

**Pre-Tournament Interview**  
**13 November 2018**

**STEPHEN PITT**



**MODERATOR:** Ladies and gentlemen, welcome formally to the 2018 Emirates Australian Open. This is the first of several press conferences. We have chief executive officer of Golf Australia, Stephen Pitt. He's going to give us a state of the nation address of the Open and then field your questions if you have any. Stephen, welcome.

**STEPHEN PITT:** Well, thank you, Mark, and welcome everyone. It's always a big week this week. It's always a mixture of trepidation and excitement as we head into the tournament, but we are overwhelmingly excited about the 104th edition of the Australian Open and we're expecting a really great week and we're pleased with the way things have come together.

Firstly, I would like to thank commercial partners Lagardere Sports. They do a range of things for the tournament, but probably one of the main ones is they assemble the field, and I think this year they've done an excellent job in what's been a pretty challenging year. I think it's well documented the changes that have come about this season, but I think they've been able to assemble a field that has great depth. I think really importantly, we have a number of in-form players, players who have won on the U.S. Tour as recently as yesterday. We've also got players that I think Australian audiences see a lot of and I think they'll engage really well with them. So from that perspective, we're excited about the week.

I think something we're really, really proud of and looking forward to is the All Abilities Championship, and it's the first time that we've held this. It's really important to us. We've got 12 of the best players from around the world and they will be in the main field from Friday through Sunday. There will be groups, they'll be in the TV slots on the weekend and that's something we think is really important for Australian sport, Australian golf. It's actually something we think our crowds will love. These players are fantastic players and I think they'll add a new dimension to the tournament that will become more important as time goes by. We're doing this in conjunction with ISPS Handa, who's a really important partner with Golf Australia, so it's something really excited to see roll out during the week.

This week, of course, commences a really big three weeks for Australian golf. We've had some great lead in-events, state Opens and other events, but the Australian Open kicks off a really important three-week swing for golf. We've, of course, got the World Cup next week and then the PGA the week after. So we've got a raft of great players playing in Australia this summer, and a big part of this for us is -- also the PGA, is to showcase the game of golf and to make golf strong and to get people more attracted to playing. So we're really excited about the next three weeks as they unfold.

In terms of where the tournament is at, we're really pleased with where it is commercially and the revenue streams of the tournament. And I think for people who were here in 2012, which

is the last time we were at The Lakes, the corporate areas have pretty much doubled in size, so we're certainly heading in the right direction. We've added some really important commercial partners this year, so there's an underlying health, I think, of the tournament that bodes well for the future. Obviously we've had a very strong, stable and secure relationship with the New South Wales government and I think that's been a driving force behind the growth of the tournament.

In terms of the future, we are really optimistic about the future of the tournament, future of Golf Australia and golf in this country. As part of that, we're really pleased to announce today that the Australian Open next year will be held from the 5th to the 8th of December, which of course is the week before the Presidents Cup, and I think that's a really important announcement to make.

That was, I think, a critical moment in 2011 in terms of the Australian Open being before Presidents Cup and I think we were able to leverage that really well. We had a star-studded field that year and we're really confident about being able to do the same in 2019.

And I need to thank our friends at the PGA who have made this decision. It's an important decision. It's the right decision for golf, but I applaud them for making that decision, I think, for their care of our national championship and also for the close relationship we've forged. I think that's absolutely critical for the future of Australian golf. So I thank them for that and I'm very happy to take any questions.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Yes, it will. We understand that. I guess last time around with the Australian Open, I think we got nine out of the 12 U.S. players. I think this time around that will flip and we'll (inaudible) into national players. And look, not everyone will play Tiger's event. It's obviously a limited field, but I think that's the challenge that organizations like ours face in terms of dates these days.

**Q. Just a follow-up to that, was there any consultation with the PGA TOUR relative to the date of the Presidents Cup, relative to Tiger's event so that you were able to get American players down here?**

**STEPHEN PITT:** No, I think the order was they picked Presidents Cup date and then everything worked around that. Look, it's challenging. World golf is a bit of a behemoth and there's a lot of things going on around the world at any one time. Look at this Tiger-Phil next weekend. So there's things happening at every time and you've just got to work the best you can around dates not just around golf, but around domestic events as well.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Yes, absolutely. We were cheering on Brandt Snedeker a few weeks back, too, but he didn't quite get it done. Yeah, that was a great win and I think he'll come here obviously playing well, full of confidence.

But he's one player I'm really excited to see. I've seen Matt Kuchar play overseas and the reaction he gets from crowds, his sort of persona and the feeling he gives off, really positives. I think Australian crowds will enjoy watching him this week.

**Q. (Question regarding schedule.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** I think it will help because we would expect that there will be a raft of Australian players on the Presidents Cup team, that they'll be down and they will have made arrangements to be down for an extended period. There's been some discussions with Ernie Els through Lagardere Sports, so I think we're pretty confident that we'll get a really strong field off the back of Presidents Cup.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Patrick, I take a different view, and I've spoken to a lot of golf people and I think there's a lot of positivity about the field. I think it may be the deepest field we've had since 2011. It's different from the field we've had in the past. Typically, we've had sort of one or two of those really big name top-10 players. This year it has been a challenging year, but I do think it's a deep field with a lot of players in really good form.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Well, I think depth is around players who are playing very, very well and are in a good position to win the tournament, that have a good CV. We've got five of the top-15 in the world, which is I think a really good achievement. So I think it is a deep field.

**Q. You said in the past you've had one or two of the top players. You said this year that was still your strategy going forward. What happened then to this tournament, (inaudible) a different approach since July?**

**STEPHEN PITT:** I think the thing we found this year is we're up against Dubai. As soon as you're up against Dubai, this creates challenges. There's some really good players who I think might have been targets who are playing Dubai, so that cuts off a lot of really big names. We understand that.

And I think also we're going through -- there's just been some things that have happened. Everyone knows that Jason and his Ellie have had a baby and that's terrific news, but Jason is not here. Adam's not playing in Australia this year, and of course Marc is playing two weeks in a row and that's his limit, so we understand that.

I think for us, and we obviously are really exposed to it, but we see the younger players coming through. So for us we're getting to a point in Australian golf where there is a passing of the baton and players like Cam Smith and even Cam Davis, who won last year, both had terrific years, and I think we see a time when that baton will be passed to the new brigade.

We've got five amateurs in the field this week and they're all ranked in the top-20 amateur rankings in the world, so there's a lot of positivity there from previous years.

**Q. But then going back to when you made those comments, was that still a chance for this year to get a couple of the top players, you thought, or were you just generally talking about the tournament going forward?**

**STEPHEN PITT:** That's been our ongoing strategy probably since about 2011, and we've been remarkably successful in that. If you think about who's cycled through the Australian Open since then, we've had Tiger Woods, Jordan Spieth, Rory McIlroy multiple years, he played with those guys, Bubba Watson, Dustin Johnson, Billy Haas, Nick Watney. There's been a whole raft of top players. So we've been, I think, really successful in terms of that. This year presented different challenges and we've gone about it a different way.

**Q. You saw (inaudible) comments this morning?**

**STEPHEN PITT:** I haven't seen them yet.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** And drop prize money or appearance money?

**Q. Prize money.**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Okay. I probably don't have enough context there to answer. We do know we've got a very important trophy in terms of the Stonehaven Cup and we run a tournament that we try to make as attractive to players, particularly international players, as possible.

I think we've had outstanding fields in the last, you know, eight or nine years and we're confident about the future. I've been at Golf Australia about 10 years and I've seen the tournament grow. When I started, I don't take any credit for this because we've had a very strong and positive relationship with world sport and Lagardere, but the tournament was in pretty dire shape 10 years ago and traditionally has been really, really impressive since then. We've built and built and built. I think financially we're in a really good position and that enables you to do more in terms of players and fan experience.

And I think the other thing that golf will need to do in the future is brighten up the broadcast of the game and look at ways we can innovate there.

**Q. Are you concerned about the galleries that you might receive? You just mentioned broadcast and how that may look on TV, and what have you done to ensure that you do attract more (inaudible)?**

**STEPHEN PITT:** No, we're not concerned about galleries. Our galleries have been strong for a period of time. We expect to have good galleries this week. The forecast, weather forecast is better than what it was a couple days ago, so we're expecting to have really good crowds again.

Pricing is something that we do keep very affordable. We want to make sure that the Australian Open is accessible to fans, and we've always done that. I think where we'll go in the future, I think we do want to more around the fan experience and build maybe more activities for families and things like that.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** I think in an ideal world you'd like to move the tournament around the country, a la The Open Championship in Britain and the U.S. Open. But for Australian tournaments, the relationship with state governments is pretty important and often that means stability in terms of where it's held. I think for us, we are in Melbourne in 2020 and 2022 and there's a nice (inaudible) to sharing it around the country, but that's one of the trade-offs you have to make. I think for us the trade-off has been we've seen the tournament grow and we've had a really strong, stable relationship with New South Wales government, it's important.

**Q. (Inaudible.) Does Golf Australia and the Australian Open (inaudible) and treading water when it comes to a form of entertainment?**

**STEPHEN PITT:** I think that's a great challenge for golf in general, Patrick. I do personally think golf's got to look at how it can change because we've been ultra-consistent in terms of format for tournaments over a period of time. I don't think we've done a good enough job of bringing players into the living rooms in Australian households over time. I think other sports have probably done a better job than us, so I do think golf has to change, but I don't just think it's the Australian Open or Australian tournaments. I think golf needs to have a look at the broadcast generally and look at how it's engaging with people. Society's changing, people don't have the same time or even the same attention span that they had in the past. So I think golf's got to adapt to that and I think we're on a journey there and there's some way to go.

**Q. You mentioned Adam Scott before. Can you tell me the exact reason why he decided to pass on the Australian Open? When I read the story, I think it said he was actually at a charity luncheon, which seems a bit odd.**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Yeah, I don't want to put words into Adam's mouth, and I think it's been documented about why he's not playing Australia this year, but he's taking time off. People think, well, if he's in Australia, he should play. But the reality for Adam is if he's going to play,

he's going to be practicing and grinding and doing everything he needs to do, and he wants the time off.

I think for him the decision was if he played World Cup, he would play in Australia and do it well. If he didn't play World Cup, he wouldn't and he would take a break and focus on getting a quick start next year. I think that's understandable. All sportspeople need a break at a certain time, and Adam's been a wonderful supporter of Australian golf. Again, it's well documented he's played 17 of the last 18 summers in Australia.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Look, it's not something we've done before, but it is a good idea, something that we'll follow up on. But what I would say, while the Australian Open hasn't been around the country, we have seen tournaments around the country. There's been a bit of a spread, which I think has been good. You've had PGA in Queensland, obviously the Perth Super 6 is in Perth, Melbourne's had its fair share of different things in World Cup, Presidents Cup, and Adelaide's had Women's Open. So there's been a good spread around the country of tournaments, it's just become harder to move than what they were --

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** We understand the Australian Open is --

**Q. It's the premier event.**

**STEPHEN PITT:** It is, but look for the reasons. I talked about it, it's hard to move. That's been the reality of tournament life in Australia. The state government partnerships are absolutely critical to the health of the tournament and ultimately you need to make sure the tournament's financially viable and healthy before you can start to do some of those things.

But we have thought about the future of what that could look like and how we could actually do that and there are some ideas, but there's some more of it to go under that bridge because we are contracted in New South Wales until 2023, but we have put a lot of thought into what it could look like and how it could have a different reality.

**Q. Could that involve shorter term contracts with state government?**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Yeah, look, that's an option. The other option is trying to have an anchor-type tenancy maybe spanning 20 years, but having out years within that agreement. This is the current agreement that we've brokered this time around. We've brokered in two out years and we've been able to exercise them, which I'm really pleased about because when we did the deal, it was always going to be challenging to actually get that done. But we've managed to do it, so we've got two years in the next five in Melbourne and that's really positive.

**Q. So ideally you have say for example, giving a hypothetical, New South Wales government sponsoring every five years and then (inaudible)?**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Yeah. There's a couple of different options that can help deliver and it's not easy to do, so there's got to be a lot of work between now and then. It's in some ways premature to be talking about it because we've got a really strong agreement with New South Wales, but we will be exploring every opportunity in the future in terms of how we structure it. And it's something we recognize the value of moving it around, and if we can make it work financially and keep a strong relationship with government, then that's something we'll absolutely (inaudible.)

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**STEPHEN PITT:** Absolutely. But I think we're fortunate we've had a number of golfers come to Sydney for the Australian Open and take it in and enjoy it as a spectator, and that's part of the reasons state governments invest in tournaments. We've had a lot of that and that's been part of the strength of the tournament.

**MODERATOR:** Any more questions? Thanks very much, Steve. We appreciate your time and thanks for coming in.

**STEPHEN PITT:** Thank you, everyone. Let's have a good week.