

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
January 23, 2019



RORY McILROY

MARK WILLIAMS: We would like to welcome Rory McIlroy to the interview room at the 2019 Farmers Insurance Open.

Rory, this is your first start in the tournament. You've had a look at the golf course this morning in the pro-am. Just if you could share your thoughts on the golf course.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, yeah, it's nice to be here. I feel like I've watched this tournament a lot on TV, you know, whether it be U.S. Open or obviously this tournament over the years. It's funny, you get a sort of perception of a golf course from TV, but then you play it and, you know, it does play very different than I thought it was going to play. Almost, yeah, there's some holes that you've got a bit of a Pebble Beach feel about it, the greens are sort of small, narrow fairways. But yeah, it's good. I played 10 holes on the South course on Monday evening, played the North course yesterday, and then obviously played a full 18 on the South today.

Yeah, I like coming to new golf courses, the process of learning them, what you're hitting off tees, good angles coming into the greens, what side to miss on, all that stuff. So it's been a pretty productive three days and I'm ready to get going tomorrow.

MARK WILLIAMS: You mentioned you liked coming to new golf courses. You played at the Sentry Tournament of Champions for the first time, a new golf course for you, and here. Is this something we'll see a little bit more of this season on the PGA TOUR?

RORY McILROY: Maybe, if I can speak to the commissioner and I'm playing all these new golf courses, whether I can carry that over to next year and the year after and the year after.

Yeah, I like it. I mean, I was in between playing here and Phoenix next week. I knew I was going to play Hawaii and L.A., and honestly, I just didn't want to be at home for five weeks. Five weeks is a long time and I wanted to play once at least. You know, I've always liked the look of this event, it's such a strong field. I've alluded to the fact that I want to play in the strongest possible tournaments each and every week. I'm happy to be here because of that.

Q. Rory, when you say that it didn't actually play like you thought it would from seeing it on TV, can you be a little more detailed about the differences that you saw?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I guess I'm seeing it a little bit softer as well. So like, for example, the third hole here, the downhill par 3 I mean, I thought from TV it looks as though that green slopes so far away from you. Actually, the green isn't. Actually, if anything, it's tilted more toward you.

But I like the design of the golf course. I think it gives you opportunities. Even if you do hit it offline, you have areas to run the ball up onto the green, you don't have to fly it all the way there. So it is, it's a long and narrow golf course, but it gives you chances and gives you opportunities to show your recovery skills and show your short game. I like that about it a lot. It's not just a brutal golf course from start to finish, it does give you opportunities to make amends for maybe some errant golf shots.

Q. Rory, you played the course a couple days this week. When you walk the course, do you think of the fact that Tiger's won this event seven times, he won his last major in '08. Does that sort of surprise you, you can see what he's done to get around on this course?

RORY McILROY: I mean, you look at Tiger over his career, Bay Hill, Firestone, here, he targets the golf courses that he has success on and that he likes. I alluded to the fact that you don't -- you need to be a tremendous ball-striker, you need to be a great iron player, a great short game, and those have been the hallmarks of his game over the past 20-odd years, so I can see why he has done so well around here.

And you do, you get comfortable. Once you've had some good memories at a place and you've played well, it's nice to come back to those places and think of all that success. That's why he's won eight times here and eight times at Bay Hill and eight times at Firestone. It's obviously not very easy to do, but he just has a comfort on them and he's -- obviously not just these tournaments, but he's been playing Torrey Pines for 30 years, all the way back to Junior World, so he's got some experience.

Q. Should we ask you this question about Tiger when we get to Riviera?

RORY McILROY: Why?

Q. He's never won there.

RORY McILROY: And?

Q. Well, we'll just bring it up again. Two things for you. 2008, would you have gone through the U.S. Open qualifier in England?

RORY McILROY: I did, I played at Walton Heath.

Q. Didn't make it?

RORY McILROY: Obviously not.

Q. Obviously not. Secondly, would this be the only PGA TOUR course that your caddie has played and you haven't?

RORY McILROY: I think Harry played Bay Hill before I played it. I don't know. I mean, it is one of. Might be, could be.

Q. In your Junior World days you missed it?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I wasn't old enough, I wasn't in that age group. I don't think I would have reached many of the fairways back then.

Q. Rory, you have a big fan base, but what was it like Sunday morning at East Lake when tens of millions of people across the world are rooting for one guy and you kind of have a few rooting for you?

RORY McILROY: I guess I didn't really think about it that way. I was just going to go out there and try and play a good round of golf. If anything, I was just thrilled to be in that last group. I played the last few holes on Saturday very well, and for me it was just another opportunity to try and win a golf tournament.

I didn't even realize the magnitude of it until it got to the point we were walking down 18 and it was pretty apparent Tiger was going to win. But no, that honestly didn't cross my mind at all. No matter where I play, not to sound disrespectful or whatever, but the support of the crowds, I don't think about that one bit. When I go on the golf course I'm thinking of me, I'm thinking of winning for myself knowing that that's what makes me happy.

Q. What do you recall about your experience on 18?

RORY McILROY: It was very cool. Obviously they lost control of the crowd a little bit. I ran ahead not for the fact that I wanted to give Tiger his moment, but I knew there was police officers coming towards us and they were coming towards one guy and one guy only and it wasn't me, so that's why I ran a little bit ahead. It was a cool moment to be a part of. Standing on the 18th green looking back down the hole and just seeing a mass of people there, it was very cool.

Q. Rory, with the revamping a little bit of your schedule and playing more over here, how much of that is geared toward kind of honing in for the majors, Augusta, et cetera?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I mean, look, I think travel definitely sets you back a few weeks. Had this conversation with Paul Casey at the end of last year. He obviously played well at the start of the season, won in Tampa. As soon as he traveled back across the Atlantic to play at Wentworth, he felt like it knocked him back a few weeks. He didn't play well at the U.S. Open because of it, he didn't play well going into the summer and he felt it was because of just that back and forth travel.

And I know the schedule has changed and we're not going to be doing as much of that in the

future, but even the fact that I do live in Florida now, so if I were to go and play the Middle East, it's a 14-hour trip one way, it's a 14-hour trip back. That's over a day in the plane with the jet lag, time change, all that sort of stuff. Just trying to make my life a little bit easier and a little less -- just try to get on the same routine more often, I guess.

Q. Just as a follow, how surprised and maybe we could use the word "disappointed" were you with some of the backlash that came with not playing as much over there?

RORY McILROY: Not disappointed or -- you know, I've done the exact same thing for 11 years in a row. I started over there, I've done everything that I guess has been asked of me to be a member of that tour. I haven't made that decision yet this year if that's going -- if I'm going to go that route or not again. I am happy with my decision. I'm happy to be over here and playing. Again, anything that makes my life and my performances better, I'm going to do that.

Q. Rory, starting with Riviera, it's quite a stretch leading up to the Masters no matter who the players are. Is the decision on where to go and what to do difficult? Not so much to say what it is, but just big events and a lot of good golf in that time.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, 100 percent. I don't think so, I don't think it's difficult. You have to play where you want to play. You've got to play the events that you're comfortable with. I mean, I'm looking forward to playing L.A., I'm looking forward to going down to Mexico again. You know, THE PLAYERS, defending at Bay Hill, World Golf Championship in Austin. There is a lot of good golf, but it's exciting.

Yes, you're going to miss some events that you might have played in the past or that you might want to play, but you could literally play seven out of eight weeks leading into Augusta, and by the time you get there you're -- physically you might be okay, but mentally you mightn't be in the best possible place. It's about pacing yourself. Not even that, you go beyond Augusta and you look at the entire season and very possibly I'm going to play six out of seven in May, and June I'm playing seven out of eight, July and August. I mean, there's so many big stretches of golf there that you just have to -- at least if you can pace yourself at this point in the season, you can have some energy reserves left for that latter part.

Q. Rory, kind of a rules question here. With sort of the change from what seemed to be black and white rules before to now intent as an issue, and I'm thinking of the drop where guys' knees might be a little bent and the intent isn't there. Does that make it easier or a little bit more difficult because now you're going to have to sort of imagine what the player's thinking?

RORY McILROY: I think for us out on tour at the highest level where we have rules officials and it is -- it's fine, we can have a conversation. I spoke to one of the USGA guys today about the rule regarding a caddie or a person lining up a player before they hit a shot. It's no different if you're hitting a full shot compared to if you're hitting a putt on a green.

Very likely there's going to be some point where say a guy -- say I hit it in the trees and I'm looking to see if there's a gap or there's some sort of window and I've got a club in my hand and I set that club behind the ball thinking, yeah, I might be able to, and Harry's standing behind me going, yeah, I think you can get it through. I don't step away from that ball and I step into it and hit it, he's not lining me up, but at the same point -- and he's walked away, but if I don't walk away from that ball and step back in, that's a penalty. But again, there's no intent for Harry to line me up.

So I can have that conversation with the rules guy and say, look, it's no intent, so is that a penalty or not? So there is a lot of gray areas and I think there are things that if certain situations come up. You know, the rule book in golf is this thick and then there's the Decisions on the Rules of Golf, which is like this thick, different scenarios, different situations. I think for the most part of the rules have been simplified, which is a good thing, but there might be some scenarios over the next six months to a year where decisions on those rulings are going to come from.

Q. Just a couple quick ones. Well, not the second one. What goes through your mind when you see Ho-sung Choi swing a club and his follow-through?

RORY McILROY: Who?

Q. The Asian player who's doing all the gyrations.

RORY McILROY: Oh, the guy, he's playing Pebble.

Q. Yeah.

RORY McILROY: I mean, I mean, technically his swing is good. If you watch it up until impact, he's technically got a pretty good swing. He's obviously a pretty good player. Whether that means he should be taking a spot away from a PGA TOUR player at a PGA TOUR event, I'm not so sure.

But yeah, I mean, it's gained a little bit of notoriety and he's a good player. I'm not sure a golf shot should mean that much to you that you're doing that after you hit it, like it's just trying a little too hard. You have to try hard at golf, but that's taking it to an extreme.

Q. After that lighthearted question, the last seven times you've been in a final group on a Sunday, you haven't gotten the W. Is that getting into your head?

RORY McILROY: No. I'm committed to the journey of getting to a point where that's not a conversation anymore. Just got to keep putting myself in those positions. I'm obviously playing good enough golf to get myself there. You're going out in the final group and being 3 behind, you're not supposed to win from that position. Give it a shot and at least have a chance on the back nine. So just got to keep putting myself in those positions.

I've got another great opportunity to do that this week. I feel like my game's in good enough shape to do that. Yeah, as I said, I'm just on the journey of learning and hopefully getting to a point where I don't have to answer that question.

Q. Rory, you talked about focus on yourself on the golf course. Looks like it's your inner peace you manage on the golf course. Outside the golf course, are you able to do it?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, definitely. I'm very happy within myself and very content and in a good place. I think if you're that way off the golf course, it enables you to be that way on the golf course.

Q. Just a follow-up. Now you have an American family and maybe in the future you would have kids. You would like to maybe represent Americans?

RORY McILROY: Sorry.

Q. Like play for American flag?

RORY McILROY: I play golf for myself. You know, I don't go out there to try to win for anyone else but me. It brings me happiness, it brings me joy. A by-product of that is maybe it brings other people happiness as well.

Q. Rory, what were the circumstances of coming to Junior World in the first place? Was it a decision for your family to come, was it your first time in America, and I heard you actually made it out to Torrey like for the opening ceremony and flags and stuff?

RORY McILROY: Yep.

Q. Can you talk about how you came to come here?

RORY McILROY: So my first junior golf tournament in the United States was at Doral in December 1998, '99, '98. Anyways, so the next summer I stayed with Scott Pinckney and his family in Utah, played some of the junior tournaments there. No, that was 2000. Sorry, the year before I played.

So my first Junior World was at Presidio Hills, I guess in the Old Town, San Diego, a little par-3 course. Actually made a hole-in-one that week. And I remember the opening ceremonies there, I got my picture with Earl Woods, which was pretty cool at the time. But yeah, so that was really -- I played my first event in America as an eight or nine year old and from there we got exposure to everything else that was happening in this country junior golf-wise. This is or was or I'm not sure anymore, was one of the biggest junior golf events in the world.

Once I got a taste of it, I just wanted to go and play all over. So I actually went to go play Junior World, and then the next week or two weeks after there was the World Junior Masters in Hawaii, so I went to Hawaii and played there. For a few summers I spent my time playing junior golf tournaments over on this side of the world, which was pretty cool.

Q. Did you seek out Earl and Tiger? Did you meet Tiger that week?

RORY McILROY: No, I didn't. Earl was here. Yeah, I don't know if he was a part of -- I'm sure I've got the picture somewhere. Tiger was probably off winning majors.

Q. Rory, you addressed before about having put yourself in so many positions. I just wonder with regard to the majors, as time goes on and you haven't had one in a few years, do you get antsy about that and how do you manage that as you go here in the midst of your prime?

RORY McILROY: Not really. I think if you look at all the players that I'm trying to get to their level, if you look at say a Faldo or a Seve, if you look at Phil, Phil's won more majors than me and he didn't win his first one until he was in his 30s. I've had success early and it just takes a little bit of time to figure it out again. Once Phil got his first one in '04, he won five pretty -- from '04 to '13 it was still a nine-year period.

I'm not trying to compare myself to someone like Jack, but Jack had a three- or four -- a couple of three-year spells where he didn't win any. I know Tiger's had his difficulties with injury, but it's 11 years since Torrey in '08. So I don't feel like -- yeah, four years is four years and that's 16 opportunities that have passed me by, but at the same time I'm giving myself chances. I had a chance at Carnoustie, I had a chance at Augusta. That's all I can ask of myself, just keep giving myself those chances and sooner or later I'll figure out how to get the job done.

Q. Rory, Justin's got a new club deal as you probably know. He's got a new golf bag that looks like a race car, all these exciting colors, very shiny. Is there any freak-out moment when you switch not to the clubs but just to a new bag, you look over to the bag and, oh, it's my new bag, it's different?

RORY McILROY: I see his name's not written in English, so that would freak me out a bit.

Not really. Yeah, look, it's a very high profile switch to go from obviously what he was playing to a golf company that is a little unknown at least in the Western world. I think it's a very well-known golf company in Asia. They've got a very good person at the head of it with Mark King, who used to be at TaylorMade, so he's familiar with the people who are running it.

I think the big thing is he hasn't changed the golf ball. The one thing that you hit all the time with every single shot is the golf ball, so to still have that constant in there, you can make

that change and I don't think there's any sort of freak-out moment.

I think when you change 14 clubs and go into a new golf ball, that's when it can -- it takes a while. It definitely took me a while. It took me a good six or nine months. But when you've changed some equipment -- I mean, we change equipment all the time. I got a new driver this year and a new 3-wood and a new putter and a new whatever, but there's still a lot of constants in that bag that you know what you're going to do, so I think JR will be just fine.

Q. Another rules thing, and you had some experience on California poa this time of the year from Pebble a couple years ago. Repairing damage on the greens, which will come into play a lot more here certainly than it did at Kapalua. Could that be an optics issue do you think for people watching, especially when you look at four or five foot putts and it looks like you're just smashing your way all to the hole, how do you deal with that?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I think there's going to have to be conversation between what is damaged and what is not damaged. Especially I think in low light late in the day, you see so many little nicks and marks on the green.

I said to Harry on Monday night, it's like, oh, I can tap these down. It still feels a little weird to do it, but that's the rules and you've got to be able to take advantage of the rules. I don't think people are going to make this trail all the way to the hole, but if there is a heel print or there's something in your line or a little imperfection that has been man-made, you know it's well within your rights now to tap it down. Just as long as people don't take advantage of it. But I don't think there's a problem with integrity on this tour, I think everyone's pretty by the book.

MARK WILLIAMS: All right. Thanks for being gracious with your time, Rory, and good luck this week.

RORY McILROY: Thank you.