

ROUND 1 INTERVIEW
January 23, 2020



RORY McILROY (-5)

Q. If we can just get some quick comments about how it went out there for you today?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I mean, I think for first round back of the new year, it went pretty well. Drove the ball particularly well today. Hit some decent iron shots. Felt a little rusty around the greens, gave myself a lot of chances. I hit some good putts that didn't go in, but overall it was a nice start.

Q. Rory, when you start out like this, do you expect to drive the ball well and knock the rust off around the greens or do you just have no idea?

RORY McILROY: That driver went in my bag at about 4:00 p.m. yesterday afternoon, so no. I didn't drive the ball particularly well in the pro-am yesterday, so I worked with the TaylorMade guys yesterday on the range and we figured a couple things out.

And it's funny, you know, you go through that testing process at the start of the year with new equipment. There's things that seem really good on the range, but once you actually play some rounds with them competitively and try to hit certain shots, things sort of I guess appear. A couple things appeared that I didn't like yesterday in the pro-am, so worked with Keith and the guys at TaylorMade yesterday and we seemed to have fixed it.

Q. What kind of things were appearing and were there things that weren't there the last time you were with your driver?

RORY McILROY: The last time I was with my driver was last year, it was like a different driver. I like the club -- this is getting a little golf geeky, but it sits very open and I sort of was playing ahead at a loft that there was a loft on it but it looked to me like it was a little bit left. But on the range it was going good and stuff and I was sort of thinking I can maybe get used to that look. But as I went and played a few holes, I just -- the face just looked a little bit left to me.

So I ended up going to a new head, a 10 and a half. I've never played a 10 and a half degree driver, but I put a 2-degree sleeve in it and it's actually playing around eight and a half but it's opened it up two degrees so the toe is not in, it's more out and it's more how I like to see it. Just visually it gives me a little bit more confidence.

Q. Just to clarify, was the driver you had yesterday, was that what you were using last year or was that something different?

RORY McILROY: Something different.

Q. Can you repeat that whole thing?

RORY McILROY: No. Wouldn't serve you or me, Doug.

Q. So what are your expectations when you come out for the first time in a new year?

RORY McILROY: I don't know if there are any expectations, it's just more, you know, see where your game is. You hope to see some good stuff in practice and then hopefully those good things you see translate onto the golf course and into some decent scores.

I guess it was nice today that it did translate. The stuff that I have been seeing at home and in practice, I was able to continue that out onto the golf course.

Q. Was it the driving that you were most inspired by today or your short game?

RORY McILROY: A little bit of both. As I had, I think the short game, there was a couple of chips that I didn't hit exactly the way I wanted to, a couple of putts that were a little weak, a little lacking of speed. So the short game, I think there's room for improvement there, for sure. I drove the ball as well as I've done in the long time today.

Q. Do you consider yourself a fast or a slow starter when you've had a long layoff starting a new year, or somewhere in between?

RORY McILROY: Somewhere in between. I mean, I've always started well in the desert over in the Middle East, I've had a lot of good finishes, runner-ups and stuff.

Q. But you're over there, too, aren't you, before you play those?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, and I'm practicing. I wouldn't have played competitively for six, seven, eight weeks. Somewhere in between. I think in the middle of a season when you're used to -- you're on a run of playing golf, you take two weeks off and it sort of stops any momentum that you have.

I think from a standing start, which is what I'm sort of starting with, I think I'm pretty good, but if I have some momentum in a season and I stop for a couple weeks and then come back, I seem to struggle a little bit doing that.

Q. Rory, understanding this is a question very early in the season in a round, if you do win, I think you go to No. 1. How much does that mean to you? Does it not mean anything at this time of year? It's been a while since you were at that spot.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, did you listen to my press conference yesterday? (Laughs.) Just read the transcript. I answered all that yesterday.

I'm working on improving my game. I'm working on -- I have no expectations going into this week. I said yesterday if it doesn't happen this week, hopefully I'll have plenty more chances this year to get it done. It wasn't on the radar, it wasn't on the radar a few months ago and now it is and that's wonderful, but I just need to go out there and shoot a few more scores like I did today and all will be well.

Q. What was your goal today, not shoot 80 or something like that?

RORY McILROY: Starting on the North Course here, it presents a little bit of -- you know, you feel a bit of pressure to get off to a good start because it's an easier sort of course. I guess there was a little bit of that, a little bit of that sort of anxiousness going out there. but felt like I settled into the round well.

I didn't really set myself a target, I knew I was going to have plenty of chances and maybe my goal today was not to be too, you know, anxious.

Q. Given the way you finished, the momentum last year, was there any part of you that would have liked to keep riding it as long as you could or --

RORY McILROY: I played 52 golf events, 53 including the Ryder Cup, in 2018 and 2019, so I was ready for a break. I had a busy couple of years. I played 27, 28 including the Ryder Cup in 2018 and then I played 25 last year. I was ready for a few weeks off.

Q. I'm sure you're a big fan of the round today, seven birdies, but I want to talk about that par save at the drivable par-4 seventh, how big was that for your round?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it was. The seventh hole on the North Course is a hole that you want to birdie. I tried to go for the green and that was probably the only drive that I missed today. We had a little bit of a wait on the tee and I missed it right. I got a little unfortunate that it hit the cart path and I had that tree in my way, but that was a big up-and-down. I had gotten to 4 under for the round and I certainly didn't want to drop a shot there. You're looking to pick up one, but to not drop one there after the tee shot was big, and it was nice to birdie the last.

Q. You told me yesterday that this is a really good litmus test for where your game is right now. Obviously positive results today. What would you say overall about your performance, what were you pleased with the most?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so I think I drove the ball well for the most part, I hit some pretty good iron shots. I hit a couple loose ones. Around the greens I was okay. I made that good up-and-down on seven and good up-and-down on nine, but there's a couple of chip shots that I didn't quite get right and there's a few chances that I missed. So a little rusty around the greens, but just a little bit of play, a little bit more practice and hopefully it will feel more and more comfortable as the week goes on.

Q. You also told us obviously you were pleased with the putter last year. What about your performance with that club today considering these greens can really get difficult with the poa annua?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, as I said, the North Course's greens are probably a little bit truer than the South Course right now. You hit good putts on the North and they're going to go in.

My speed was a little off, I was a little weak and a little tentative on some putts today. And again, that's just from not playing competitively the last eight weeks. It's something as you start to play a little bit more regularly, you dial that speed in a little bit more.

But overall I held out well. To shoot 5 under, you need to make a few putts. So yeah, that part of my game was feeling good, but hopefully I feel like I can improve each and every day this week. If I do that, I'll give myself a chance to win.

Q. The first time we see you in 2020. How did you feel about that round today?

RORY McILROY: I felt good. I drove the ball really well, very, very pleased with that. My iron play was pretty good in places. I hit a couple of loose ones. The short game was good in parts. I actually chipped it well out of the rough, but off the fairway I was a little -- I didn't -- I had a couple of poor chips. Overall, I mean, for a first round starting back out a new year, yeah, pretty happy.

Q. You made a comment the other day that you have the attitude now where you'll go out and play aggressive because basically you've got nothing else to prove to anybody else, right?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, sort of. Nothing really left to prove to myself, I know what I can do. I've done sort of everything I've ever wanted to do in this game, now I just want to do it over and over. I said yesterday everything beyond this is sort of gravy and that's a very nice position to be in at 30 years old when you've got 10 or 15 years ahead of you.

Q. By the way, that doesn't mean you're not looking to win every time?

RORY McILROY: Oh, no. Jeez, no, yeah.

Q. What are your thoughts on the changes to the golf course, your second time playing this tournament?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so yeah, the South Course, it's going to present a sort of different -- you know, it plays similar. There's a couple little changes that if you didn't know the course or hadn't played it that much, you wouldn't really notice. A few of the bunkers have changed and fairway lines have shifted and stuff, but the South Course is always tough and it's going to be tough tomorrow. It was nice that I took advantage of the easier course

today and shot a good one, but need to go out there and play well tomorrow.