

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
May 4, 2022

RORY McILROY



JACK RYAN: Rory, if we could just get an opening comment from you. Obviously defending champion, but a different venue this week. What's that experience like for you and how does it feel to be back at the Wells Fargo Championship?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, anytime you can defend a title, it's a nice thing to do. Obviously my success at this tournament's been at Quail Hollow and not here. Never played here before, never seen the venue. So I played 18 holes yesterday and just played another nine today, so I guess as a replacement for Quail Hollow, it's a pretty nice one.

Hadn't really heard much about the golf course, but from what I've seen the last couple days, I really like it. It's a really -- it's just a solid golf course. You can't really fake it around here. You've got to hit the ball really well, green complexes are tricky, pretty small targets, the rough maybe isn't up as much as they usually have it here because of the time of year, but overall really solid test. Looking forward to getting out there tomorrow.

Q. Rory, you obviously have some pretty good memories from the course across the street. I wonder if you've been back there since and how would you reflect on that week, and does it seem really distant, does it seem fresh? You know, it's 11 years now.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so I have been back. I did something for the club with The First Tee there a couple years ago. I'm actually going to go over this afternoon and take a look at -- whenever I went back a couple years ago, the Blue Course wasn't fully renovated, they were still in the process, so I'm going to head over. That day a couple years ago they gave me honorary membership and as a member I think it's only right I go over and at least show my face. So I'm going to go over this afternoon and I'm looking forward to that.

Yeah, 11 years ago does seem like a long time ago. It is a distant memory. I think I've watched it back so many times, I don't really remember the experience of it. I remember more just from watching on a laptop or a TV screen.

It is cool. I was driving in here yesterday morning and going along whatever road that is and I looked left and I thought, "That looks like Congressional. Oh, that is Congressional." So good vibes obviously from this area.

Yeah, I still to this day think it's the best week of golf I've ever played in my life. The ball was on a string that week and you wish you could bottle that every single week that you play. Unfortunately, that's not the case, but I think that's still the benchmark of how I can play. That's as good as I could play that week.

Q. Just real quick, when you do watch it back, the shot at 10, is there a particular moment that stands out?

RORY McILROY: Not necessarily. Just sort of how free flowing it was and how at ease I looked. Yeah, just sort of how comfortable I was with everything. I was coming off the back of a tough loss at Augusta and that was still fresh in my memory. I think I was just so hyper-focused that week that I knew I was playing well, and I think just the lessons of Augusta, they stayed with me the whole way throughout the week and I didn't get ahead of myself and mentally I was just in a really good place.

Q. Rory, based on -- a small sample size, but based on your time at Congressional and a couple days here, what's your sense of enthusiasm for golf in this area? A lot of fans around here would like to see the PGA TOUR come back to D.C. on a regular basis. Is that something the players you feel would kind of be behind if that happens?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I know it's not D.C., but down the road in Baltimore last summer, the crowds there were incredible at Caves Valley. Yeah, I think this market and this area deserves a PGA Tour event every year if there can be one here. There's some phenomenal golf courses.

I thought this course is very underrated just because of the golf clubs that it's surrounded by, Congressional, Burning Tree, all the rest, but this is very, very good in its own right. Yeah, I'd love to have a PGA Tour event in this area every year. I love playing golf in the Northeast, it's some of my favorite style of golf courses and if we were to come back here more regularly, I think everyone would like that.

Q. Rory, coming off your Sunday performance at Augusta, do you now feel higher expectations or more pressure heading into the next 10 weeks that are going to define your year?

RORY McILROY: No, not necessarily. I think if anything it gives me comfort knowing that my game is there. And no, not more expectation or pressure. I think that's always there, that's always been there, but I got a lot of confidence from that round on Sunday. I did a lot of great things. It's something to definitely build on over the next few weeks.

Q. And you're known as someone who has played well historically in wet conditions. Do you think that's fair or has that kind of played out by now?

RORY McILROY: I think I've won 30 times around the world, not all those weeks were wet and rainy. I think I'm pretty good in most conditions.

Q. Happy birthday.

RORY McILROY: Thank you.

Q. I hear it was a special day for you. Can you tell me about what the HBCU athletes that you met with today did for you?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it was a wonderful pro-am. It was some -- hi, guys. I thought you were supposed to be playing the 10th.

Yeah, it's great. Not every -- there's a lot of Wednesdays on Tour in pro-ams that aren't as fun as something like today. To be able to spend time with these guys and see what great golfers they are but also the great people that they are as well. I was sent all their CVs and bios last night and just the list of things they've done and accomplished at a young age is really, really impressive. It was really nice to spend some time with them this morning.

Q. Was there a birthday song?

RORY McILROY: There was, there was a happy birthday song on the first tee, which was very nice of them.

I don't know, I think a 33rd birthday isn't really much to -- sort of right in the middle. 35-something, 30-something, 33 just seems sort of like, meh, I don't know.

It was very nice of them to sing happy birthday to me.

Q. Can I ask you guys what it was like playing with him today?

FIRST TEE PARTICIPANT: It was amazing. Super friendly, super just helpful. Asked him some tips for chipping and he was willing to give them to me, so I'm going to take them back and give them to our kids when I coach them so they're really appreciative of it.

FIRST TEE PARTICIPANT: Yeah, I would just reiterate that it was unreal. You see these pros on TV and you never think you get a chance to see them, meet them in person let alone play with them, so it was an amazing experience for sure.

Q. Rory, the conversation --

RORY McILROY: Play well on the back nine. I get the easy one, I only play nine holes today.

Q. The conversation I know at least for the PAC and the policy board, your position has been kind of what the Tour's going to do in the fall, I know there's a lot of things in the fall. Personally, what would you like to see the fall schedule look like?

RORY McILROY: What I would like to see the fall schedule look like is my preference, but I guess this is the hard thing, right? You've got 200-whatever members that you're trying to keep everyone somewhat happy. Some guys really like to play in the fall because they feel

like they get a head start in the FedExCup. The top guys like to feel like they have time off to actually have an offseason and rest and prepare for the next season coming up.

I guess it's sort of trying to find a balance of that. It's hard. Like I -- it's very hard for me to stand here and say I'd like all the fall events to go away and play three or four of these suggested tournaments that they're thinking about because that's good for me, but that's not good for the entire membership. So I have to try to -- I have to try to look at things that are going to benefit the entire membership and the entire Tour and not just what benefits me or the top players.

I think there's enough programs in place that benefit the top players right now, PIP program, the Comcast Top-10, the FedExCup bonus, all of those things are designed to funnel more money into the top players' pockets. You play the best and the cream should rise to the top by the end of the year. That's why Comcast Top-10, FedExCup bonus money is so high. And then you add the PIP in there for the people that make the biggest impact on the Tour.

So I think the top players, we've gotten a lot of things our own way the last couple years and I think for us to talk about just taking the fall events away for the guys that sort of need them and need those opportunities would be very, very selfish.

It's a delicate balance. It always has been on the Tour with a membership that's this big because you're trying to accommodate so many different people and so many different scenarios.

So it's hard for me to sit here and say this is the way I would like the fall because the way I would like the fall probably isn't the common consensus among the membership.

Q. One thing that would have changed from 22 years old to 33 would be taking questions like that, sweeping questions about the game, the state of things. You seem as a person in your early 30s very comfortable tackling those subjects. Did that come naturally on the way up or have you had to learn that, as one of the top players, you're going to be asked things about the state of the game?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, like if I had been asked that question 10 years ago, I would have been like, What are you talking about? I just want to go play golf and make birdies.

But I think when you get to a certain point in the game and the stature, it's more responsibility sort of falls onto your plate and you have to accept that responsibility. I feel like I'm in a unique position, especially with this tour. Having grown up on the European Tour and sort of seeing both sides of the coin a little bit, I think I'm in a pretty unique position to at least give my perspective on some things.

But it is something I've had to learn, it's not something I've always been interested in, but I think it's something that is pretty important, especially where the game is right now, making sure it's headed in the right direction.

Q. Welcome back to Washington, Rory. I was looking at the players that you played with today. I'm from D.C. and I've known those guys since they were teenagers and actually known you since you were a teenager. It's kind of interesting to see you all together. To follow on the previous question, what The First Tee does is sort of teach leadership along the way. Is there some sort of program like that in Ireland, and if there was, do you think that would be something that would be useful or would have helped you?

RORY McILROY: There's not a program like that that I know of in Ireland. There may be. I'm certainly more familiar with The First Tee program and all the great work that The First Tee does. I've been lucky enough to play with people that have come through The First Tee program and I think more -- look, they get to golf and that's great, but I think just the life lessons that can be taught through golf and like you said, leadership roles, mentoring the next generation coming up, that's something that to be instilled in you from such an early age in The First Tee I think is -- like when I was 18 or 20 years old, I certainly wasn't thinking about that stuff. All of these young men and women that come through The First Tee program, it feels like they're much more prepared for the world than I was at that age. I think they do a really good job. I would be a really huge advocate of The First Tee.

Q. One follow-up, you re-signed with TaylorMade. What was the process going into making that decision? Did you ever consider moving on to another manufacturer or back to a previous manufacturer? What went into your decision?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, no, so I think I've worked with those guys for five years and hand in heart, they are the best team, they're the most dedicated people in that business.

And look, there's times where -- and I had never -- never once did it cross my mind to go to another manufacturer. It may have crossed my mind to go with no manufacturer and just sort of do my own thing, but at the end of the day that presents problems as well in terms of having the paradox of choice and there's so much choice out there. Just to really simplify it.

At the end of the day, TaylorMade does make the best product in golf. I'm really happy with every single Golf Club in my bag. I feel like the golf clubs that I have right now are the golf clubs that I can use for the next three, four, five years and be very, very successful with them.

But it doesn't mean that you don't look at other stuff or you see what else is out there. Of course you keep an eye on things, but I'm really happy with my decision and delighted I'm staying with TaylorMade for the foreseeable future.

JACK RYAN: Thank you, Rory.