, and he's fourth in scrambling. You add those two numbers together, that's five. Nobody has come in there with anything less than 20.

What we're looking at here is, on the one hand, yeah, the odds are better that it's going to be wide open, but on the other, it's easy to see a Scottie Scheffler blowout.

RICH LERNER: If I could just jump in on LIV real quickly, I do not dispute anything that you said. What I think we can safely say, though, is that they, those in the LIV camp, will undoubtedly hang their hat on the fact that the first two majors of 2024 will have as defending champions LIV guys in Jon Rahm and Brooks Koepka, and then at the Masters next week four of the first five on the final leaderboard from 2023 are now with LIV, Rahm, Koepka, Mickelson and Patrick Reed, who tied for fourth with Russell Henley. That and the fact that they can claim to be aligned with McIlroy on this need for -- the approach that they need to come together, however that happens.

It feels like -- I don't know that they'll have an upper hand, but I think they'll lean into that, whether it's justified or not.

Q. The other news of today, Rory McIlroy officially took a lesson a week or so ago after PLAYERS with Butch Harmon, and I'm curious your reaction to that. What do you think of that move and some of the stuff that Rory is doing to try to close the deal on the Grand Slam?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I'd have to reserve judgment until I watch him make a few golf swings in the practice round. He had made some improvements on his iron play at the Arnold Palmer Invitational, made some improvements I should say at THE PLAYERS over what he did at Arnold Palmer Invitational. He had made some improvements.

But I'll have to see it, and I'll believe it when I see it. His golf swing is just so -- it's beautiful, no doubt, but it's such an odd fit for Augusta. He just swings too in to out, and he misses so many shots there off all those hook lies. That's the thing about the equipment is very few players draw it anymore because if you draw it, you have to work so hard to draw it. The equipment makes you work so hard to draw it that when it comes to iron play, you're just too much in to out and have too much closure of the face and it leads to too many long and left shots which are accentuated at Augusta National by hook lies, further accentuated by greens that slope severely back to front, so you're long left above the hole coming down the hill, and you are just handicapped at Augusta National.

Now, that is a scene that plays out year after year after year with Rory. For him to change the attack angle, the approach and his release patterns for one week and get it fully set, that's just a tall order, a really tall order.

I'll believe it when I see it. The game is better when Rory is playing his best. It's more exciting. That's arguably the most exciting -- don't count Tiger, but outside of Tiger, that's the most exciting story in all of golf.

If he drives it down 1 on the first day and he's got a huge hook lie and he hits a soft cut 10 feet beneath the hole, I'll go, game on. But if he hits it 30 feet left of the hole above the hole, I'm like, here we go again. So I'll believe it when I see it.

NOTAH BEGAY: To follow up on Brandel's comments, and he's spot on with regard to Rory's short iron performance at Palmer, 17 times between 100 and 150 yards, he had a short iron in his hand and only managed to get two of those inside 15 feet. That's far below average of any PGA TOUR player, far below any of our expectations with regard to a player of Rory's caliber and talent. Yes, there were improvements at THE PLAYERS, but it still came up to bite him on a handful of shots that he needed to keep himself in contention there.

I've seen Butch work with a number of players. I saw him firsthand work, standing next to him, work with Tiger, and his approach has been the same. Once he gets you swinging left, once he gets you on top of the ball, and if you listen to Rickie Fowler's post-round comments a few weeks ago, having gone back to Butch just recently, he talked about I need to do what Butch told me and I need to swing left. That's a big thing to change in a short period of time.

Like Brandel is right; if we see a big high soft cut off a slightly above-the-feet lie, then I think we can reconsider, but until then I think it's still a big question mark.

Q. Notah, do you have any additional insight into -- we haven't seen Tiger for a while, really since the one round he played. Have you any more insight you can share with us, what we might expect from him next week?

NOTAH BEGAY: Well, with regard to that, the recipe hasn't changed. He's trying to formulate a strategy and approach that he can work within the constraints that he's presented with. He's got some major constraints. He's got zero mobility in that left ankle and really has some low back challenges now, which he knew he was going to have.

After the ankle surgery I had a chance to visit with him when Charlie was playing in my junior golf event in Louisiana, and he said, my ankle doesn't move, so something is going to take the stress. The stress is going to transfer somewhere else, and he goes, I don't know where it's going to be, but it might be my knee, it might be my hip, and it ended up being his low back.

This last couple months he's just been spending trying to find a way to recover. He can play the golf, and we always knew the question mark was going to be can he walk the 72, that's still up in the air, but can he recover from one round to the next. That's the biggest question that I really don't know and he's not going to know, either, until he gets out there and figures out if the way he's prepared for this year's Masters is going to work for him.

Q. While we have been on this call, your colleague Todd Lewis is reporting that Matt Minister will be the caddie for JT next week. My first question would be to Johnson. You probably have known Matt for a long time. You have shed one veteran caddie, you add another with a major right in front of you, is that helpful that it's someone like Matt versus a close friend from home or some kind of patchwork kind of deal?

JOHNSON WAGNER: I think that's a great move. Matt

Minister is an awesome caddie, been with a number of great players, most notably recently with Patrick Cantlay. Matt has got a great track record. He and Justin know each other well.

My personal opinion, the JT-Bones thing, while I have so much respect for both of them, it was never a perfect fit. Without that PGA Championship, which I believe they were seven back with nine holes to play and Pereira making double on the last to put them in a playoff with Will Zalatoris, they hadn't really done a whole lot together and hadn't really contended a bunch.

I think it's a good thing for JT. I think Matt Minister is a wonderful person to have on the bag. I couldn't be happier for JT, and it makes me like his chances even more.

Q. Notah, you talked about Tiger not knowing where the forces are going to go. Is this an example of why he may not have been able to play THE PLAYERS because who knows how the back felt leading up to that, but he can then play the one-day Seminole pro-am? Is that where we are with not knowing how he'll feel any given day?

NOTAH BEGAY: Well, exactly. He's not going to risk going out -- anytime Tiger tees it up in a sanctioned event, the guy gives it his all. Brandel and I stood there years ago and watched him just completely embarrass himself at the Waste Management Phoenix Open when he just couldn't chip.

But I talked to him shortly thereafter, and he's like, I never stopped trying. I didn't know what was happening with my swing, but I just couldn't chip, but I never stopped trying. He just doesn't have that gear in him to give up. So if he goes out and tees it up in THE PLAYERS a few weeks ago and something else happens and breaks down, then it jeopardizes the Masters.

THE PLAYERS is such a crapshoot on your tee times and the wind conditions. It favors nobody. Why would he risk it there when he can go to Augusta where he knows the course better than any player walking on the grounds, where he's at a distinct advantage, and it's just a question -- the same questions are in front of him. Can I walk this hilly course and what's going to happen to me when I do.

I just don't think the risk was worth it to him.

Q. Lastly for Rich, those essays which I assume are written during Live From because you don't know who the champion is up until very close, how fast of a turnaround is that from I'm going to put something down, I'm going to write it, I'm going to do the

voiceover and then you see it on there? That's got to be pretty fast.

RICH LERNER: It varies, but thank you. I've done them sometimes as the championship is ending. I've had to load them up when something dramatic has happened, something has changed radically at the end, which happens quite a bit. I'll write -- what I do quite a bit is I'll write the first half to two-thirds that tries to maybe capture what we've seen through the week, the sort of overarching storyline, and then I will write three or four different endings with three or four different player possibilities.

Last year let's say at the PGA Championship I had plenty written about Michael Block, and then I wrote a Viktor Hovland ending, I wrote whoever else was in it, and then I wrote a Koepka ending and then came back to Michael Block.

Other times I have written them sometimes to cover any eventuality, and I can get them done early in the day. It's a challenge but it's a fun one to try to get something finished early and then look at it and say, does this cover any eventuality, including a hole-out to win. That gives the people, the production team back in Stamford, Connecticut, plenty of time to dress it up.

It varies. I've had many hair-on-fire experiences, but it keeps me -- it absolutely keeps me on my toes all day long. It's good fun. But thank you for that.

Q. A question about Rahm. Brandel, you touched a little bit on it earlier, but I'm curious, how dizzying this game has been, a year ago this guy had won three times in eight starts coming into the Masters and was on everybody's radar as the best guy out there, and now a year later Scottie has kind of taken that mantle and Rahm feels like to the regular golf fan like he's been in witness protection. He's played a lot less leading into this Masters, Jon has, and many less rounds and obviously hasn't won. I'm curious what your take is, Brandel, Notah and Johnson, on what you expect to see out of him. I know Brandel, you referred to the fact he does so much research obviously leading into this as you always do about the numbers, but I'm curious with this different lead-up for him what you expect and how you think it'll affect him.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Well, it's a bit of an unknown, again, if you look at the data that's available on LIV's website, they have preposterous numbers for guys in some instances. They've got a handful of guys that are hitting over 75 percent of their greens in regulation. A handful. More than a handful.

It's rare when one person does that on the PGA TOUR. They've got guys out there that are well above their historical high on the PGA TOUR in data achieving it with regularity out there. So you just don't know what to believe.

When you look at Rahm, obviously he hasn't won yet on LIV. We'll see what he does in Miami. But he's playing very consistent golf.

The thing about Augusta National is that -- one of the reasons why it has so many repeat winners and it's so predictable is if you happen to have some very specific aspects of your game that fit that golf course, it's the gift that just keeps on giving, and as it relates to Rory, if you just happen to have a couple aspects of your game that don't fit Augusta National, it's the pain that keeps on giving.

Rahm just has everything in spades. There hasn't really been his equal in terms of driving it long and straight since maybe Nicklaus. It's just extraordinary to watch him. He has the necessary move being able to hit cuts off hook lies. He can hit towering iron shots. He doesn't swing left. There's such a huge movement to swing left. There's a fine line between swinging out, swinging down the line and swinging left.

Most Masters winners I would argue don't swing left. They swing down the line and they finish high, and that's what Jon Rahm does. He's down that line.

He's just got it all. They just don't come along like him very often. He's so competitive, and I'm sure he feels like he's got an axe to grind, and I'm sure he feels like he wants to show the world that LIV has not impoverished him. I'm sure he'll show up in the mindset I'm guessing of so many of the LIV players last year, and that's part of why they played so well last year I would say, but the other part is they're defending champions. They're the best players in the world. That's why LIV sought them out and poached them because they had value and they were still freshly off having played the PGA TOUR.

As time goes on, they're going to become less and less competitive. I think the early data is showing that. But I think Rahm will show up and do very well. It's rare that somebody successfully defends, but it wouldn't surprise anybody.

JOHNSON WAGNER: I don't have much to add. I agree Rahm is an incredibly competitive guy. I think maybe he's at a little bit of a crossroads debating whether or not he made his decision. I hate to -- the right decision. I hate to speculate, but from everything I've heard, he's maybe missing the competitive golf, so I think he's going to get

back into the major environment and he's going to feel right at home quickly and I think he's going to relish the opportunity to go back out there and be somewhat of a disruptor.

NOTAH BEGAY: Yeah, and I think obviously Brandel hit the nail on the head again. My take on it, just maybe from a playability standpoint, is that there's a reason that the world's best runners get together on a consistent basis leading up to the Olympics. It's because they make each other better. They're challenging each other. They're pushing each other. They're calibrating times and splits and recovery and all the things that you have to do against the world's best athletes in those specific events.

That's not happening on LIV. That happens on the PGA TOUR. It's cutthroat. You've got players nobody has ever heard you that can beat you on a week-to-week basis as has been shown this first few months, and at the end of the day steel sharpens steel. They make each other tougher, they make each other better. There's no guarantees of anything. They play just as much for the glory as they do for the money.

I think you're going to see a slow deterioration of not just Jon Rahm's game but other players that had once held that top-10 World Ranking at some point just because it's inevitable when you're not pushing yourself and red lining your performance expectations every single week. Lance Armstrong said it very clearly: Comfort makes you weak.

Those guys are awfully wealthy and awfully comfortable right now.

Q. You talked earlier about Will Zalatoris, but I wondered if starting with Brandel if you could break down what you like about the changes to his golf swing that you like after having the back surgery?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Well, I've looked at his golf swing in pretty granular detail. He still has a huge right-side bend, still has a lot of spine angle tilt coming into the golf ball. The things that we could have surprised were causing a back issue, they're still prevalent there to me, but he's swinging without any pain, so that's great news. His club head speed, his ball speed has come up as the year has gone on, he's had some solid finishes.

I think 1-A to the bad back was the bad putting stroke. Even though his dad is not by any stretch of the imagination great in that regard, I would say it's somewhat promising.

I'm saying promising in the sense that it's not as devastating as it looked before or potentially as

devastating.

Contrary to popular belief, the Masters has rewarded a number of very poor putters over the years. Ball-striking is more important there. Chipping is more important there.

I'm bullish on Will. I'm not completely gung-ho on him. He's still losing four-tenths of a shot to the field with his putter.

But more than anything, what matters is how well you're recovering, almost as much as your iron play. His short game is just not that sharp. Hasn't been that sharp.

It wouldn't surprise anybody if he hung in there and he contended, but I don't think he's going to be anybody's pick to win the golf tournament.

NOTAH BEGAY: I think the most notable element of Will Zalatoris's game that can lend some people to have some excitement about him heading into the Masters is the new putter and the new putting stroke. The stats aren't obviously overwhelming, which I think he makes up for with his tee-to-green game, but I did a careful analysis of that stroke and the stroke is solid, but what's more important is that ball is turning end-over-end extremely well.

I know the speed of the greens and the slope of the greens at the Masters does not lend itself to rewarding a long putter, but he wouldn't be the first player to win at Augusta using a long putter. I think that the fact that I think he certainly feels more comfortable on the greens going back to a venue where he obviously feels great tee to green, and that's his strength, certainly pushes him up my list.

JOHNSON WAGNER: Well, with Will Zalatoris for me, I played with him a couple years ago his rookie year at the Byron Nelson, and I was blown away with how high he hit his irons. I don't think I had ever in my life seen someone be able to compress and hit an iron quite so high in the air, and I watched him pretty closely at THE PLAYERS Championship and a little bit on Bay Hill, and one thing that makes me very excited about him is that he is still hitting his irons as high as he did before. He's ninth this year in strokes gained approach, which Brandel said was one of the key stats coming into Augusta.

I don't think he gets enough credit for how imaginative and creative he is with a wedge in his hand around the greens.

I know the putter is always going to be an issue, but I think he's got exceptional touch, and his iron play is exquisite, and I think he is back pain-free. I'm not picking him to win, but he is definitely going to be in the top 5 for me.

Q. About your tweet last night talking about all the players losing ground, strokes gained total, one year ago to today, there was just a comment earlier, this wasn't originally part of my question, but there was a comment earlier about when the top players are together they play better, but all the top players are playing together more this year, and as you mentioned, a lot of them are playing worse. Why do you think that is, and could it be because the schedule puts them all together so much that everybody can't play well every week?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: You know, I think they're distracted, honestly. I think to the degree that players think about money, they're not being drawn upward athletically. I just don't think that's the place where your best anything comes from.

If you're distracted at all, just generally speaking, you can't play your best golf. But if you're distracted to the degree that the best players in the world are, should I go, should I stay -- several of these great players are on the board, so every time they go out there they're barraged with questions.

We talk so much about how important it is for players to be in the right place mentally, and I just think there's an epidemic of distraction on the PGA TOUR, whether it's greed or trying to solve problems that are almost unsolvable, however you want to put it. I just think they're hugely distracted.

Then there's always the two or three or four players that come along that decide they want to chase perfection, and they start fiddling around with their golf swings and they lose their game.

I think Viktor Hovland is suffering that. We spent most of our time this year talking about the falloff in Viktor Hovland's game, but Fleetwood's game has fallen off more, Cantlay's game has fallen off more, Matthew Fitzpatrick's game has fallen off more, Max Homa's game has fallen off more.

In the top 20 players, they are about, on average, the top 20 players in the world right now are about, on average, one shot worse a round than they were last year. That is a lot of bad golf from the best players in the world. That is a lot of bad golf.

There's only just a few players that are playing a little bit better in the top 20 in the world. Just a few. Xander Schauffele is playing better. Scottie Scheffler obviously is playing better, which is hard to do, given how well he was playing last year. Wyndham Clark who wasn't in the top 20

last year but is now at this time -- last year at this time he was 81st but he's obviously playing better.

Again, it's very few. I've never seen a time when the best players in the world have come into the Masters playing so poorly and so distracted, which is why I think it sets up for a blowout by Scheffler, or if he doesn't very well, doesn't play to his best, a very surprising winner at the Masters.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everybody, for joining us today. Again, we will have a transcript of this call available later this evening on [NBCSportsGrouppressbox.com](https://www.nbcsportsgroup.com/pressbox).

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