

THE PLAYERS Championship

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Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, USA

TPC Sawgrass

Rory McIlroy

Press Conference

AMANDA HERRINGTON: We'd like to welcome the 2019 THE PLAYERS Championship winner Rory McIlroy to the interview room here. Making your 12th start this week at TPC Sawgrass. Thoughts on the week.

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, always good to be back. I've liked the -- I would say my relationship with this tournament has definitely changed over the years. I wasn't a huge fan of it in May, so the date change to March has really been -- I feel like it sort of brought the tournament back to sort of what it was.

And I grew up watching THE PLAYERS Championship. It was always this time of year, and I remember Davis Love with an incredible final round and Tiger. There's been a lot of great moments and a lot of history created here. I think it's been great since it's went back to this March date. I think I've had a little more success when it's been -- when it's went back there, as well.

Yeah, good to be back. I always feel like this time of the season everything is sort of ramping up, and this is the first really, really, really big event, but yeah, excited to be here and excited to get going.

Q. Have you cleared your head since Sunday?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, I think so. I think so. Yeah.

Q. Rory, Justin mentioned having the muscle memory of going, when you walk in the locker room, going left instead of right. Do you remember the first time for you, what was that like and the feeling being able to go into that champions' locker room?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, it's a nice little sanctuary in there. Yeah, it's nice to come back and go that way.

I guess I don't really think about it. It's a little bit of a further walk to get food, I guess, now and dining, but it's nice to be in there, nice to sort of share a locker room with a lot of those great players.



Q. You and many others in the golf world have all weighed in on Phil in the last couple weeks. Moving forward now, how long do you think it's really going to take for this to blow over and for Phil to get back in the good graces of the golf world because plenty of good athletes have had their PR blunders but nothing lasts forever.

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, I have no idea. You'd have to ask him whenever he resurfaces, but for me I'm sort of over the whole thing and ready to move on.

Q. Collin was talking about how his perception of this tournament has changed since he's turned professional and does feel like the tournament has grown in stature. How does a tournament do that besides money?

RORY MCILROY: I think -- well, everything. You've got all these TVs in here, you've got 24/7 coverage of it. I think the changes to the golf course, the aesthetics of it, sort of the setup, the agronomy. Just the whole feel of the place. I mean, you drive in here and you have that big grand clubhouse, it feels special. It feels like a special event. It feels like a special week.

It has, it has got bigger and better most years. I think there's a lot of thought and a lot of new ideas that are brought to the table for this event. This is where the PGA TOUR can showcase what they have.

So I think just all of that in general. Obviously the prize fund is huge, and that's great, but there's a lot of other things that go into the event to make it feel the way it is and make it feel special.

Q. I'm curious, when you face these shots like 17 tee shot or 18 tee shot, these shots that you just have to hit, what's going through your mind? What are you focusing on in order to actually execute those shots?

RORY MCILROY: I think the biggest thing is just trusting commitment. I think that's the thing. It's trusting what you're doing and committing 100 percent of the shot you're trying to hit, not to try to guide it, not to try to be too careful with it. It's almost like you have to almost let go and give up a little bit of control.



I think that's when I certainly swing at my best and hit my best golf shots.

Q. I wanted to revisit your post-round comments from Sunday. Is it frustrating to you when maybe you're asked about certain conditions, you're asked about a course and explaining gets misconstrued publicly as maybe complaining?

RORY MCILROY: I was probably complaining (laughter). It wasn't misconstrued, I was definitely complaining.

Yeah, unless you were out on the golf course, you wouldn't understand in a way. Look, it was the same for everyone. I certainly get that. But there was a lot of alcoholic beverages being drunk in the locker room when I went in there on Sunday afternoon by a lot of players, so it wasn't just me out there having a rough time.

Q. You've been around long enough to see successful waves of new stars come out here on TOUR. Three very young guys have a chance to become No. 1 this week. From your perspective is it somewhat daunting to see how many new stars are out there, and does it make it harder to try to close out wins?

RORY MCILROY: I don't know. Look, I mean, I think you've seen the trend in golf over the years where the top guys have gotten younger and younger. Yeah, Collin, Viktor, Jon Rahm, these guys coming out of college, and they're ready to be superstars and they're sort of candidates to be No. 1 in the world.

I don't think it makes it harder to close out tournaments or to -- it does, obviously, if the fields are deeper, but none of that's necessarily in my control. I can't control what those guys do. All I can do is go out and play the best golf that I can, and if that's good enough to one tournaments, that's great, and if it's not, then you have to try to make improvements and see where you can.

I still feel like my best golf is more than good enough to win the biggest golf tournaments in the world, so I don't worry about that.

Q. What's the first thing you think about when you approach the 17th? Take us through your thought process on that hole.

RORY MCILROY: I think one of the biggest things on 17 is just making sure you get the wind right. There's sort of a high camera tower sort of beside the 16th fairway there, and there's usually a flag up on top and you're looking at that to see where the wind is coming from and if it's

switching or if you're getting any gusts from a different direction. That's something to really take into account.

Sometimes it's nice not to be the first one on the tee just to see what your playing partners do. I'm not saying that that's a reason to not make birdie on 16, but sometimes it is nice to have a couple guys go ahead of you just to see what the ball is doing.

You're not really trying to go for the pin on 17, you're just trying to hit it into the middle of the green, and you make four 3s on 17 and move on this week, you're going to gain strokes on the field.

There's certainly a lot more birdie holes out there, and on this golf course you just have to pick and choose your battles, and 17 isn't one to go chasing the pin.

Q. You talked about the brutality of last week and coming into this week, two hard golf courses in a row. What did you do to decompress? How do you let last week go and still know you're going to have to have that kind of energy going into this week, especially with the weather forecast?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, I mean, yesterday was just more of like an off day, a travel day. Made our way up from Orlando. Got a quick workout in here, and yeah, just got organized. I didn't touch the clubs. I just sort of left them alone for a day.

Sort of regroup and just have a nice night and not really -- just not think about it too much and regroup this morning and go out and go through my normal routine, obviously do this and then practice, play a few holes and get into preparing for a golf tournament again.

I think sometimes those Mondays between tournaments can be important to just sort of flip the switch a little bit and recharge, and then you wake up on Tuesday morning and feel a bit better about everything, and you get after it again.

Q. Obviously you had great success here three years ago. Last year you came in here and started with a 79. How do you psychologically adjust to being able to put that behind you and being able to start this tournament well especially knowing what we could be dealing with weather-wise?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, I didn't know it was 79 last year. I tried to forget about it, but thanks for reminding me.

Yeah, I came in here last year not very confident in my golf game. I didn't feel like I was playing well. I sort of had a

two-way miss going. I was missing it left, missing it right. So I'm a lot more comfortable with my game coming in this year.

I don't want to tempt fate, but there would have to be a drastic change in my game from now until Thursday for me to go and shoot 79 in the first round, but it is golf and you never know.

Yeah, I feel just much more comfortable with where my game is, where my swing is at. Look, it's always important to get off to good starts in golf tournaments, and I obviously didn't do that last year, but in 2019 I did. I got off to a great start the first two days, and that set me up to have a solid weekend and go on and win.

I'm playing Thursday afternoon and Friday morning. The weather forecast looks like it's going to be the same for everyone, just looks like rain pretty much all day those two days.

Yeah, just try to handle the conditions as best as we can and try to shoot a couple of solid scores and get through to the weekend and go from there.

Q. When you were saying Sunday that it's a course that made you maybe feel like you were playing worse than you actually were, I assume that was mostly condition related. Are there actually courses that can do that to you?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, I mean, courses or certain types of -- yeah, I guess you can get golf courses that make you feel uncomfortable just with visuals and tee shots and stuff.

For the most part, it's more -- you'd never want to go out and shoot 8-over over a weekend, but I didn't feel like it was as bad as that. I guess it was just more maybe me just getting frustrated and mentally not being able to handle that challenge a bit.

Yeah, there's certainly golf courses that make you a little tentative and careful and maybe throw you off your game a bit, but I think if you're confident in where your game is at, then it shouldn't really affect you that much.

Q. Kind of following on what you were asked about the stature of this tournament, can you recall back in your early, early pro years when you were in Europe before you came over here, did you ever get a sense that the TOUR was trying to push this as a fifth major, and did you kind of resist that, and if not, how did it evolve? Did it evolve to its place just by letting it go, by letting people see it for what it is?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, so I played '09 and '10 and missed the cut both times, and then I actually skipped this event in '11. Actually I gave up my PGA TOUR membership in '11, too. Yeah, and I don't -- there was a couple -- I was influenced by certain things or certain people, and that's what sort of led to that decision.

But then 2012 came back and it was always -- as I said, my relationship with this tournament has definitely changed over the years. I don't feel like the TOUR pushed the fifth major name in any way. It's just sort of what became of it.

But it certainly has, it's got bigger and better every year. They've done a wonderful job with it. It's been -- I think all the players would agree with that. Yeah, it's certainly one of the -- from the start of my career where it wasn't one of my favorites, it's certainly up there in at least the top half dozen that I want to play and want to make sure that my game is in shape for.

Q. Your dad was a major part of you playing golf, and coming up I know you had a great team. What do you see your role as for youngsters and your own children? How do you see yourself, and what role should the professionals, particularly at this level, play in the growing of the game for other youngsters, not only from those in Ireland but from all over the world? How do you see that?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, I mean, I think when you reach this level or this stature in the game, there's a responsibility there that comes with that. I'll always remember when I won the U.S. Open in 2011 and I got a few letters, and Jack Nicklaus wrote to me and Arnold Palmer, and it wasn't the exact same letter, but they said, you are in a place in the game where you have a responsibility to grow the game of golf and inspire others to take this game up.

I've always felt like I've been a pretty international player. I've played all over the world, and as much as I resisted the whole golf in the Olympic movement at the start, I went last year and really enjoyed it and saw the benefits of it for golf as a -- for it to go to a wider audience and for more people in more countries to get involved with it, so I certainly saw the benefits of that and think that it's a wonderful initiative.

I'm happy that I could play some small part in maybe furthering the sport and growing it and taking it to other places in the world that wouldn't necessarily have a chance to play it.

Q. We talked about 17 a few minutes ago; do you ever before or after you've hit your second shot on 16, do you look ahead to see what the flight path is of the balls that are coming off of 17 tee?

RORY MCILROY: Yeah, I mean, I think it's hard to not look over there nowadays. You've got the big screen there and you're sort of -- yeah, I think it's just human nature to have a peek over and see what's going on over on the green or on the screen or what the group ahead of you are doing on the tee box.

Yeah, certainly you have a look over, but I don't think -- I don't think you're really trying to gather any information. You've still got half of the 16th hole to play, so that's sort of where your focus is.

Q. Obviously you're aware of what's going on in Ukraine with the Russian invasion --

RORY MCILROY: Yes, Alex, I don't live in a cave.

Q. I figured that. Bottom line is the PGA TOUR unlike many sports organizations including the R&A haven't made a statement yet. I think there's going to be maybe something coming out today, but one of the issues is that some of the major sponsors involved with the PGA TOUR have not stopped doing business in Russia. Do you have a thought on what the TOUR should or shouldn't do in these situations?

RORY MCILROY: I think what's going on in Ukraine is absolutely horrible. I think everyone would agree with that. It's absolutely brutal. It's sad. It's heartbreaking to see what's happening to that country and those people and the families. It's something that I don't understand. It's certainly, like my knowledge on geopolitical stuff is very low, but I just think from just a human side of things, it's just horrible what's going on.

I'm sure Jay is in here in an hour or so and he'll be able to speak more on that and the business side of things, but I've seen a lot of companies pull back. I saw Shell today is not going to buy Russian oil. I think at this point it's only the right thing to do.

I think that international community has to come together and, I guess, do whatever they can to -- I don't know if they can stop it or make it more difficult or whatever it is, but it's horrendous what's going on, and I think everyone can agree with that.

Q. If you were to give Jay Monahan a report card, where would you give him high marks and where is there room for improvement?

RORY MCILROY: I think growing the business of the TOUR. I think the TV deal, the domestic rights deal that the PGA TOUR did a year or so ago was incredible.

Like the business side of the TOUR had everything to do with putting more money in players' pockets. I think he's done a fantastic job.

I think the one thing that the TOUR in general could do a better job at is transparency, whether that be with -- yeah, just with everything. I think transparency and maybe it not being as closed a shop. I've always felt that a few of the bans or suspensions, I think that should all be announced. I think that should be more transparent. I've always said that.

But that's something I'm sure they're working on and have constant dialogue in, but I'd say overall Jay has done a wonderful job in terms of weathering the storm of the pandemic, putting more money in guys' pockets, making this Tour the best Tour in the world to play on.

You're only sort of picking holes if you're really trying to have any negatives, but overall he's done -- him and his team have done a great job.

Q. A couple weeks ago at Riviera you said that the Saudi breakaway Tour was dead. Do you still feel that way?

RORY MCILROY: I've heard nothing since, so I don't know -- obviously I don't know where they stand. I don't know, but it seems like pretty much every top player in the world, especially the younger guys, the guys that you really need to get something like that off the ground, they all want to play here, and they've stated their intention, and that's what it is.

You've got Jon Rahm and Collin Morikawa, Viktor Hovland, Justin Thomas, myself. You've got the top players in the world that are all very young and have a long runway ahead of them, and they're all saying the same thing.

I don't see how that could change at this point.

Q. Rory, I'm sure you know Tiger is going to the Hall of Fame tomorrow night. I'm curious from your perspective if you can remember maybe the first time you met him or played with him on TOUR and what it was like for you then and how the relationship has evolved obviously into a friendship and someone who knows him better than most.

RORY MCILROY: Best than most. That's funny.

The first time I ever watched Tiger play golf was his -- I think it was his '95 U.S. Amateur win, or maybe '96. Anyways, he was a big deal when he was an amateur, and



obviously he won three U.S. Amateurs in a row and turned pro with a lot of hype. So that was the first time I watched him play.

Then yeah, I met him -- I went first to watch him play in 2002 at Mount Juliet in the WGC -- I think it was like the American Express back then. Then yeah, I met him when I was 15 or 16 for the first time, and then -- I think I feel very fortunate because there is this sort of saying that you shouldn't meet your heroes, and Tiger was my hero when I met him, and he lived up to expectations.

He's been nothing but unbelievable to me and my family, and yeah, he's been awesome, and he's been an inspiration for so many of us that are out here playing this golf tournament this week, and to see him inducted into Hall of Fame, which is obviously like a no -- like of course he was going to be a Hall of Famer when he was five years old.

Yeah, it's really cool. It's cool that he's here. It's cool that it's happening. And yeah, I think he's at a stage in his life where he probably appreciates all this a little bit more at this point, and yeah, I always say, we all that are playing here this week have to thank Tiger for where the game is and where the TOUR is.

I'm pretty sure it's going to be a pretty nice turnout for him tomorrow night.

AMANDA HERRINGTON: Rory, thank you for your time.

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