

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
January 27, 2021



RORY McILROY

DOUG MILNE: We would like to welcome Rory McIlroy into the interview room here at the Farmers Insurance Open.

Rory, thanks for joining us. You're making your third start here at Farmers Insurance Open and off to a great start with this event, that is top-5s in each of the last two years here. You've had a chance to be out and see the course today, so just some thoughts on being back here at Torrey Pines this week.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it's great to be back. As you said, I didn't really start playing this event until a little later on in my career, but it's been a good venue for me. Even going back to the Junior World days, whatever that is now, 20 years ago.

Yeah, it's good to be back. Also, with obviously playing this tournament, but looking ahead to June and the U.S. Open here as well, it will be nice to at least have it fresh in the memory for then, too. Yeah, good to be back. I've played well here the last couple years. Got to see the South Course today. I only got in yesterday so I didn't -- I was thinking of maybe trying to go out and get nine on the North, but it didn't work out that way. Just played 18 on the South and playing there, playing that course again tomorrow. Then I'll play the North blind on Friday, but I've played it the last couple years and know it pretty well. Yeah, good to be here and looking forward to getting going tomorrow.

DOUG MILNE: Okay. Well, you're making your fifth start on Tour this season with a couple of top-10s in both of the majors so far. This is your first event back on Tour since the Masters. Feeling good with what you're seeing and feeling so far?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it feels pretty good. I think I made some good progress in the fall last year. It obviously wasn't the year that I wanted last year. Especially post coming back out of the COVID lockdown and no fans, it wasn't quite the year that I wanted or the play that I expected to have, but saw some good signs in the fall, in the Masters, and then Abu Dhabi last week I had a couple of good rounds and a couple of not-so-great ones.

Yeah, I think the game, it's coming around. It's definitely in a better place than it was a few months ago and I'm feeling pretty comfortable. I'm on a nice run of events coming up here and just nice to see where the game's at after the next couple weeks.

Q. Rory, could you tell me what went into your decision to play seven of eight weeks?

RORY McILROY: I don't know. I felt like I had a pretty quiet fall. I played the U.S. Open, the

two events on the West Coast, the CJ Cup and the ZOZO, and then the Masters, and then I took like nine weeks off as well. I had a pretty quiet spell there for a few months. I just wanted to get back out and play. I felt like I sort of stopped last year on quite a positive note the way I played at Augusta and I just wanted to try to keep that going into the start of this year. I feel like the more I play, the more I'll get comfortable with my game and know where it is. Yeah, I just thought it was a good opportunity to sort of hit the ground running this week.

Q. And next week will be the first substantial amount of fans on the PGA TOUR, they're expecting 5,000 a day at Phoenix. Your thoughts about fans? Any concerns about having 5,000 fans out there?

RORY McILROY: I don't think so. Like, it's outside. You know, there's ample space out there for people to socially distance and stay safe. If everyone's wearing a mask, I don't see any danger in that at all.

Even last week in Abu Dhabi there was some fans, it wasn't 5,000 but there was about 100 out there and it felt good. It felt good to hit a good shot and get a clap and get a reaction.

I'm looking forward to welcoming fans back. It's going to be gradual, I don't think anything's going to be at capacity or 100 percent for a while, but the fact that Phoenix is going to have 5,000, maybe the Florida events might have a little bit more that. Gradually welcoming people back as the vaccine gets rolled out and we try to get back into a more normal world, I think it's a good thing.

Q. Rory, just was curious, I think this is the first time you're officially being paired with Matthew Wolff, and I know you played with him in the TaylorMade event. Just was wondering about your thoughts on his unique swing and whether you've ever tried the "Wolff wiggle" to sort of initiate your swing.

RORY McILROY: Matt's A hell of a player. He came out straight out of college and played great. I have a lot of time for Matthew, he's a good kid and he's got a good head on his shoulders. I think he's got some really good people around him, too.

Yeah, I mean, look, the way he swings the golf club is very unique, but it's not as if it hasn't been done before. If you look at swings going back in time and through history, there has been a couple others that have swung the club like him, and he can generate a massive amount of clubhead speed, but with that he's also got a great touch.

Yeah, look, you've got him and Viktor and Collin that came out, and all awesome players. They're the future of this tour. Weird to say that sitting here and still feeling like I'm pretty young, but those guys are sort of nine and 10 years younger than me. Yeah, there's some really bright talents on Tour right now and obviously Matt's one of them.

Q. Is the ball flight completely different? He hits it quite low and you hit it quite high. You both get sort of to the same place, but is it a completely different way of getting

there?

RORY McILROY: I think a little bit. Yeah, Matt can hit it any way he wants to, he can hit it low, high, sort of do whatever he wants with the ball. Yeah, it's different, it's a different way to get there. He obviously gets the club up, shallows it and then has a real shallow for a very long time in the downswing and then rotates, he gets his arm and his right elbow really tucked in his body and then rotates and hits it. It reminds me of how I swung it when I was younger, maybe '08, '09 where I got the club real deep on the way down and then really rotated through hard to get the club back online, but his move is just a little more pronounced because he gets it so much more upright at the top of the swing.

Q. I wanted to ask you about you played here so well last year, I was just wondering what did you think of it as a major championship venue when you toured around it, and this Farmers, are you going to be thinking about angles and what the USGA's going to be doing to it in June?

RORY McILROY: So I think it's a wonderful layout for a major championship. I think it stands up -- to have a U.S. Open here, it stands up to basically the most elite level of golf that we play, the toughest test we face all year for the most part.

But no, I'm not really going to be thinking about what they're going to do because I just have to play the golf course that's in front of me this week. But as I said, I think three competitive rounds on the South Course this week, it will be fresh in my memory when it comes around to June and the U.S. Open's on. Obviously the course is going to play much differently in June, I would expect the rough to be up a little bit more and the greens to be a little bit firmer, a little more premium on accuracy that week than maybe there is this week, but it's not as if you're not trying to hit the fairways this week either.

Yeah, if I can go out and play well and shoot three good scores on the South this week, it will give me some confidence going into June.

Q. It seems to have suited you well. What about it?

RORY McILROY: It's long, so I think I can take advantage of my length pretty well. Then if I'm on with my irons, I feel like the greens are maybe a little smaller on average than what we get week in, week out on Tour, so with the second shots it's -- if you're feeling it with your irons, you can really take advantage of that.

And then I feel like this golf course maybe more than any others, if you're going to miss the green, you have to miss it either long or short because if you miss it pin high but on the sides, every green sort of slopes in a ways and it's very hard to get it close to the hole then. I think little nuances like that and having that fresh in your memory for a few month's time is always a good thing.

Q. Rory, going back to what you were saying about fans next week, just curious,

what are you most looking forward to about that, and secondly, what's been the most difficult thing for you about not having it?

RORY McILROY: I'm looking forward to when it's like -- sometimes you have a pin that's tucked behind a bunker or something, you can't see the bottom of it and you think you've hit a good shot but you have no idea where the ball is. It will actually be nice to just have a reaction, to get a clap or not get a clap or whatever, so that will be nice.

I think sometimes the most difficult thing for me without having fans is just sometimes it just felt so casual. You're just out there playing and it's sort of just like playing a practice round. That's been the thing that I've had to get used to, because like I play way better on Tour than I do at home because I have something to focus me. Yeah, just having that, getting more in a competitive mode is a good thing.

The pro-ams I've played on Wednesdays, my pro-am partners are probably like, "How has this guy been the best player in the world," because you don't have that competitiveness going to bring the best out of yourself. If anything, that was sort of my struggle at the start.

But as it went on, we got used to it and it's sort of the norm now, but I'm definitely one that's in the camp of welcoming fans back and being excited about it.

Q. Rory, I was wondering, when you decided to start playing Torrey two years ago, was this summer's U.S. Open sort of in your mind to try to get ready for a more familiar with it, and does the fact that a lot of the majors this year are places that you're familiar with and have had success or at least some success at, is that a positive going into the major season?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so I wouldn't say that was the reason for me to play Torrey. I think the first, I would say the first year that I played Torrey, the reason for playing was I think -- no, it actually wasn't because I played Hawaii that year as well, but obviously we have this rule on Tour that if you don't play 25 tournaments a year, you've got to play one that you haven't played in the last five years. That's part of the reason I'm playing Phoenix next week, and I've heard the golf course should suit my style of play.

But no, at that point I had no -- I had no thoughts about the U.S. Open coming up. I had watched it on TV and people told me it would be a good course for me, it would suit my game, take advantage of my length. So that was the real reason that I started to play here.

And then yeah, I'm looking forward to the major venues this year. Obviously Augusta, we go back to each and every year, but then Kiawah which I've got some good memories of, Royal St. George's that I've played a lot of golf at, whether it be The Open Championship in '11 or some amateur events that I've played there. And then obviously here. So yeah, it's nice to go back to familiar venues and venues that you've played well on.

Q. I think that's so interesting about playing so much better at a tournament than

outside of it. I was just wondering, is there any particularly bad pro-am you remember playing where you were in particularly poor form on Wednesday and better Thursday?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, there's been a lot of them. I think it's one of the reasons that Harry and myself now actually, I play a game with him every pro-am or every practice round where I have to try to shoot a score, because it got to the point where I would play in a pro-am and shoot 76 and that's not great for your confidence going out to play the next day in the tournament.

It was part of the reason we started to sort of play these games, because I just had zero concentration and I just wasn't in the right frame of mind to hit good golf shots. That's why we started to do that.

I don't know if I can think of one off the top of my head, but there's been -- as I said, there's been many where I'm sure the amateurs have come off the course like, "How the hell is that guy as good as he is?"

Q. When you're at home, do you play like stroke play rounds with one golf ball or are you playing matches or playing like six balls at a time, dropping balls here and there? How does that look?

RORY McILROY: A little bit of both. I think when I play at home and I play games with obviously whoever's down there, JT or Rickie or DJ or all the guys that are down in Jupiter, it's more match play, so you're not really holing out a bunch. Everyone's giving themselves four-footers because you're not really going to most likely not miss those. But it's just not the same, it's not the same. You're riding around in golf carts, it's taking two hours to play, you're not marking the ball, you're not reading putts, you're hitting with the pin in. It's very casual.

So yeah, it's a little different. If I'm practicing on my own, I'll go out and maybe play nine holes of a worse ball, play two balls off the tee, two into the green. I always know if I can shoot under par playing worse ball, then my game's in pretty good shape.

Q. Is anyone stingy with those four-footers?

RORY McILROY: No, everyone's actually okay, it's fine. Sometimes I play with my dad at Seminole, he can be a little stingy with me.

Q. Rory, I was just curious if -- I know the White House is looking at travel restrictions. If you were to lose the exempt status that allows you to not have to quarantine when you come back to the United States, how would that impact your schedule? Specifically last week to this week, you wouldn't have been able to play.

RORY McILROY: I think there has to be some common sense involved as well. If I'm going from one bubble in Europe to basically entering another bubble here. I mean, I take a test, it's negative, I don't see why -- I don't see why that should prohibit you from playing in a golf

tournament.

Yeah, I think the testing thing is the biggest thing. If you can take a test and it's negative, obviously I know that symptoms take between two and 10 days to show up, but I think everyone's pretty aware that if you start showing symptoms, that you go get another test and see what's happening.

I just think there's so much more knowledge about the virus now than there was, say, 10 months ago that I -- like if it were to come in, I would obviously do it and I couldn't do what I did this week and go straight from Abu Dhabi to here. But I just think there's ways around it now and there's more knowledge about the virus and testing is more readily available. Yeah, I would say that would be a little bit extreme to have to quarantine.

Q. You've spoken before about not letting Augusta dominate your thoughts as you start the year. Is that more difficult when you go November to April, where you've had a good run, as opposed to April to April, and then added to that, as you said, going back to Kiawah not long after that where you had a fantastic time in 2012. Are these things more prominent in your thoughts than they would be in a different year maybe?

RORY McILROY: Kiawah not so much. Obviously Augusta, it's still very fresh in the memory, it's only two tournaments ago. I played Abu Dhabi last week and before that was Augusta. Again, as I said before, I'm just trying to play the golf course that's in front of me this week, which is Torrey Pines, and next week I'll try to do the same at Scottsdale.

It's not -- I mean, it's hard because you're always assessing your game and say, okay, how is it going, is it progressing, with trying to get yourself in the best possible state for April, but I don't think anything can put you in a better place than playing well at golf tournaments you're playing and getting into contention and winning. I think winning and being in contention and playing good rounds of golf, that's the best way to prepare for going into major championships.

DOUG MILNE: All right. Rory, thank you for your time. We appreciate it and wish you the best of luck this week.

RORY McILROY: Thanks, Doug. Cheers.