

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
21 October 2020

RORY McILROY



MICHAEL BALIKER: We'll go ahead and get started here with Rory McIlroy at the interview room at the ZOZO CHAMPIONSHIP @ SHERWOOD.

Rory, you've had some experience here at Sherwood in the past, albeit it was 7 to 10 years ago. I guess how has the refresher been going so far this week and what stands out to you about Sherwood?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I've got some good memories here. Playing Tiger's event back in the day, this was the first ever competitive round I played with Tiger was here at Sherwood, which was pretty cool, so remember that.

Yeah, it was always a fun time of year. You know, coming up to the holidays, it felt sort of pretty festive. It was a little chillier than it is now.

Yeah, I've always enjoyed Sherwood. It's a great golf course, it's a great venue for a golf tournament. Whenever this tournament was announced that it would be coming here instead of going back to Japan, I was excited. I think a lot of the guys were looking forward to playing it.

Yeah, it's been nice to get out on the golf course the last few days and refresh my memory a little bit of the place. It hasn't really changed much. The greens are a little different, a little bigger, maybe a little less severe than they were in the past, but yeah, it's great to be here. Nice that we're able to play this week. Obviously not too long of a trip from Vegas, so it's all good.

Q. Rory, what are you working on right now with your game both with this week in mind and with the Masters coming up? What are your focuses?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, so I've been working quite a bit on some technical stuff in my swing the last few weeks, trying to get my right arm working a little better in the backswing, get it supporting the club a little more, keeping the club a little more out in front of me.

Yeah, I've been working on my swing a bit. I felt like I made some decent progress last week apart from the last five holes on Sunday and that's really been it. I've been tinkering or messing around with trying to get a little more speed; not that I could -- I used it a little bit last week and I led driving distance and I think I was No. 1 in strokes gained off the tee.

Again, this week there's a lot of 3-woods and 5-woods off tees, not that many drivers, but going into, you know, looking ahead to a few weeks' time at Augusta, it's somewhere where

you can maybe hit the driver a little bit more and maybe take advantage of that.

Yeah, I felt like most stuff was pretty good last week. If anything, my approach play, my iron play wasn't that good, so just trying to tidy that up. But other aspects of my game, I thought I putted pretty well, short game was decent. Yeah, just a little bit of swing stuff, sort of neutralize the ball flight a little bit. Yeah, dial in the approaches and I think I'll be good to go and play well this week, and then obviously looking forward to a couple weeks' time as well.

Q. Rory, you've been pretty outspoken talking about how much you miss fans on the golf course and the excitement that they bring. What is your comfort level now that Houston Open and Bermuda have decided to bring back a limited number of fans?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I think I'm more comfortable with it now than I was, say, back when we were going to play the Memorial in July with fans. I think that was the first one and I think everyone was still a little skeptical about that. But I think right now with -- I think we just know a little more about COVID and what it does maybe not long-term wise, but at least in the short term what it maybe does to the body and what the symptoms are and treatment protocols and therapeutics.

It's hard because the demographic that is a Tour player and the people that are out on site, if they get COVID, more than likely nothing is going to happen. They might get symptoms for a couple of days, but they'll bounce back and they'll be fine.

But it's down the line is if someone gets it, you know, we need to still be careful and protect the communities that we play in as well. If local officials there are comfortable with fans on site and the PGA TOUR are comfortable in working with local health experts, then I'm all for it. I think it's a gradual reintroduction back to having fans again, but I'm certainly more comfortable with it now than I was maybe two or three months ago.

Q. Rory, you've been one who's gone to Augusta several times away from tournament week. I'm just curious about the times you went there just for fun, if that was the case. I think you've gone with your dad?

RORY McILROY: Yeah.

Q. I don't know if you can recount a couple of those. I was just wondering how that experience was, not so much the getting ready for the Masters but just enjoying it.

RORY McILROY: Yeah, I think that's the -- like I've always said, my favorite times at Augusta have been not the Masters. My favorite times is we've taken a couple of father-son trips, which has just been awesome. It's the greatest -- I think for a golfer, the greatest experience in golf is being invited to Augusta by a member, staying in one of the cabins, doing the dinners at night, going down to the wine cellar, picking your bottle of wine, all that sort of stuff. That's the cool -- there are the cool things about Augusta that a lot of people don't see.

Yeah, I've always said my favorite times at Augusta have been away from Masters week and I would say there's a lot of people that feel the same way. There's going to be a little bit of that feel come November where it's quieter, no patrons on site, all that stuff. We've played two majors this year where there hasn't been fans and it's still a different atmosphere than what you get week in and week out.

But no, as I said, those experiences at Augusta when you're there and there's nothing on the line apart from just having a good time, they're the best times.

Q. Have any of those trips been in the fall and do you recall it playing a lot different than we would see in the spring?

RORY McILROY: No, most of those trips have sort of been leading up to Augusta. I think the earliest I've ever been there is February and I don't know if February is comparable to November in terms of temperature-wise.

I feel like I've played Augusta in most conditions. I've played it when it's been in the 40s and I've played it when it's been in the 80s and 90s and sort of everything in between. I think I've played it enough to know what to expect no matter what the temperature and what the conditions are.

Q. Just writing about the fact that all Irish golf clubs are going into a six-week lockdown starting tonight, which is not good. A lot of indignation, too. It's not the golfers' fault, but that's another matter.

What I wanted to ask you was just going back those 10 years when you played with Tiger, was it one of those sort of pinch yourself moments and was it one of those moments where you thought it could be the start of a really good friendship?

RORY McILROY: Yeah, it wasn't the first time that I played with Tiger. We played practice rounds before and gotten to know each other a little bit. It was the first competitive round.

Yeah, the start of maybe -- you know, I think at that point I just won on the PGA TOUR that year and I was pretty excited to be playing in that tournament. It was my first time playing. And it's an 18-man field, you've got to be one of the best players in the world to tee it up. Yeah, I was pretty excited. Nervous as well.

I remember coming down the last hole, I think he was 5 under for the day and I was 4 under for the day and I'm thinking, oh, if I birdie, I can tie him. He ended up making birdie and shooting 6 under and I doubled the last to shoot 2 under. So it ended up not being quite as close as it was, but still a great experience. I think everyone will remember, especially someone of my age, growing up watching Tiger. I think sort of that's etched in my memory just that little bit more because it was a dream of mine to play in a tournament with him and against him.

Q. And just quickly, there's a Masters question going ahead to the next couple of weeks, do you feel as though you really need these four rounds at Sherwood going into Augusta or are you just comfortable and the four rounds are really just fine tuning?

RORY McILROY: I mean, it's four rounds, it's an opportunity to win a PGA TOUR event. That's sort of first and foremost what my focus is. It's been a year basically since I've won, I haven't won since China last year.

I think that's first and foremost. It's a great opportunity to try to get a win and get into contention and I think that would be a big step if I were able to -- I haven't really been in contention much since coming back from the lockdown. If I could get into contention this week and have a chance to win, I think that would be great for just overall confidence in play and all that. But obviously great looking ahead a couple weeks' time and getting in a position where you're having to hit shots under the gun and under that pressure of trying to win a golf tournament.

Q. Rory, what wine did you pick out of the wine cellar?

RORY McILROY: I don't know. There's been a few thankfully, which is nice. Jeez, we've drank all sorts of wine there. I do remember, we went with Jimmy Dunne one time and he picked -- there's a winery, Dunn Vineyards, so we had a bottle of that.

The cool thing about Augusta, their wine selection is unbelievable and the prices that the members pay for the wine is very reasonable compared to what it would be in restaurants and other places. If you're an Augusta member and you're a wine lover, you're in luck.

Q. Are you by any chance working on any specific shots or specific shapes for Augusta right now, or is it too soon?

RORY McILROY: High bombs, as Phil would say.

No, not particularly. I don't think -- I think nowadays everyone talks about trying to hit a draw around Augusta. Jack Nicklaus won the thing six times and wasn't particularly known for moving the ball right to left, so you need to just execute. You need all aspects of your game in good shape, especially your short game.

I think going back to Phil, one of the conversations I remember having with Phil back in the day was he always tried to get his short game so good at Augusta so then he could be ultra-aggressive with the second shots knowing that he had a short game to bail him out if he did miss it on the wrong side. So you try to get your short game really sharp and get everything else sort of following that.

Q. Seems like everyone from our circle listening to these press conferences, it's all

about Augusta -- Augusta, Augusta, Augusta -- and you mentioned this week (inaudible) the opportunity to win a big PGA TOUR event, but I'm wondering, is it hard to keep your focus on this week and your next start when all everyone seems to be talking about is Augusta?

RORY McILROY: No, not really. Look, again, it's what's important to you, right? It's not what's important to the masses and what's important to the media. I mean, you guys are going to write about Augusta because that's what people want to hear about, right? You're catering to what people want to read.

But for me, this is -- I'm 100 percent focused on this week at the ZOZO CHAMPIONSHIP @ SHERWOOD and there's no part of my mind that will be on Augusta, Georgia, when I'm out there playing those 72 holes this week.

Q. And then now an Augusta question. There's always talk about big changes at Augusta, like lengthening of 5 or building a new tee on 13, but it seems like there's all these little subtle changes that happen every year that don't get really talked about. How much of the practice rounds are about mapping out those changes?

RORY McILROY: Right, it's mostly to do with the greens, right? Or they'll maybe expand a certain green by two or three yards in one section so they can maybe add an extra pin placement, or they'll add a couple of trees on a certain hole so you mightn't be able to be as aggressive. There's all those little nuances that people probably don't know about at Augusta.

But yeah, there are the subtle things that they do every year and I think that's what -- you know, we don't have the luxury of a green book or anything like that there, so that's why practice rounds are so important, is just to try to really figure out if they've done anything. They like to be pretty secretive about it as well, so that's why preparation is key there going into the week.

Q. Rory, you've had, in the 10 or 11 tournaments you've played, tests every week. I'm curious if you've ever been nervous waiting for the result to come back and how would that anxiety, nervousness be different when you test at Augusta since we have no --

RORY McILROY: Yeah, the only -- I mean, I think with having a pregnant wife through COVID and I've tried to be careful with that, and then with my mother having some respiratory issues, having asthma, I've really tried to be careful as well.

I've never really put myself in a position I don't think to -- anyone can get it and you can get it from anywhere, I get that, but I've tried to be ultra careful just because of those two things.

I guess the only time I was a little nervous was when our daughter was born and I was in the hospital for three days, because that's -- I think you could catch it there pretty quickly. I think

going to the TOUR Championship and getting tested, that was probably the most nervous I had been about maybe catching it or having it or having a positive test.

So yeah, and I think going into Augusta, I mean the next two weeks while I prepare there, I try to be as careful as possible. I don't really -- I maybe go to a restaurant once a week while I'm at home, but I try to take all the necessary precautions. I'm loading up on zinc and magnesium and vitamin D and all the stuff that's said to maybe help protect you from it. Yeah, so I try to do my part to stay as safe as possible.

Q. Rory, this kind of touches back on the idea of preparation in general. Collin Morikawa was saying he's not going to go to Augusta before the Masters. I was just wondering, how much does preparation matter like in general? So how much better are you going to play the second time you play a course or the fourth time you play a course versus the first time seeing it?

RORY McILROY: So I think like I've always thought that preparation is only important if you can execute what you're preparing for, right?

Like if, you know, you're doing all this preparation, but you can't hit your 7-iron out of the middle of the clubface and you don't know where it's going, all that preparation does nothing because you can't execute what you're trying to do.

First and foremost, it's execution. You have to make sure you're hitting the ball well, you're doing the right things. That is the most important part, is getting your game in shape. But then I think if your game is in shape, that's when the preparation becomes really helpful. I think all the work leading up to Augusta for most of the guys or for any tournament is getting your game in shape that you're comfortable hitting the ball both ways, hitting shots that you need to hit, and then if you go into the week with that comfort in your game, then the preparation becomes very important because then you can actually -- you can prepare for any sort of scenario that you might encounter while you're playing the tournament.

Q. Do you feel like you're playing better golf by the end of a tournament week, like on a Sunday versus a Wednesday or a Thursday?

RORY McILROY: No. If anything, I think sometimes your game actually deteriorates as the week goes on because you've put so much work into the execution and the technical stuff and I think it's almost by Saturday, Sunday, if you're in contention, you're thinking so much more about the result rather than just the process that your game starts to maybe become a little more reactive and deteriorate a little bit more. And then that's why it's good to use weeks in between or Mondays and Tuesdays to reset and sort of go again. That's certainly what happened to me last week. I felt like it was sort of one of those, it was like a bell curve where it sort of wasn't great the first day, it got sort of good Friday, Saturday, and then it started to go again on Sunday. You reset here and you try to go again.

Q. You said something about nuances at Augusta National and I was wondering if

you could explain at least a little bit what it is that the veteran players of the Masters know about the place that seems to benefit them so much.

RORY McILROY: Experience. If you go back to a course every year, there's no real surprises. You've probably missed it in similar spots before, you know what it does. There's certain things you remember about certain -- you know, like the putt up the 14th green, like that's the slowest putt on the course and if you have that putt, you remember it.

I think it's just all these little things that it's just experience, I think that's it. I don't think it's anything like there's more knowledge or more -- it's just being in that situation a few more times than guys that haven't been there that much and being comfortable and having certainty of knowing what this certain shot or this certain putt is going to do.

Q. So it can't be explained, it has to be lived?

RORY McILROY: Yes, I think so, I think so.

MICHAEL BALIKER: Rory, thanks so much for the time. Best of luck this week. We'll see you later on.

RORY McILROY: Thanks, guys.