



# Fred S. Ridley

Chairman, Augusta National Golf Club and the Masters Tournament

Press Conference

Wednesday, April 8, 2026

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: Good morning, everyone. On behalf of our membership and the staff of the Augusta National Golf Club, I'm delighted to welcome all of you to the 2026 Masters Tournament. Thank you for being here.

Joining me this morning are two fellow members and good friends with important responsibilities in support of the tournament. I'm honored to introduce to you Geoff Yang, our new Chairman of the Competition Committees.

Geoff has been a member of the Masters Tournament Rules Committee since 2007 and the Competition Committee since 2018. He is exceptionally qualified to serve in this leadership role. Welcome, Geoff.

And to my left is a familiar face here in the press building, Tom Nelson, Chairman of our Media Committee. I thank Geoff and Tom for their dedication and service throughout the year, especially during Masters work.

Before I begin, I want to offer my sincere appreciation to Jim Hyler, who recently retired as Chair of our Competition Committees. We always will be grateful to Jim's commitment to the integrity and excellence of the Masters Tournament competition.

On a sad note, I also want to acknowledge the passing last November of 1979 Masters champion Fuzzy Zoeller. Fuzzy won the Masters in his tournament debut, a feat that has not been achieved since. Fuzzy's love of the game and vibrant personality endeared him to golf fans everywhere. We will miss him.

As we enter Masters week, I want to acknowledge the excellent work of Brent Seyer and his agronomy team in preparing the golf course for the tournament. Although we had ice and snow events this fall, the course condition is impeccable and ready for the start of the tournament tomorrow.

The 90th edition of the Masters represents a milestone that provides an opportunity to reflect upon the tradition and the historic moments of the tournament, as well as the progress we continue to make in service to the game of golf.

One of those historic moments occurred 50 years ago when Raymond Floyd tied the then tournament scoring record of 271 held by Jack Nicklaus. Raymond hit many memorable shots that week to win by eight strokes. Several of those shots were hit with his famous 5-wood that is now on display in the Grill Room with clubs of other Masters champions.

Two impactful traditions, the Augusta National Women's Amateur and the Drive, Chip and Putt national finals, continues to benefit the growth and popularity of the game. Congratulations to Maria Jose Marin, who was brilliant all last week to win the 7th edition of the Augusta National Women's Amateur in record fashion.

Maria emerged as our champion in a field of 72 of the world's top women amateurs, representing 23 countries across 6 continents and 32 colleges. Maria's accomplishment is one we hope will inspire women golfers everywhere in the years ahead.

Congratulations also to our eight Drive, Chip and Putt national champions who won their divisions on Sunday. I hope all 80 national finalists who were here over the weekend will treasure their memories at home and share them with their family, classmates, and friends.

Sunday evening we celebrated another initiative to serve the game of golf in our community. This endeavor focused on our home in Augusta with the celebration of the reopening of The Patch and a nine-hole short course we have named The Loop at the Patch.

This project has been developed in partnership with the City of Augusta, the First Tee of Augusta, and Augusta Technical College. The Patch and The Loop are each near the end of a one-month soft opening and will formally reopen to the public on April 15. It will be a community destination where golf is accessible, affordable, and fun for everyone.

Augusta golf legend Jim Dent was with us when we announced this project three years ago. Jim meant so much to all of us here and to the city of Augusta. Sadly, we lost Jim shortly after construction commenced last year. I know he would be pleased to see the positive impact for many of The Patch's regular golfers and community leaders. Jim will be missed, but his legacy as a central figure in Augusta's golf history will endure in perpetuity.

Later this year we will break ground on another exciting community project, the TGR Learning Lab of Augusta. This concept was brought to life by Tiger Woods and his TGR Foundation more than 20 years ago. The Augusta Learning Lab will be the fourth location in the United States and will provide underserved youth with access to STEAM education and workforce development opportunities. Mobile programming will begin next year with the opening of the lab targeted for 2028.

I would like to thank the Richmond County School District and the TGR Foundation for sharing our belief in the potential for golf to make a difference well beyond the course. I would like to add that we fully support Tiger's recent decision to focus on his health and well-being. Our commitment to the TGR Foundation and to Tiger personally has not wavered. We wish him the very best.

One of the story lines of this 90th playing of the Masters is the return of our champion. Rory McIlroy won his first green jacket last year and completed the career grand slam. Rory has been a wonderful champion, not only for his historic win, but the way he has represented the Masters and the game of golf.

Over the past year, Rory has taken his green jacket and the tradition of the Masters around the world to Ireland, Australia, Dubai, his home country of Northern Ireland, and for the first time to India.

Rory has a wonderful host at last night's Masters Club Dinner. That evening always is a special occasion, but especially when we celebrate a first-time champion. I should say that, like his golf game, Rory's menu and wine selection were world-class.

We were pleased this week to have an accomplished field of 85 professionals and 6 amateurs representing 23 countries. Among our amateurs competing this week are two exceptional international champions.

Fifa Laopakdee won the 16th Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship held last October at Emirates Golf Club in Dubai. Joining Fifa will be Mateo Pulcini of Argentina, winner of the 11th Latin America Amateur Championship held in January at Lima Golf Club in Peru. Because of their commitment, promising amateurs like Fifa and Mateo now can compete at the highest levels, both at home and on a global stage.

Creating global pathways will continue to be our priority at the professional level also. In that spirit, last August we announced jointly with the R&A that the champions of six highly respected national Opens across four continents would win an invitation to play in the Masters Tournament and an exemption into The Open Championship.

We are proud to welcome to the 2026 Masters Tournament the current winners of the Scottish Open, Spanish Open, Japan Open, Hong Kong Open, Australian Open, and South African Open. Golf has long enjoyed a loyal and enthusiastic following, and yet there are significant opportunities to broaden participation and audiences alike,

especially on the international stage.

We will continue to explore all avenues to expand the game and its popularity around the world.

Equally important to earning an invitation to play in the Masters is our commitment to the experience of every competitor during the tournament. Our new Player Services building, now fully open, underscores that commitment. The building itself features state-of-the-art fitness, physio, and locker room facilities, along with an upper-level dining room where players and their families can gather.

Players arrive here each April with the goal of leaving on Masters Sunday wearing a green jacket. Our goal is to provide all players with the level of attention, care, and hospitality that is best in class in golf and all of sports.

On the media front, we are pleased to welcome a new broadcast partner to the Masters family. Amazon's Prime Video will be joining us for the first time with live coverage on Thursday and Friday from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. This two-hour window will lead directly into ESPN's afternoon coverage, extending the live broadcast of the Masters to even more fans.

Prime Video's commitment to golf was evident with Rory McIlroy's documentary that debuted last week. This film exemplifies Amazon's dedication to bringing premium golf content to audiences worldwide, and we appreciate Rory's commitment to this project. We look forward to a long relationship with Prime Video, along with continued partnership with CBS and ESPN.

I would like to recognize new leadership at the highest levels across golf's several organizations. All have brought fresh perspectives and a shared commitment to growing golf and serving all its stakeholders. We look forward to collaborating with them to make golf stronger together.

Finally, I've commented for the past several years on the subject of distance. We have been consistent in our support of the governing bodies in their effort to regulate the distance elite players are hitting the golf ball. Recognizing that the implementation of the Overall Distance Standard test for golf balls may be delayed to 2030, I want to reemphasize that support and affirm our position as the USGA and R&A represent their collective obligation as custodians of the game.

I also want to be clear that our position is grounded on much more than protecting the Augusta National golf course. We will continue to make modifications as are necessary to react to driving distances that in some cases exceed 350 yards.

Unfortunately, many courses, including some iconic venues, do not have that option. Until recent years golf has been a game of imagination, creativity, and variety. The game has become much more one-dimensional. As players drive the ball prodigious distances and routinely hit short irons into par-4s and even some par-5s, this issue goes beyond competitive impacts. Increased course lengths results in more time, more cost, and more environmental concerns.

The data that has been shared with all stakeholders makes one thing clear: The impact to the recreational game will be immaterial. All of us in this room and millions of weekend golfers around the world will be hard-pressed to notice the effects of this change, and I do not believe our enjoyment of the game will be affected.

As for professional golf, we hold firm in our belief that the greats of the game are defined not merely by how far they hit the ball, but their extraordinary skill in all aspects of the game. Their ability to shape shots, to take on risk, and to execute under pressure is at the heart of championship golf and is best displayed through a full spectrum of shot-making opportunities.

Regulation of the golf ball is not an attempt to turn back time or stifle progress. It is an effort to preserve the essence of what makes golf the great game that it is.

With that, Tom, I'm ready to take some questions.

TOM NELSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Q. An Augusta-centric question. Could you pull back the covers a little bit. How does something like The Patch and the success of it, how does The Patch get on your radar? How do you find out about that? And when you guys decide to get behind something, what are some of the determining factors that go into that?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: I think you have to start with the way we start with a lot of issues or opportunities, and that is with our core values and our mission statement. We state clearly in our mission statement that one of our -- we feel that one of our obligation contributing to our community. So that opens up a number of opportunities.

The Patch, the Augusta Municipal Golf Course has been a fixture in this community for many years, has so much history. We felt that there was an opportunity to take a wonderful piece of property and to transform it into something that was just really life-changing for many people in this community.

We can't think of a better way to promote the game of golf than doing it right here in our own town. In partnership with, as I said, with the City, with the First Tee, with Augusta Technical College, we formed a very strong partnership to take this idea forward and hopefully to make a difference in the community for years to come.

**Q. Mr. Chairman, there seems to be a spirit here this week at this tournament, unlike any other on the calendar, players, patrons have great excitement. If you had to describe the culture that you and this club has developed for the Masters, what would you say?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: I think it goes back to the beginning of the tournament and really to the founding of the club. The real motivation behind starting the Masters Tournament -- of course it was not called that at the beginning -- but the impetus was really to serve the game of golf. So we look at ourselves as servants of the game of golf.

And in doing that, we look to every stakeholder and constituency that is here this week. That includes all of you. That includes the players. That includes the patrons. That includes our vendors, our friends in the media, in the licensed media.

So we feel -- and the Player Services building, which I talked about a minute ago, is a prime example of that. We want this experience to be the best that it can be for everyone who sets foot on the grounds. By doing that, hopefully we promote that feeling that you've described. That's what we're going to continue to do, and we'll look to find more ways to do that.

**Q. Mr. Chairman, you just amplified the club's position on the golf ball, which gets me to hole 13. You have another year of data since the changes and the added length with the new tee. What has the variance of whether it be scoring average, birdies, eagles, overall difficulty rank in relation to other holes? And what other advanced metrics are you all looking at year to year that tell you whatever story it is that it's telling?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: I think, although I don't have the exact statistics in front of me, but the scoring average, the number of birdies and eagles, has not materially changed. What has changed is the way the hole is played today and, I think, the excitement of the hole.

For example, before we added the yardage to 13, only about 60 percent of the field hit drivers. Now it's 90 percent. We had an interesting statistic, I do remember, from the first year that we had the added length, and that is we actually had more players going for the green than in the previous year.

And when you looked at the scatter chart of where the shots were, a number of players that were hit down the center of the fairway or perhaps a little right center in the prior year had gone up into the trees, and there was no opportunity to go for the green.

The first year we added the distance, those same drives stayed back in the fairway and allowed the player the decision -- Bobby Jones called it a momentous decision -- as to whether or not they wanted to go for the green. So we had players hitting 240-, 250-yard shots into the green, which I think is pretty exciting.

So I think the hole is now playing more like it was designed to play. Sure, there are going to be some middle to even -- probably not short irons, but there will be some middle irons played to that hole. But that's not an easy shot in and of itself. But there are going to be more longer irons and even some fairway metals that are played. I think that's the way we want the hole to play.

As far as other opportunities, and we'll continue really to look at that same theme, and that is how did Alister MacKenzie design the hole, and how did he intend it for play? That may be adding some distance where it's available. That may be making a change in bunkering. It could be making a change in the green.

As all of you have observed over the years, we're not reticent to make changes to this golf course. But in doing so, we always try to honor the design philosophy of MacKenzie and Jones when the course was built.

**Q. Now that you've got the Player Services building up and running, can you foresee a time when you provide housing for the players? And as much as you want to create the best experience for the players, is there a point where you cross the line and pamper them too much?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: You said that, I didn't, Doug.

(Laughter.)

I would say, as it relates to housing, I think we would look at housing for our tournament workforce or parts of our tournament workforce before we'd look at housing for players.

As far as pampering them, we want this to be a pleasant experience. I was in the Player Services building yesterday. I've been through it many times, as you might imagine, in the summer and leading up to the tournament, but it was the first time I was there with people in the building, and just the energy, the mood just couldn't have been better.

Sure, we'll look for other opportunities. We ask players what we can do to make their experience better. That's really how this building came to be. It was not -- it went up very quickly. We started it June 1 last year, but the planning for it took many years. That was because we really asked players, their teams, what they wanted, what could make their experience to the Masters better. So we'll continue to do that.

**Q. Mr. Chairman, in his press conference at THE PLAYERS Championship, PGA TOUR Enterprises CEO Brian Rolapp was asked about the TOUR's lack of ownership stake in the men's majors and in the Ryder Cup. In his response he pointed out that the financing for the men's majors and the Ryder Cup largely comes from professional golf, which is to say PGA TOUR players. Do you have a comment on that exchange?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: What I would say, Jim, is I had a chance -- Brian was nice enough to come to Augusta in early February, and we spent a good half a day together talking about a lot of topics, showing him what we had done to the property over the summer.

We talked a lot about collaboration, and I thought it was a very positive conversation. I think, as it relates to your question, I think it's important to note that there are a number of golf organizations, including ours, that makes the journey to the PGA TOUR possible. There are a number of grassroots organizations -- I won't name them all. I think you know what they are.

I think about the field this year, and I don't know the exact numbers, but I suspect that quite a few are alumni of the American Junior Golf Association.

Certainly our collegiate system is the most direct pathway to the PGA TOUR and provides the PGA TOUR with the best-trained and best-prepared players.

So I think I understand Brian's comment, I suppose, or his perspective, but I think we really need to look at the entire ecosystem to get a full perspective of that issue. I also think it points out that, when we talk about collaboration, that what we should be talking about and what I'm talking about is collaboration to elevate the game of golf. I think that's

where we're all going to be successful.

**Q. Mr. Chairman, we've seen an uptick in recent years in amateurs forfeiting their Masters invitation. I'm wondering if you have any views on that personally, as someone who played the Masters 50 years ago and remained an amateur, but also as a chairman who is attempting to uphold the vision of the founders who believe strongly in having amateurs in the tournament.**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: As you stated, amateur golf has been very important to the Masters since its beginning. I think when we have -- when I played in the tournament, there were as many as 12 or 14 amateurs because there were different classifications of invitations. I think probably in that day it was less likely that any one of us would turn professional, at least until the tournament was over.

We've lost a few players because of that, but really not that many. I think it just points out that we look at our invitation criteria every year. As you know, in recent years we added the NCAA champion. I'm not saying we're going to add any other categories, but we might because we're going to look at that.

I think also you may recall that we have -- in one occasion, I believe, given a special invitation to an amateur, and that's not something we usually do. But it just points out the flexibility we have, and we'll continue to have that flexibility.

**Q. Fred, you referenced a new streaming partner and different ways to grow the game and elevate the game. The NFL in its Skydance partnership has backed a number of scripted dramas. They're going to have a Hallmark movie, a Christmas Day movie, a scripted series. I wonder if you've considered that model for the Masters to sort of reach and cultivate new audiences. Not just lending your marks and logos, but actual full-scripted dramas, or comedies, or whatever. Are there upsides and downsides that you look at, and have you even discussed it?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: It's not something that I think we've considered. There's no shortage of examples of things that we're looking at. I think that the last few years have pointed out that we'll try different things.

I think that your question really points out sort of the balance -- and I've referred to the tension in the past -- between respecting tradition and innovating, or in our nomenclature, continuous improvement. So I do think we need to be looking at nontraditional ways of promoting the tournament, but more so promoting golf.

A few years ago we had Dude Perfect playing frisbee at Amen Corner. In retrospect, I like those guys, but that may not have been the best idea. But it does point out that we try things every once in a while that are a little bit nontraditional.

So we'll continue to look at things. Not specifically necessarily what you've referred to, but I think thematically, we're certainly willing to look outside the box every once in a while.

**Q. Given Augusta's position on the board of the OWGR and the decision earlier this year to grant LIV world ranking points, I'm just curious your own view on that and if you had any influence, if you're sort of pushing for that and hoping to see that happen? And obviously we haven't seen it so far this year, but there's the potential down the road that could help LIV players get into the Masters.**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: I wouldn't say we had any particular influence on it other than the fact that Augusta National does have a seat on the board. I think what our interest is in that role is making sure that the integrity of the OWGR remains intact.

An underlying certain purpose is to identify the best players in the world through the ranking system, which is very transparent, is very data driven.

As it relates to LIV, the issues involved in LIV getting or not getting ranking points has been public in Trevor Immelman's letter to LIV a while back. And several of the issues that were raised have been addressed, which resulted in LIV receiving limited points. They know what those issues are. Scott O'Neil has a copy of that letter, as I'm sure most of you do as well, and hopefully there will be efforts made to address those issues and allow them to receive more ranking points.

The purpose of the system is to make sure the best players in the world have an opportunity to play in the best tournaments.

**Q. You talked about obviously your reemphasis on what the USGA and the R&A are doing with their look at the golf ball testing. What role do you see the Masters playing and perhaps trying to get other organizations to agree on this front?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: There has been -- there's always been quite a lot of agreement. My feeling on this subject is failure's not an option. I think we need to continue to work together to come to some agreement.

Tough issues like this require compromise, and I think there has been some compromise to date. There's certainly commercial interests that are at play here, and we all know what those are, but at the same time, I think, if we can look at this from the standpoint -- and it's not just trying to -- it's not the good old days. That's not what we're trying to do.

What we're trying to do is to protect the integrity of what makes golf so great. I think I tried to articulate it in my comments, and that's that it's more than about just hitting prodigious drives.

I talked to Jackson Herrington, one of our young amateurs, and he told me that yesterday he hit it over the bunker on 1 and 5, which is about a 325-yard carry, and one was into the wind. I've said that we can make changes, but there's not much we can do to make changes, number one, unless we tear down the Eisenhower Cabin, and we're not going to do that.

We'll make changes when we can, but I think it's time to really address this issue. It's been talked about for a long time.

**Q. I apologize in advance if this question appears somewhat trivial, but from speaking to a number of patrons this week, I can assure you it is a talking point. There's a rumor circulating this could be the final year of the now iconic Masters gnome. Are you able to quash that rumor and allay fears?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: Number one, the question is not trivial. Number two, I've been asking that question for several years, and they won't tell me the answer. So I can't help you.

**Q. The international Opens that you invited people to brought six new players this year. The one I'm curious about is the Scottish Open is currently a PGA TOUR co-sanctioned event, and depending on how future scheduling with the PGA TOUR goes, do you have any plans to possibly add a different one or any other international Opens to the portfolio of qualifiers?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: First, we looked at that decision we made this year independent of other schedules, but we also realize that those schedules and those criteria can change over time. So we really wanted to take our own step by identifying those six national Opens.

The purpose, as I mentioned, is really to honor the history and the significance of those championships. I do think there might be other national Opens that should be considered. Because we say over and over again that we review our criteria every year, we'll be looking at that next year and the coming years, and possibly we would do that.

**Q. A question for the Competitions chairman. Geoff, we have the portraits of the founders staring at us on the wall here. What do you think would surprise Jones the most if he came back and saw the -- not the players, but the course? Is it the speed of the greens? The length of the fairways? What do you think is the biggest surprise in the direction of things?**

GEOFF YANG: I think the purpose of the renovations and the changes in the course are to maintain the original design intent. Certainly the game has changed, and I think we tried to adapt to those changes in the game to maintain the strategic challenges and the skills involved.

Certainly I think he'd be amazed -- that they would be amazed by a lot of things, including how far people are hitting the ball and the level of athlete involved in the game, and I think the conditions have adapted to try to maintain those skills.

I don't think it would be any one thing. I think everything is a little bit of a reaction to where the game has gone.

**Q. Geoff Shackelford alluded to briefly about your participation in 1976 as an amateur. I wonder if you could speak for just a minute about the arc of your career here from that time to where you are now.**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: Well, I can certainly say that I did not think 50 years ago this week I'd be sitting in this chair, that's for sure. I have a lot of great memories of that week.

Certainly playing with Jack was one of the highlights. Meeting Clifford Roberts for the first time, which turned out to be his last year as chairman. I think we probably maybe have a dozen members who ever met Mr. Roberts. So I feel very honored to be one of those.

Certainly staying in the Crow's Nest that week. I remember with Curtis Strange and Jay Haas were a couple of the guys that were there. Then going to the Amateur Dinner and hearing Harvie Ward give the pep talk to us. Harvey and I had a little something in common in that we had won the U.S. Amateur 20 years apart at the same golf course, at the Country Club of Virginia.

I guess I would say that playing with Jack that day, looking back, was the start of a 50-year friendship. As it related to the club itself and to this place, it was the start of a 50-year love affair I've had with this place, and it's been a big part of my life. Probably other than my family, the biggest part of my life.

So I feel very honored to be here, to be a member, to be in this role. That's about what I remember.

**Q. When Brian Rolapp was here, you said you took him around and showed him and things you did to the course and so forth and so on. At the same time, I'm assuming that he probably briefed you on what they're trying to do in the future in regards to scheduling and tournaments and things of that nature. In those discussions did you foresee the possibility of changing your criteria on how players will be able to get in here?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: Well, Brian and I had a far-reaching conversation -- not conversation, conversations. We've spoken several times since then. He's been very transparent and open to me in his comments.

There was nothing that we talked about that would trigger any thoughts, immediate thoughts on changing criteria. We'll just have to wait and see what his plans, how they unfold, and what that means for the schedule and for who's playing in what tournament and how those tournaments sort of stack up in importance. Then we'll react accordingly.

**Q. I was curious if hearing Rory talk about Carla Bernat Escuder's winning putt at last year's Augusta National Women's Amateur feels like a full circle moment and what you envisioned what the Augusta National Women's Amateur could become in connecting the men's and women's game?**

CHAIRMAN FRED S. RIDLEY: That certainly was nice to hear Rory said that. It's certainly gratifying, both with regard to the Augusta National Women's Amateur and the following day with the kids, how many of our current players really are very engaged with what's going on there.

I think that most of the players on the PGA TOUR are really interested in what's going on in women's golf. I think they have friends that are playing on the LPGA. I know that certainly is the same thing in collegiate golf, where the men's and women's teams really show a lot of interest in each other and how they're doing.

I don't think I really imagined exactly how the Augusta National Women's Amateur was going to progress and grow. I'm not going to say it was beyond my wildest dreams, but it might have been beyond my expectations for this short of a period of time.

I couldn't be happier for the way it's been received by the players -- I think we had 48 of the top 50 women amateurs in the world -- by the way that all of you have covered the championship. I think it's really elevated the women's game.

The intention in starting this tournament was to allow these wonderful players, these wonderful women amateurs to

have an opportunity to compete on the biggest stage in the world with the spotlight shining on them. I felt by doing that, we were doing our part to elevate the women's game and to really allow it to grow and prosper as we've seen many other women's sports in the last few years.

Thank you for the question, and I hope we're doing a good job.

TOM NELSON: That concludes our press conference. Please enjoy the 90th Masters Tournament.