

THE PLAYERS Championship

Tuesday, March 9, 2021

Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, USA

TPC Sawgrass

Rory McIlroy

Press Conference

JACK RYAN: We'd like to welcome defending champion Rory McIlroy to THE PLAYERS Championship. Rory returns as the defending champion after the 2020 event was canceled. Four top 10s this season, including both major championships and each of his last two starts. If we could just get an opening comment.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I guess it's nice, like I get another bite at the cherry. Last year was obviously very surreal, difficult. Yeah, I think at least we know this year the tournament is not going to be canceled, unless something pretty crazy happens again.

Yeah, it's good to be back. I feel like THE PLAYERS Championship being back to its original date of March really has a nice feel to it. I think the golf course plays really well. The conditions out here this week are absolutely perfect. Everyone is happy to be back and happy that we're going to get a four-round tournament in this year.

Q. Obviously as you mentioned, you're still the defending champion and you're no longer nine shots behind Hideki Matsuyama. How does that make you feel going into the week?

RORY McILROY: I think I feel a bit better about that than Hideki does. If I felt for anyone last year because of all this, it was Hideki. That was obviously a hell of an opening round. I birdied my last three holes to shoot even par, so it could have been a lot worse, as well.

Yeah, it sort of feels weird that it's two years removed from winning but still the defending champion. But it's nice, as I said, to be back, and hopefully I can get off to a better start than I did last year, shoot something in the 60s, not be too far away from the lead and try to build on that.

I guess it's just nice to be back. It's been a year since the world changed, and I think everyone here in terms of the players that are playing are just grateful that we're back doing what we want to do, which is playing golf and trying to win tournaments.



Q. You sounded a little dejected on Sunday night at Bay Hill. Was that just a spur of the moment, knee jerk thing or are you feeling you do need a spark to get you going this season?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I think it was just me walking off the course not having my best day and I guess sort of venting a little bit to whoever was there at the time. So that was really it.

Look, I did feel dejected. I felt disappointed. I think one of the biggest things is, it's funny, I'd almost feel better if my game was worse, but it's the inconsistency of I shot 66 on Thursday and thought, I've got it, I feel really good, and then I didn't quite have it. The ups and downs are just a little too much.

I think that's where I'm sort of struggling to come to terms with it and sort of trying to figure out what I need to do because the good stuff is there. It always will be. I'll always be able to figure it out and find a way.

But it's when it goes slightly off, how do you manage that and how do you -- I feel like over the last few years, I've been really good at when my game hasn't been fully there still be able to shoot 69, 70, still being able to get it under par, where I feel like the last few weeks when it hasn't felt quite right, I'm sort of treading water and I'm just trying to shoot even par, and that was sort of what it felt like last week.

Just trying to get the bad golf a little better because the good golf is always there and the good shots will always be in there. It's just when you're not feeling quite 100 percent, that's when you need to just be able to manage it a little better, and I just haven't managed it well over the last few weeks.

Q. You mentioned this does kind of feel like the one-year anniversary, at least in the golf world, of the pandemic hitting. With that in mind and also with the caveat that obviously there are people out there who are struggling way, way more than PGA TOUR players, how has this last year been extra challenging compared to years in the past as far as life on TOUR?



RORY McILROY: Yeah, look, there's been -- again, it's hard to sit here and complain because we have it way better than a lot of other people in the world. I think it's all relative. There's been challenges. There's been maybe having to get to tournaments a day earlier to get tested, obviously all the COVID protocols, maybe the challenge for some people not having fans out there and the atmosphere of tournaments being not as good as it usually is.

But in the grand scheme of things, they're not challenges. It hasn't -- it would be very -- I think it would be wrong of me to sit here and say that life has been hard for the past year because I recognize and I think everyone else out here on TOUR recognizes that we've been very lucky compared to the vast majority of people that have had to live through this.

Q. With your Players Advisory Chairman's cap on, what's your view now in relation to the Premier Golf League? Has that changed?

RORY McILROY: No, it hasn't changed at all. I haven't heard much about them over the past year. If they've been making the rounds, they certainly haven't been approaching us or my team. Again, I think with the new strategic partnership between the PGA TOUR and the European Tour, I think that is the beginning of something that could become quite significant. Yeah, it's not something that I've heard a lot of, and yeah, I just can't see where they can go from here.

Q. I guess that's where I was coming from, with this new strategic alliance, as you mentioned. Also, as a fellow European, just your thoughts on the possibility and rumors that there could be three European Tour events being staged in Florida, post the Masters? Could that just be a one-off thing?

RORY McILROY: No, I don't think that's going to happen.

Q. What makes you say that? Have you heard from the horse's mouth that it's not going to happen?

RORY McILROY: Pretty sure it's not going to happen, which is a good thing because I think it means things are starting to get a little better back in Europe.

Q. Do you ever sort of think back to this week last year, because it was quite surreal? We sort of arrived there, we knew about this virus, but didn't really think it was going to affect us, and then it all seemed to happen so quickly that the world changed in 24 hours. Do you ever think back to this week last year?

RORY McILROY: I do. I mean, it is, it's the anniversary of

where the world really changed, especially the sporting world, what happened in the NBA and then every other sport sort of followed what they did.

Yeah, I mean, it's funny, at the start of the week you had people sort of fist bumping or elbowing and I'm sort of thinking, what are these people doing, like this is stupid. And then five days later the world shuts down.

Yeah, it's amazing, and to think that we're a year into it and we're still having to do certain things. I mean, obviously back in the UK the vaccine rollout is going incredibly well, which is great to see, and that bodes well for hopefully sporting events and golf tournaments being staged there in the summer.

But yeah, it's surreal. I was saying to someone yesterday, it's felt like an incredibly slow 12 months, but at the same time it's gone really fast. I can't believe we're back here already. But happy that we are back and happy that we get to play.

Q. Do you feel in any way still like the defending champion, or is Hideki Matsuyama the defending champion after his 63?

RORY McILROY: I mean, there's been no one else's name added to the trophy after mine, so I guess I still am, even though it was a year hiatus or it's a two-year thing.

Yeah, it's hard when you're so far removed from that win. It was two years ago, and a lot has happened since. I'll still try to rekindle those feelings and memories from two years ago, and hopefully that gives me the spark that I need to get my game in shape.

Q. Just curious, when you come off a week or a day where you maybe weren't happy with how you played, take Sunday Bay Hill as one example of what you touched on earlier, how do you go about kind of analyzing that? Do you look at stats? Do you just practice more stuff that felt off? Do you just have a few glasses of wine and forget about it? What's your routine?

RORY McILROY: All of the above. Certainly had a couple glasses of wine and watched a pretty compelling interview on Sunday night.

Yeah, I think you have to go -- I sort of alluded to this a little bit earlier, that it felt so good on Thursday and then felt off a little bit on the weekend, so it's like what happened, what changed, what is the difference. I think that's where I've sort of struggled the last few weeks is that inconsistency of the good being very good, good enough to

lead the golf tournament, but when it just gets slightly off, not being able to manage it.

I think from thinking over the last couple days where my swing is, it's an unusual pattern for me. Usually what happens is the club gets out in front of me on the way back and then drops behind me on the way down, where at the minute it's the opposite, it sort of gets behind me early and then I sort of throw it back out in front of me on the way down, so it's a completely different pattern that I'm having to manage and one that I'm not used to managing, so it's just been a different -- I know for years and years my whole golf career I've got used to dropping it underneath the plane on the way down, and from there I can manage it. I can hold it off. I'm used to that feeling. But this feeling that I have at the minute, I'm not used to managing it, so that's where the two-way miss comes in, and that's where I just have to figure out what to do to get it back to a familiar pattern.

Q. What are you most down about in your game?

RORY McILROY: I think, as I said, the inconsistency in my ball-striking from day-to-day. On my approach play on Thursday, I gained nearly three shots on the field, and then Saturday I lost nearly three. It's just the inconsistency. It's not being able to manage the misses as well as I usually do, because it's not -- everyone out here can play great golf and shoot 65s and 64s. It's when you're feeling a little off still being able to get it in in a couple under and not losing too much ground to the field.

Q. Anything you're happy with in your game?

RORY McILROY: I felt like I putted -- I feel like I've putted well the last couple weeks. I've gained strokes on the field there, which has been a nice bit of progress, so I feel if anything I've hit the driver pretty well and I've putted well. It's just the stuff in the middle. It's the iron play. Obviously the two balls in the water on 6 on Sunday cost me, but I wouldn't necessarily call them bad drives. They weren't much off line, and for the most part I drove the ball pretty well apart from that.

Just the iron play. My par-3 play has been pretty poor, and that goes back to iron play and missing it in the wrong spots and stuff. That's the big area of focus is just trying to get the iron play a little better.

Q. Along kind of those same lines, what was the most dramatic change you've ever made to your swing or your game, and do you remember why you did that and when?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I think the golf swing is always a

constant -- it's very fluid. It's very -- I think you're always thinking about things. You're making certain tweaks or a feeling that works one week might not work the next week. It's a movement that consists of a lot of different parts. Sometimes they all jive and sometimes they don't.

The biggest change I've made? I don't know, I think one of the biggest things was I'd say probably just getting my body stronger so that I had a little more stability in my lower body so the club wouldn't get as far behind me on the way down. I used to make this move in my lower body where my hips and my pelvis would go towards the ball and the club would drop inside, and I think being able to strengthen my lower body to sort of hold myself in my posture a bit better enabled me to get the club more down in front of me, and that really helped. That helped me to sort of feel more comfortable hitting shots left to right, which meant being more comfortable to get to right hole locations, and I think that was a big turning point in my career. That was probably when I started taking my physical fitness a little more seriously at the back end of 2010 going into 2011. That was sort of the biggest thing that I have changed in my swing.

And then there's been other things because of the ankle injury in 2015 or the rib injury in 2017 that I've had to try and tweak here and there to manage those things, as well. But I think obviously getting in the gym in 2011 and getting a little more stable in my lower body was probably the biggest thing that I've changed.

Q. When you look at athletes in other sports, whether it's NBA, Major League Baseball, tennis, when they reach an elite level, as long as they stay relatively healthy, they seem to continue to sort of be their dominant selves. Golf is much different than way. You see guys get to the top of the world, and you know the feeling, and Jordan Spieth is feeling that feeling a little bit the last year and a half and Rickie Fowler is going through it. What is it about golf? Is it more of a mental game than anything else that causes sometimes elite players to suddenly go into slumps that you don't see happen with athletes in most of the other major sports?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so I think there's -- so yeah, you mentioned golf is more mental than some of those other sports. The only thing I can really -- the only sports that I can compare golf to is tennis, because they're both individual sports, even though golf you're playing against yourself and tennis you're obviously playing against an opponent on the other side of the net. In tennis you've got the dimensions of the court are always the same, the surface of the court might change if you go hard court or grass or clay or whatever, but I think it's -- yeah, it's just



more mental.

I think like tennis, for example, you can control what your opponent does. If you know that this guy has got a weak backhand you're just going to hit it to his backhand all day. You can't really do that in golf. If I'm playing against a guy, know that he struggles to turn the ball over from right to left, I can't just play right-to-left doglegs all day and tell him to do that.

It's a little different. You're basically in a battle against the course and against yourself every single day, and I think there's a lot more things in golf that are out of your control, golf course, conditions, people just playing better than you on given weeks. So I think that's why you see some players get to the top of this game and maybe not be able to sustain it or have little lulls and then come back up again.

You know, that's why it's such a compelling sport, because these things do happen, and it's ever evolving and ever changing.

Q. When you see what's happening with Jordan, although he's started to come out of it a little bit, and with Rickie, is this just another reminder to all of us who watch you guys from the outside just how hard golf is to sustain excellence?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, a hundred percent. When Jordan was having his run in '15 and even Rickie in '14 and '15, I'm sure no one thought that, five years later, that those guys would be outside the top 50 in the world. I think it does just illustrate how hard it is to sustain that level in golf.

Look, we've all been spoiled with Tiger. Tiger is the only one that's done it for a sustained period of time. Everyone else has had their times, Ernie Els, Vijay Singh, Phil Mickelson, even myself. We've all had those great times and then the other times we've struggled a little bit or haven't played to the standard that we've set before.

But Tiger is the only one that's done it year in, year out for a number of years. I think he might have set a benchmark that is obviously ridiculously high. We might see it again. Never say never. But it's going to take something very special to emulate what he did.

Q. In addition to Sunday saying you felt a little dejected, you implied that there might be some changes. A lot of times the knee-jerk reaction is to change a caddie or a coach. I'm just curious if either of those are on the table, and if not, what might be considered for you for changes?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I mean, I certainly didn't mean like a change of personnel per se. I think more a change in philosophy or maybe what I'm trying to work on, maybe going in a slightly different direction. Not so much in terms of -- yeah, swing-wise I think there's some things that I'm working on that haven't quite bedded in or I'm struggling to grasp what I'm trying to do, so that's sort of what I meant, talking about going in a different direction. Just sort of maybe trying something different or thinking about another way to do it, I guess. More so I was coming from that point of view.

Q. How would you compare your level of confidence right now versus how you felt when you're on a heater coming into this tournament last year?

RORY McILROY: Not as high, obviously. You know, as I said before, the good golf is in there, and I feel capable of going out and shooting good scores any week that I play on any golf course that I play, but it's the days where you don't feel so good that you need to manage it and get it around in a couple under par. That's the challenge for me right now.

I feel like I can go out there this week and string four good rounds together, but it's maybe just a bit more of a challenge than it maybe felt a couple years ago. But that's on me to try to get a little more comfortable and work pretty hard these next couple of days to be ready to go on Thursday and feel like I'm in a bit of a better place with it all.

Q. I was wondering when you look back at the last year if there have been any changes within the structure of golf that might be permanent? I'm thinking more about interaction with fans and media and what have you. How hard will that be to get back to what it was?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it's a weird one, right, because like, for example, like most of you guys in the media can still maybe not do your job 100 percent from home, but there's a majority of it that you can still do from maybe not being at a tournament site, maybe not seeing and interacting with the players and seeing the shots, but there's enough coverage on TV that you can certainly write about it.

It's funny because like a year into it, you think, okay, we hopefully will be done now, the vaccine is rolling out and there's light at the end of the tunnel, so even somewhere last week in Orlando, sort of following the news of say a Texas opening back up again and removing the mask mandate and all that stuff. There's a part of me that likes that, right. There's a part of me that likes people to have

freedom and to have their own choice and all of that, but then you walk into like a busy restaurant in Florida and you're sort of taken aback and you're like, whoa, maybe we're just not quite ready for this yet.

The idea is great and the idea you're comfortable with, but then when you actually start to live it, it's like, whoa, maybe this is a little too soon. Yeah, I know what you mean. You are certainly going to have that coming back, but hopefully by the end of the summer getting into the fall, things start to become a little more normal again.

I don't think there's going to be any permanent changes. I still think there's going to be fans on-site, there's going to be media members on-site. I certainly think that everyone is looking forward to the day when things can go back to where they were pre the 2020 PLAYERS Championship.

Q. Do you ever think that maybe your best of your career might be behind you?

RORY McILROY: No, I don't think you can ever think that. I've talked about this before; you have to be an eternal optimist in this game, and I truly believe that my best days are ahead of me, and you have to believe that. There's no point in me being out here if I didn't think that. That's just not part of my psyche or anyone's psyche out here.

I think that's the difference between people that make it to the elite level and the people that don't, because they don't think that way. I certainly believe that my best days are ahead of me, and I'm working hard to make sure that they are.

Q. It looks like the 12th hole has the back, back tee open. Might play a little different playing from the back. Your thoughts on that?

RORY McILROY: How far is the back tee? I haven't been out there yet, so I don't know.

Q. Let's just say if you're going to drive it, it's going to be Bryson or you at your absolute best territory. The layup is pretty much the option, where it narrows out. Does it create anything different?

RORY McILROY: I guess so. I think it's almost -- I think you've almost got a bigger area to hit into when you're going for the green than you do when you're laying up. I think that's the hard thing. I think I've always found that lay-up more difficult than actually going for the green.

It's sort of one of those, as well, where if you can cover that long bunker that runs up the left side, if you can cover that off the back tee, you've got quite a wide landing area to hit

into there. So I don't know what the cover is off the back tee from there, but I probably assume it's like 280, 290, which most of the guys are going to be able to cover.

I think you're still going to see a lot of guys hitting driver from that back tee.

JACK RYAN: Rory, we appreciate your time. Best of luck this week.

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