

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Tuesday, April 1, 2025

Rich Lerner

Brandel Chamblee

Paul McGinley

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Good afternoon. Jamie Palatini here from the NBC Sports and Golf Channel communications team here. Before we start, we've got some interesting technical things with folks, including Brandel Chamblee calling from Scottsdale but we've got all the way out in the UK, Paul McGinley. Are you on, Paul?

PAUL MCGINLEY: I am, yes. Hello from Ireland.

THE MODERATOR: Paul has joined us, as well. We just wanted to make sure we got him on the call here, so his line is open now, as well. What we're going to do is start our call off in a moment here, but I wanted to make sure Paul is in and he's all set.

Everybody, thank you for joining our Live From the Masters media conference call. In a few minutes we'll be joined Live From the Masters team of Rich Lerner and analysts Brandel Chamblee and Paul McGinley.

A few housekeeping things: As we look ahead to next week's 89th Masters tournament, the momentum on the PGA TOUR continues this week at the Valero Texas Open on NBC/Golf Channel/Peacock. It's going to conclude seven straight weeks of PGA coverage on NBC, and that viewership has been strong. Sunday's final round at the Texas Children's Houston Open on NBC was up 44 percent year over year. That's six straight weekends of year-over-year viewership gains and six consecutive Sunday final rounds on NBC with viewership gains. So strong momentum heading into Valero and then heading into the Masters next weekend.

Before the Masters begins in earnest at Augusta National Golf Club, we've got an awesome week of golf on tap at Augusta beginning tomorrow with the first round of the Augusta National Women's Amateur at Champions Retreat. First- and second-round coverage is tomorrow and Thursday at 1:30 p.m. eastern on Golf Channel.

We then head to Augusta National for Live From the Augusta National Women's Amateur on Friday and Saturday on Golf Channel. That leads into the final round on Saturday at noon eastern on NBC and Peacock.

Then Sunday morning, an incredibly special day on the golf calendar each and every year, the Drive, Chip & Putt national finals at Augusta National, 8:00 a.m. eastern Golf Channel. 80 junior golfers ages 7 to 15 testing their abilities at the tournament practice area and the 18th green in their driving, chipping and putting.

We'll also have some new production enhancements that viewers can look forward to this week as it relates to the Augusta National Women's Amateur and the Drive, Chip & Putt. NBC Sports will utilize drone coverage for the first time at Augusta National Women's Amateur. Iona Stephen will join Jim "Bones" Mackay as a second walker for Saturday's final round coverage of the Augusta National Women's Amateur, and we're going to have some PGA TOUR and LPGA Tour stars, including Rory McIlroy and Nelly Korda, voicing the introductions for the junior players during our broadcast at the Drive, Chip & Putt during Sunday's coverage.

All of that is to say, lots of enthusiasm and excitement centered around Augusta and the Masters coming up over the next two or so weeks.

As a reminder, we will have a transcript of this call available on [NBCSports.com/pressbox](https://www.nbcsports.com/pressbox) later this afternoon. We will take questions from the press, so feel free to queue now. But before we do that, we're going to start with opening remarks from each of our speakers, and we will start with our host, Rich Lerner. Go ahead, Rich.

RICH LERNER: Jamie, thank you. What a good year it's been in golf.

As it relates to the Masters, the hero is back yet get for an 11th try. I think what makes Rory always so appealing is the vulnerability. This is a guy who Monday morning couldn't sleep in the run-up to the Playoffs at THE PLAYERS. This is the guy, the hero who was watching "Devil Wears Prada" at 3:00 a.m. He's not watching "Gladiator." He wasn't watching a Liam Neeson or a Jason Statham flick, but he was watching "Devil Wears Prada."



What I'd like to do with this week in particular is sort of work from a potential ending backwards, and so what would it look like on Sunday with several scenarios.

I think if Rory does win, I think this Masters would be in the same historical neighborhood as 1986, 1997, 2019. Rory would be, in my estimation, the first true legend of the post-Tiger Woods era, becoming the sixth to have won a Career Grand Slam. There have been great players, obviously, in the post-Tiger era, Brooks, Scottie and Dustin Johnson, maybe Xander Schauffele is on his way there. But Rory would be a legend of a different stripe.

I think Scottie Scheffler, should he win, he would be just the second player to have ever won three Masters in a four-year stretch, and the other is Jack Nicklaus, who won in '63, '65 and '66, so that would be consequential.

But I don't think we should overlook world No. 3 Xander Schauffele. I know he's on the way back from that injury to his rib area, but he did finish 12th at Valspar. I think he's as smart a player, as cagy a player as there is in the game, and I think if Xander wins, he will have won three of the last four majors, and that would have us, I think, comparing him to sort of Brooks Koepka of seven, eight years ago, the guy you looked to when we arrived at major championships.

Most of the best players in the world are verging or trending in the right direction. It sets up for a great Masters.

There's some good sentimental stories, obviously the farewell for Langer, maybe Freddy Couples, we don't know. Intrigue on the return of Angel Cabrera, and I think what are some of the young players who are pushing, what do they do. Akshay Bhatia showed us something at THE PLAYERS. Ludvig we have high expectations for, and maybe Min Woo off of what he did in Houston.

Obviously excited. I think this sets up to be a consequential Masters for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, Rich. We will toss it across the desk to Brandel Chamblee.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Thanks, Jamie. I think Rich summed it up perfectly there, touching on the major stories. Masters is always heightened anticipation for obvious reason. We haven't seen a major championship in about eight months or so. But there's an anticipation of just the panoramic beauty of the place. It's also a terrific homage to somebody who I don't think it's possible to overstate their importance in the game, which is Bobby Jones.

The very nature of Rory McIlroy trying to win the Career Grand Slam harkens back to Bobby Jones in 1930, him winning four major championships in one year: The British Am, the U.S. Am, the U.S. Open and the Open. It's the whole reason the Grand Slam is four, because Arnold Palmer in 1960 on a plane over to the Open at St Andrews along with his side kick Bob Drum said what are the four equivalent event to what Bobby Jones did.

So the very thing that we are most anticipating and looking forward to really has its origins back to what Bobby Jones did in 1930, and of course this tournament embodies the spirit of Bobby Jones. It's a thinking man's golf course. He was a thinking man.

This is a golf course of constant adjustment. There's almost no stock shot that you'll get at Augusta National. Everything is requiring you to work the ball one particular direction to fit into a slope, and then once you get down there you're off a slope to a green that's sloped with a big penalty if you go to the wrong spot. The golf course certainly in the history and what transpires there.

To Rich's point about what Rory is trying to do, if you look at the modern Career Grand Slam, I'm going to call it the modern, because the current configuration wouldn't have been possible until 1934, but from 1934 to 1966 there were four players that completed the Career Grand Slam in a span of 32 years. Just one has done it in the last 59 years. I would say that's a testament to the increasing level of competition.

So we can tip our caps to what Rory is trying to do. He's one of 12 players that has won three of the four legs of the modern Career Grand Slam.

There really hasn't been that many players come very close. Arnold Palmer came close in '68 at the PGA when he missed the putt. Snead in 1949 at the U.S. Open when he bogeyed the 17th hole or the 71st hole in the '53 Open well back of Ben Hogan.

Then you could look at Rory in 2018 as he stood on the first tee alongside Patrick Reed. He was in grasp of doing it. And then you could say Spieth in 2019.

But there has been just a dearth of success at completing the Career Grand Slam.

As it relates to Augusta National and Rory McIlroy to continue this "Devil Wears Prada" theme going a little bit further, I would say Augusta National is the Miranda Priestly for Rory McIlroy playing as Andrea Sachs. It is literally his nemesis. It brings out the worst golf in Rory



annually that we see almost every year. It was his worst golf last year in majors, worst golf the year before. Two years before that it was his worst golf. He annually underperforms there. He hits on average about 42 greens, and on average the winner hits about 52 greens.

There are things about that golf course that have been very problematic for him, but I will say him switching to a softer ball, I think, really does harken and give us greater hope for his success there because it's forcing him to get on top of it. It's getting him to cover it. Paul McGinley has been talking about this -- I think he talked about it a lot at THE PLAYERS Championship. Off camera after our interview with Rory he talked about it with the three of us, about how keeping it down -- I ran into Curt Byrum yesterday when I was out tossing around the golf course. Curt was following his group on Sunday at the Texas Open. He said that he is on top of it and sliding down these wonderful wedge shots. That is the shot that he needs at Augusta National. He's got to be able to sort of hold it off, trap it down, hit some cuts off hook lies, not get that long left shot that has plagued him with a flare out to the right.

There's a reason for the golf world to be excited about the possibility, and again, from a competitive standpoint, he's never gone into the Masters playing better or sharper from a competitive standpoint.

To get there, though, obviously he's got to get over Scottie Scheffler, and right, he's on the cusp of doing what only Jack Nicklaus has done, as Rich pointed out. I would say two other favorites at least in my estimation besides those two would be Collin Morikawa, who's sorted out the problems he's had shifting. I've got him maybe the favorite to win. Shane Lowry, similarly.

Nothing matters more at Augusta National than strokes gained approach and strokes gained around the green. Combine those numbers, and there you can pretty much get a great handle on who's got the best chance to win. Combining those numbers, Shane Lowry leads the field.

You put those two numbers together ahead of Morikawa, ahead of Justin Thomas, ahead of Rory McIlroy, ahead of Scottie Scheffler. So there's a lot of reasons to get excited about this year's Masters.

THE MODERATOR: Paul, I want to get some thoughts from you, as well, before we open up to questions from the media.

PAUL MCGINLEY: Hello, everybody. Listening intently there to my buddies Rich and Brandel, and rather than going over all the stuff that they talked about, which I fully agree with, and the insights that they've given, I'll just come

at it a little bit with a bigger picture view on the Masters and what it represents and how it's almost a juxtaposition to the trend that we are seeing in golf at the moment and the trend embracing the Generation X through things like the Creator Classic and you see LIV coming and the way guys are dressing and music on the golf course and all of this kind of new, kind of tangent that's growing up from golf.

Now when we go to Augusta next week, it's like going back in time and we're going back into this traditional game, if you want to call it that, in terms of impeccability is the word that comes close. Everything is impeccable, whether it's the condition of the golf course, whether it's the history of the tournament played on the same course every year, whether it's the dress codes, the code of behavior. You listen to the noise and respectfulness that the patrons will have next week, and then you put that juxtaposition into even the Ryder Cup that's coming in September.

So it's a great contrast, and it's a great contrast under the golf umbrella to have Augusta National next week and all it represents compared to a lot of the tangents and the growth that we've seen and this new tangent that Generation X embracing that's going on in the game.

I'm really looking forward to that, obviously, on top of all the narratives around who's going to win and obviously particular reference to Rory and the form that he's on going into hopefully not just win another major championship but complete the elusive Grand Slam.

Q. I guess I want to start with Paul since Brandel maybe already sort of answered this, but in your opinion, Paul, why do you think this Masters will be different for Rory, kind of like Rich Lerner, a little reference to passover coming up? Why is this night any different? Why will it be different this time around?

PAUL MCGINLEY: Well, without trying to pile too much pressure on Rory on already what's there, there's a couple of things lining up at this moment in time, but they have lined up in the past, remember, too, and things haven't worked out for him.

Not only do you have Rory winning two of the biggest events so far on the PGA TOUR, the fact that he has won it with his B game, that's new. That's an evolution of Rory McIlroy. That's different than what we've seen before. When you go to a tournament knowing that you have to produce your best in order to win, that's one thing. But when you go there and you feel like I don't have to be quite on my game here and I can still win, and I'll tell you what, I can prove it, look what I did at the TPC, that gives you a broader sense of confidence. So that's one area that Rory



will be going with.

I think the second one would be that his greatest adversaries, the guys you would expect to be really challenging here, are slightly off their game, and none of them are showing a huge amount of form. Scottie, I know he's trending and he's getting closer and it's a matter of time before he does, but is his first win going to be in a major championship and a Masters? Normally you would see someone winning earlier in the season before they go on to win a Masters. I know he had a great week last week and his underlying stats are getting stronger. He's certainly going to be the guy to beat still, I think, but he is still -- you can't say that he's flying the way he was this time last year.

Then you throw in Morikawa, again, not winning in Bay Hill, getting involved in the stuff that he did with the two of us, I don't think he did himself any favors -- the three of us, rather, at the TPC.

Then you look at Xander again coming back from injury and slightly off form and still not -- although he's trending, not quite on it again. Can he make that jump from not being quite on his game to winning a major championship. It's quite a big jump.

Then you look at the guys on LIV, Jon Rahm hasn't won so far on LIV this year, and Bryson DeChambeau somewhat similar.

I think a combination of a number of his closest adversaries, not quite on their game. I'm certainly not going discount them, but not quite on their game. So that would buoy him a little bit, as well.

But I'll go back to the point. The biggest challenge for Rory is the mental one. I know that Bob Rotella has been a huge influence on him in the last 18 months, and I think he'll have him very well prepared now. This is not the first rodeo going into the Masters working together. They've had two or three runs at this now, and I think they will be coming up with a plan in terms of taking that pressure and kind of decimating it and putting it aside, so I think he'll be well prepared mentally because of the work he's doing with Bob.

Two or three of those things all colliding together gets me a little bit buoyed. I'm not going to say over-buoyed, I'm certainly not going to say giddy, but a little bit buoyed that he does have a strong chance this year in comparison to other years.

Q. Brandel, do you think Bryson has turned a corner at Augusta the way he started last year and was kind of sort of in the hunt?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: No, I don't. I still don't think the course is a great fit for him. Of course he's a phenomenal player, so he's certainly capable of playing some really good golf there. It's just not a great fit for him.

I referenced this last year, but if you go back 25 years, the winners, there's 1,800 holes they would have played en route to winning the Masters. Collectively they've made six double bogeys in 1,800 holes. That's .003 percent of the time they've made mistakes. He makes almost two and a half on average every time he plays the Masters.

His big miss there, which is fine the way they set up U.S. Open golf courses these days, it gets him in trouble at Augusta National. There are some places there you just can't miss it big.

His in-to-out move is not ideal for a lot of the hanging lies or the hook lies there that you get. He gets some pretty big surprises in that regard.

To Paul's point, he's woefully off his game this year. It's hard to make sense -- it's like looking at ancient war stories trying to make sense of LIV's stats. But he's towards the bottom of the field in scrambling on LIV. To the extent that those fields are weak and depleted, he's towards the bottom of the field in scrambling. No, I just don't think it's a great fit for him.

Again, he's a heck of a player. He's capable of playing some great golf there under the right conditions, but generally speaking, no, he's too linear, and that golf course is too abstract.

Q. Rory has had so many pre-tournament Masters plans over the years, so I'm wondering for Paul and Brandel, what would your advice be to him for handling the next 10 days of his life?

PAUL MCGINLEY: As I say, there's a plan going on behind the scenes. I believe he's up again this week in Augusta. He may even be there today. He was there last week, and he's had so many runs at this. He's coming at things in a slightly different way now based on all the experiences he's had of being primed on Thursday morning, not being primed on Monday, being primed on Thursday morning.

The difficulty is navigating, like I say, all the pressure, the expectations, the press conferences, not bringing too much attention on himself, as much as he can deflect it, and trying to get into a really calm head space. He doesn't need to over-practice up there. He knows the golf course well. I would say there would be a lot of practice going on, certainly was last week and again this week, and like a



boxer going into a fight, he'll taper it off as he gets closer to Thursday morning.

I really do think that Bob Rotella on his shoulder is a really important influence now. He's got an unbelievable -- there's nobody who's worked with more major champions as a coach if you want to put him in that category than -- well, certainly maybe Butch, but maybe even Butch I don't think has worked with as many major champions as Bob has done.

He's been around -- he's on that rodeo many, many times. He knows what's needed. He's coming at it from the place which is Rory's biggest challenge, which is the mental one, and dealing with the baggage that comes with not just knocking off a major championship for the first time in 11 years but also trying to complete a Grand Slam.

There will be some psychological games going on. They'll be getting Rory into a good space. I personally believe Rory is at his best when he's slightly in a pissed-off humor. I think we see that when he's got a point to prove, where it's like, okay, get out of my way, here I come. I think that's the attitude when he's at his best, not necessarily a calm, quiet, smooth, everything is wonderful and rosy in the world and off we go. I think he's the best when he's on a charge and he's got a point to prove. We saw that early in his career.

That's the kind of psychology that I would like to see him get into come Thursday morning.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, and look, again, talking to Curt yesterday, he said there was a sense of domination about Rory just all last week, walking on the range, the way he walked on to the golf course. Sort of all business. This Masters is his to win or lose. It's his. Likely he's not going to catch Scheffler a little bit more off of his game than Scheffler is right now. Xander is a little bit off of his game. There are things about Augusta National that don't quite fit Collin Morikawa. Ludvig is a little bit off of his game.

You go down the list, and it's like, his closest competitors, the ones that are apt to give him his greatest challenge you could all say are a little off their game, and Rory has never been in a better spot going into the Masters.

From a technical standpoint and a mental standpoint, this is Rory's.

The fierceness -- if I go back and watch the 2019 Masters, Tiger Woods, that final round, I don't think that I've ever seen anybody play with more focus, and Tiger had already climbed the highest mountains and swum all the rivers, and you'd say what did he have to prove. I think he wanted to

prove to the whole world that he could still win another major championship, and in a way, watching him that day, it was like he was trying to win his first one. There was no luxury of levity at any point during the day.

You can't just act like this is any other golf tournament. It is not like any other golf tournament. For a lot of the golf world, this is the single most important four days that they will have. It's not like every other golf tournament.

At the same time, you cannot allow yourself the luxury of looking ahead. Just look at the last six years what Rory has done in the first round, and again, the winner here averages like sixth place after the first round. Rory has shot 71, 72, 73, 76, 75, 73 the last six years to begin the Masters. That can do nothing -- again, I don't think the golf course is a great fit for him. In the past I think he's mitigated some of those inconveniences, but that's mostly mental. He's got to be in that state where there's no past and no future. He's just got to own that little space that's right in front of him, that next shot.

For four days, get after it. It's his week. There's never been a better week for him to win the Masters. Never.

We keep saying he's got plenty of time, and he does. He's 35. But most of the winners of the Masters have been 35 years of age or older. This is a golf course that bows a little bit to age and experience, so from a power standpoint, he's never been more powerful. Metaphorically and literally. It's his if he takes care of business.

RICH LERNER: James, I like the fact that he acknowledged, after having won THE PLAYERS, that he was as nervous as he's been in a long time standing on that 16th tee for the Monday playoff. Not, oh, this is just another tournament; I was getting into my process. No, he acknowledged that he was as nervous as he's been in a long time because he didn't get it done, and he said, I wanted to, I really wanted to, and then he piped that tee shot, that wedge -- granted, it was shortish and downwind but had wedge into 16, was able to make birdie, grab the lead, which he never let go of.

When he was sitting with us on our little outdoor setup after he won THE PLAYERS on that Monday, I think it's important to sort of rewind what he said. I asked him how he has been able to handle getting kicked in the teeth so often and come out the other side with a win, and he said, you have to be willing to go through it, and there was a time where he sort of shied away from it. He said, you have to be willing to get your heart broken, and who's had their heart broken more than Rory of the top players in the last 10 years. No one.

Just for recent vintage, you go back to '22 when it was Rory trying to carry the establishment against the rival league and the guy we all knew who was leaving for the rival league at the Home of Golf of all places and he didn't get it done. He didn't get it done in Los Angeles. Brutal, painful loss at Pinehurst.

Rory has been kicked in the teeth.

But I think the money quote was when he said he would go through what he did in Los Angeles -- you could say the same for St Andrews and for Pinehurst, 100 times he would go through that pain to win one of these.

I think just sort of understanding being at his level, you're going to contend a lot if you're as good as Rory is, and you have to be willing to take it. It doesn't mean you like it.

I love where he's at with his station in the sport, that understanding. So you combine that sort of deep emotional psychological comfort level with the pressure that he's going to face, you combine that with the tools that he now has at his disposal -- he acknowledged he's a better putter. He's better around the greens than he's ever been. He's able to shape shots in both directions, and Brandel and Paul referenced this, in a way that he was not before, and he just has more at his disposal to go with that deep understanding of where he needs to be psychologically and the possibility that it might not work out but that he does want it.

I like when a player acknowledges the size of the occasion and embraces it.

He's all about this kind of Ryan Holiday -- I read a story six years ago, five years ago, Rory is reading Ryan Holiday and the books about the stoics, embracing difficulty, impediments in your way, embracing failure learning from it, and I think Rory has done more than just read it. I think he's been living it, and I do think he's come out the other side as a much better performer.

It doesn't mean he's going to win. It just means he's much better equipped. He's all grown up now. Just a simple way to say it. I think Rory really has it together now in a way that I don't think we could have said before.

Q. I have a couple on Rory and one on Scottie. Obviously Paul maybe first as the point man with Rory, so to speak, but I'd like to hear from all you guys. I'm wondering what you think eats at Rory and weighs on him more, the failure to win the Masters or the fact that he hasn't won a major championship since 2014? What's more important to him?

PAUL MCGINLEY: I think another major. For me, another major. 11 years is a hell of a long time for a player of his quality. I've said it before, but many players back in 2014 are still right at the very top of the World Rankings or even anywhere in the top 10 of the world rankings. People have come and go; the Jordan Spieths have come and go; the Brooks Koepkas have come and go; the Bryson DeChambeaus have come and go; but the staying power that he's got, the sustainability over that period of time has been absolutely phenomenal, and obviously the big miss is not having a major championship.

I personally believe I think it could be a steppingstone here, and winning another major first may well be the path that he needs in order to win here at Augusta.

I think going into the first major of the year and all the attention that comes with being at Augusta National, on top of trying to win your first major in 11 years, on top of trying to complete the Grand Slam is a lot. So maybe there's a steppingstone needed first, and that will be to knock off one of the three majors before he comes in here with that question taken care of.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, I'd agree with Paul on that. I think as time has gone on, I think the pressure just has built and built and built. I think since Rich has already referenced the movie "Devil Wears Prada," I'll reference another one, "My Cousin Vinny." There's that scene where Joe Pesci's character Vinny Gambini is sitting on the patio talking to Marisa Tomei's character where he's talking about the pressure that she's heaping on him. Your biological clock, our marriage, their lives, my law career. Is there any more pressure that you can heap on the outcome of this case.

I almost feel like that's the same with Rory. It's like major after major after major, year after year has gone by and it's been a decade, and that's all anybody asks about. They whisper it. They say it out loud.

He's just too good a player to have had -- I think it's one of the biggest head scratchers in the game. He hasn't, to Paul's point, lost one bit of his fast ball, not one bit. He's carried on winning prolifically in big events and THE PLAYERS Championship twice and Vardon Trophies and FedExCup and DP World Tours.

The pressure of winning another major championship, I think, it's the most pressure that anybody in golf faces, without a doubt, other than captain's Ryder Cups every other year. It's the most pressure any player faces every time Rory tees it up in a major, and then it's tenfold any time he tees it up no Masters.

Q. Related to that, and Brandel, you and Paul, obviously, it was kind of your playing era to some degree, with Norman not getting it done all those years. Not to be negative, but are we looking at Rory as kind of a Norman figure at Augusta because of all the things you just said, because of the fact that he's been on form and he's been right there?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, I think that's an interesting question to kick around. There are things about Rory's game that to me so far eclipse Greg Norman's game. I'm not at all denigrating Greg Norman's game. He was a phenomenal player.

But throughout his career he had obvious in-the-moment miscues, and they were even more substantial than Rory's. You go back and look at these losses, these famous losses, a big part of the recipe was him shooting 40 on the back nine or him shooting 78 in the final round, really hitting it off the planet.

But yeah, similarly, the pressure would have built and built and built with Greg Norman because he was such a great player. There was so much anticipation for him to win the Masters.

The same is true of Weiskopf. The same is true of Ernie Els. And if you don't get it done quickly, the pressure just continues to build.

I think that's part of why everybody wants to see Rory do it, because everybody in the world of golf respects, has such huge admiration for Rory and the way he's handled the disappointments and the way he handles the highs and the lows. It's what makes the Masters -- this Masters will be absolutely all anybody talks about for the most part for the first three days we're there, four days we're there.

PAUL MCGINLEY: I will come in on the back of that and say, yes, I think it's a distinct possibility. Nobody has a right to win the Masters. We've seen phenomenal players come and go and not win the Masters. I can think of Ernie Els as well as Greg Norman who had games and skill sets who you think would be suitable to win around there. But if he doesn't win a Masters, I think it's still a phenomenal career that he's had.

Yes, it would have been a shame that he didn't win the Grand Slam because that's the elite of the elite. Whatever about winning another two or three majors; I think he would genuinely swap being a Grand Slam winner for three more majors. Building up with another two or three would be great and wonderful, but to be in that elite six is something special, and to knock off and deal with the pressure of being that sixth person and the pressure to win at Augusta

is tough. It's a lot. It's a huge amount on anybody's shoulders.

It is a possibility. It's not a given. The game is not straightforward like that no matter how good you are, and the competition is so strong nowadays, nobody is going to hand it to him and make it easy for him.

We talk about the contenders being somewhat out of form, but we're only talking marginal numbers, and we all know they're inspirational players that can get to Augusta and step it up by 10 percent, and that's the difference for them to get over the line and win.

This is not going to be easy, and in the next five or ten years it's not going to get any easier. I think it's fair to recognize that this is absolutely a distinct possibility, but it's also -- this is what Bob Rotella will be saying to him, it's a phenomenal and exciting challenge, and boy, oh, boy, show me a golfer in the world that wouldn't want to be in Rory McIlroy's shoes having to deal with it. You just want the opportunity to deal with it and the challenge of having the possibility of that happening to you. It's great shoes to be in.

Q. If I could ask you a quick one on Scottie, how are you assessing his form? He's so used to winning and being 0-fer, which is just a short part of the season, I wonder if that's getting to him a little bit after the success he's had. I felt like I saw some agitation and frustration in him at THE PLAYERS that was very visible and adamant, or very visible, and I'm curious what you guys' take is on his form right now.

PAUL MCGINLEY: Looking at him last week, he improved his strokes gained approach, and greens in regulation he stayed last week, which is ominous. His real strength is coming back. He minimized mistakes as the week went on. He drove the ball decently, and his putting was particularly strong last week. So there's no doubt that Scottie Scheffler is going to win again soon.

I do think that last year was a phenomenal year, and there's a little bit of an extra expectation on his shoulders that he's having to deal with that he probably hasn't got on the right side of yet but probably will get on the right side of.

I think the injury has knocked him back a little bit and he hasn't had the ideal preparation, and then he came back in with a lot of guys already on the board winning tournaments and already had their seasons up and running while he was starting his, so he was starting a little bit behind. But for me, he's still the favorite next week. I think he's got a game that's really suited to win around there.

He's a very, very measured player, and measured players win around Augusta. Really good iron play, as Brandel said, with a strong short game, and he's got both of those trending in the right direction, and the big key is the ability to be patient and bounce back from mistakes.

Again, we're seeing indications that he's minimizing his mistakes. He's still the guy to beat, if you ask me.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, I'd agree with Paul. Like last year, he finished, I think, one back at the Houston Open. He almost got it done at the Houston Open this year. Look, you can't find a golf course that more favors bombers than the Houston Open. Last year it was Stephan Jaeger; this year it was Min Woo Lee. Min Woo Lee has probably got the fastest ball speed on TOUR.

In some ways it's meant to replicate Augusta National, chipping areas or whatever, but there's no rough there, and the trees are just not a factor. It's who can lift the most weight. That's what that golf course is about, throw in making some putts here or there.

He's at a disadvantage playing that week, and they can barely beat him there. Augusta National is in no way the same sort of challenge. You've got trees, you've got hanging lies, and you've got to be able to work it both ways.

If you can just go back to last year's Masters and just watch the 9th hole, the last round, Scottie Scheffler playing with Collin Morikawa, you just watch the 9th hole, they're like, nobody can beat this guy. Yeah, he plays a fade, but he gets up there and needs to draw it around the corner, he draws around the corner. Collin Morikawa can't as easily draw it so he fades it, he catches the slope, goes down there behind the trees, hits it in the left bunker, leaves it in there, makes double. Scottie Scheffler fires it past the hole, draws it back to about an inch and makes it look simple because he can work it both directions. He can hit it high. He can hit any window.

So to the degree earlier when I was saying the golf course doesn't necessarily fit Rory, doesn't necessarily fit Bryson, doesn't even necessarily fit Collin Morikawa, it fits Scottie like a Savile Row suit. Couldn't be better suited for him, and that's why he's on the cusp of doing what only Jack Nicklaus did. He can, just like Jack, work it both directions, hit it high, land it soft.

It's just too big of an advantage. It's his happy place. He can go there and play his normal game and everybody can struggle to beat him. That's just how good he is and how great a fit Augusta National is for him.

RICH LERNER: Scottie picked up a lot of confidence in his putter with Houston, save for the third round. Loved what he did there, and I think he'll come in feeling really good with the club that ultimately is the difference maker. Tiger, I think, said it last year; if he putts poorly, he's still in a tournament. You can go find the quote. If he putts just half decent he contends with a great chance to win. If he putts well, he runs away.

We all think Scottie is a truly great player, but this is more than just a two- or three-year flush run, and we've seen that over the last 10 years. Jason Day, Jordan Spieth, Justin Thomas, Brooks Koepka, they all had flush sort of three- to four-year runs. If we think this is something more sustained, and I do, that these are Scottie's prime years, then the win is coming, and it'll be more than one win. It'll be multiple victories, then the odds would say that it very well could be, should be this next week at Augusta National.

I think Scottie is going -- if he stays healthy, will be a 40-plus win guy when all is said and done. I think what would really be good is if a rivalry developed between Rory and Scottie. It's asking a lot. They're hard to come by in the sport. But again, I think both guys are trending in that direction.

I mean, Scottie is just about as sure a thing as we have in the game right now. Would you take an over/under of three victories, 20, 25 from this point on for the rest of the season? I probably would go over. I know that, again, he probably has, what, another 12 starts max, and that's a big ask, but I think he's that good. I don't know if I'd comfortably go with the over there, but I wouldn't feel badly about it, either. He's just that good.

Q. To piggyback on that last answer, maybe for Rich, what does it take for Rory and Scottie to kind of reach that level of Tiger and Phil, the competitive rivalry, the separation from the field, and how far away are we from referring to them in the same sentence in that fashion?

RICH LERNER: Yeah, well, I think we're taking the first step. Part of it is both guys have to be playing if not their best golf then close to their best golf for it to be a reasonable conversation. Scottie wins seven times last year, and now Rory has answered. That's what you need to see.

I think Rory has laid down a marker in 2025 to say to Scottie, I'm here, I'm not going away, and in fact maybe I'm coming for your No. 1 spot. Long ways to go. Scottie has a sizable advantage in the Official World Golf Rankings.

But I think you can also look at the idea that Rory has been open about his admiration for Scottie. Some rivalries you'd want a little -- you might want some bad blood. That's not what this is going to be. This is just going to be about greatness versus greatness. They're two highly admired, well-liked young players. Rory is not as young. But Rory saying that he wanted to be a little bit more like Scottie in terms of the way he played, more boring golf, fewer unforced errors, fewer mistakes, and I think we've seen that emerge, that Rory is starting to put that into action.

It happens at the big events. THE PLAYERS was step one, and Rory, again, answered the bell. Scottie wasn't quite at his best. The stage, with all due respect to THE PLAYERS, which we think is one of the five biggest tournaments, the stage gets a little bit bigger here at Augusta, fewer players to beat all the way around. I think it's 21 first-timers, including five amateurs, so it's sort of winnowed down. You have a better chance for it to happen here at Augusta.

Legends and rivalries are made on that second nine on Sunday, and I think we all feel pretty good based on the way they're playing, feel good about projecting Scottie and Rory, maybe among others, to be there on Sunday afternoon.

I think there is a likelihood, and it has to play out not just this coming -- next week at Augusta National but at, say, two of the four majors in all, if not three of the four, where they're right there, and then it needs to spill into next year, and they need to trade wins. Rory wins one major this year or two, Scottie wins one, and then they come back next year and they each pick off a major. They have to kind of have that two- or three-year collision.

I think, again, just based on what we're seeing, they're poised to do it. It would be great for the game. I think we can all say that.

Q. I was hoping Brandel could address one other thing. The LIV-PGA TOUR drama is again part of the backdrop of this tournament. Just wondering what you make of the President's involvement? Does he really move the needle? Is that initial jolt of optimism around reconciliation due to his involvement, does that feel more subdued now heading into one of the biggest weeks of the year?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: It seems to be. I think there was a sense when President Trump got reelected that it would smooth the way to a relationship, but that hasn't materialized for reasons we can only guess at, to some extent. It looks like it's going to be some while before that happens, if it happens.

The intrigue is still -- we've sat here and talked about Scottie Scheffler, Rory McIlroy, Collin Morikawa, hardly talked about LIV players because for the most part we don't see them. It's tough to get your arms around what kind of courses they're playing. Are they really tough? They're set up easy. It's tough to really guess at how they're really playing. So it does add an element of mystery and excitement coming into the Masters.

For most everybody, it will be the first time we see Rahm or Joaquín Niemann or Hatton or Smith -- Hatton I guess played in Europe. It will be the first time most people in this country have seen these players play all year long.

So yeah, there is an element of anticipation. What are they going to bring? They've done it the last few years. What Bryson did last year, what Mickelson and Brooks Koepka did the year before, they've done it. They've surprised. So that's an interesting element.

Just real quick, though, on your comment about the rivalry of Tiger and Phil, it'll never happen between Scheffler and Rory -- with Tiger and Phil there was a palpable tartness between the two of them. I don't think that's any mystery.

Scottie and Rory would be a friendly rivalry, but to Rich's point, yeah, they have to be give and take. They have to each be successful in stealing one from the other two or three times for it to develop.

I hope it happens. The sport is better with great rivalries.

Q. Brandel, you touched on this a little bit about the course and distance. We haven't had a real surprise winner since Danny Willett, and a few years before that you had Zach and Trevor back-to-back, but is the nature of the course and what they've done to it and the nature of the game right now preclude guys like that from winning this tournament?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, look, I would say -- you could say Danny Willett was a surprise, but he was playing his rear off over in Europe and I think he was the 12th ranked player in the world.

It's the easiest tournament to predict from our perspective. It's the smallest field of the major championships. The golf course continues to reward those who have played well in the past here. There's a real institutional knowledge aspect to it, advantage to it.

And when you look at a Zach Johnson, yeah, you got some bizarre weather there. Bizarre weather, it doesn't look that's the forecast the last time I looked, but when there's



bizarre weather, yeah, you can get some bizarre winners, but for the most part, this is the top 15 players in the world because they have so many advantages on that golf course, of knowledge and of ability to simply work the ball.

You can say there's a fine line between the best and the rest, but it's not so fine a line at Augusta National.

It's where the very best players get to really just go show off. So yeah, it's tremendously hard for the 20th ranked player in the world to go in there and win or the 25th ranked player to go in there and win. You don't get too many underdog stories at Augusta National.

Q. If there is a couple of guys playing well, J.J. Spaun, Tom Hoge, is there anybody out there that you think could be the underdog or make some noise on the weekend?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, look, if you want to say underdog, again, I don't know you would say Shane Lowry is an underdog, but a question is not going to come up about him very often, but I would put him very near the top of the list. Fleetwood, Sepp Straka. These are players that could easily come in there and -- Russell Henley could easily come in there and really surprise people. Robert McIntyre is another one.

But again, they're going to have to go up against and beat Scottie Scheffler, Rory McIlroy, Collin Morikawa, and that's just a very difficult aspect. Justin Thomas has played some tremendous golf this year. I would put Justin Thomas amongst the favorites. I know he hasn't won in ages, but he's trending very nicely. All aspects of the game that you need there, he has. Strokes gained approach, strokes gained around the green. Those are the two most important things. I would put him amongst the top three favorites in that regard.

Q. Brandel, Paul, my question for you is when you guys were playing at Augusta, what was the one shot that you struggled with the most, and how did you try and fight through that when you were playing?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: For me, it was the shot into 11. Well, and 12. But 11, the famous quote from Hogan, if you ever see me on that green, you'll know I pulled it. Just to underscore that, we just go back last year to -- almost the same eerie way that everybody hit it in the water going up against Tiger in 2019, everybody hit it in the water at 11 last year. It was Ludvig Åberg who hadn't put a foot wrong until that point, Collin Morikawa, who again, if you're not able to work it both directions, that shot is even more difficult.

It certainly was for me, that shot into 11. You would line up out there, you've got a hook lie, you'd look at the right edge of that bunker, which is 10 feet inside the right edge of the green, and you're trying to just hit a hard cut against a hook lie to get it to come out straight, and you're guessing about the wind.

That 15, 20 minutes from your second shot on 11 to your tee shot on 12 is absolutely harrowing.

PAUL MCGINLEY: Yeah, for me, again, another shot that I found very difficult was the tee shot on 7. It's a dead straight hole, and you're forced to hit driver. Certainly I was forced to hit driver. A dead straight hole is never an easy hole to hit, and it's got quite a strong camber from left to right, which makes the fairway about a third narrower. It's a narrow fairway anyway, and then you put the camber on it, which makes it another kind of a third smaller.

I always found that one, and you can't play that hole from the trees because you can't get the elevation on it to get it over the front bunker if you do hit it in the trees. So that was one that stood out for me.

As much as I kind of draw the ball naturally, I still when I'm forced to hit quite a big sling on it, I always found it difficult. 13 you have to really sling it, 9 you have to really sling it, 14 you have to sling it. It's never easy standing on a tee, particularly going uphill, when you have to try to hit it right to left.

Not as difficult, though, as the tee shot on 7. That was the one that stood out for me.

Q. Would you take Rory or Scottie or the field?

PAUL MCGINLEY: I would go with Rory and Scottie. I think if Rory beats Scottie, I think he's got a great chance of putting on that green jacket.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: This is what Paul does to me live. He was asking do you want Rory or Scottie or the field. But he took Rory and Scottie. I would agree with Paul there. I would pick Rory and Scottie against the field, yes.

THE MODERATOR: We had so many folks joining us and lots of great conversation and a very busy call. We couldn't get to all of your questions. Thanks, everybody, for joining. As a reminder, we're going to have a transcript of this call available later this afternoon on NBC Sports.com/pressbox.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports