

**PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW**  
**February 16, 2022**



**RORY McILROY**

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**MICHAEL BALIKER:** Just kind of talk about being back here at Riv and the challenge this golf course presents and also just kind of getting your 2022 kickstarted on the PGA TOUR.

**RORY McILROY:** Yeah, I didn't start playing this event, sort of the first half of my career I would play over in the Middle East and wouldn't really start until the Florida swing. But started to play on the west coast a little more, played Torrey Pines, played here, played Phoenix last year and this is a place I've always, since I started coming here, I've loved it, loved the golf course, loved the area, love the vibe, feel like it's a course that suits me really well and it's sort of turned into a can't-miss event on the PGA TOUR. All the top-10 are here this week and I think that speaks volumes for what we all think of this event. It's one that you don't want to miss. It's good to be back. As you said, I haven't made a start on the PGA TOUR since October, so I'm 1-1, 100 record, so try to keep that going this week.

**MICHAEL BALIKER:** Just the state of your game, returning to competition since the Middle East and how is everything kind of trending since a couple weeks?

**RORY McILROY:** Yeah, it feels good. Obviously the end of that tournament in Dubai was disappointing, made a bad swing at a bad time, but I did a lot of really good things in there that I can't forget about. I try to just focus on the couple negatives that were there and tried to work on those last week and felt like I've put in quite a bit of time and quite a bit of work since Dubai and game actually feels pretty good coming here.

Yeah, my game feels in a much better place coming into this year at this event compared to last year. I didn't play so well here last year and I was sort of, sort of searching a little bit for things, but game feels a lot more settled this time around.

**Q. Rory, a couple things. Going into the year this year, what is it that you're most looking to improve and have be better than it was last year for -- especially for the major championships? And then also, do you feel like this week gives you a good barometer of where your game is in terms of a major championship-type game?**

**RORY McILROY:** Yeah, I think just more consistency is what I need. I don't have to look that far back, I go back to 2019 and I had, I think I had 19 top-10s in 24 starts or something like that. I think it's just a consistency that I want to sort of get back to that level of consistency. I think if you do that and you play to that level week in, week out, you're inevitably going to give yourself chances to win golf tournaments, whether it be regular tour events or majors or anything else. That's what I'm looking to improve on going forward.

Yeah, I think when all the top guys get together at a golf course like this, I think it is a good

barometer and a good measurement to see where your game is. Yeah, you have to do a lot of things well at this golf course and a lot of things you have to do well here are the same things that you have to do well at major championships and major championship set ups. Yeah, like this is one of the best we play. I wish we played a lot more golf courses like this on Tour, but just because of everything else that goes on around professional golf tournaments, you have to go to venues that can facilitate that. But this is a real treat to play here this week.

**Q. Just on the 18th at Dubai, were you always going for that shot or was there a decision to be made?**

**RORY McILROY:** Not really. I had 255 front, I could have got 5-wood there, I could have stepped on a 3-iron and got there if I wanted to. I tried to hit a 3-wood and hold it back up against the wind from a hanging lie and I just caught it off the heel and it flared up in the wind.

**Q. The fact you didn't seem to have your best stuff that day and you were still right there until the very last shot, what's that say about --**

**RORY McILROY:** So I thought I did a lot of the scoring aspects of the game very well, I putted well, I chipped well, I hung in there, my mental game was really good. So the things that -- you have to do everything well to win golf tournaments, but the things you have to do well to put a score together, I did, which is really encouraging because that's -- if that part of the game's there, then minor tweaks here or there is all the difference you need between doing what I did and winning.

**Q. Rory, how much of the Phoenix Open did you watch, and I guess from afar, what do you think the beers, the aces, the scene does as far as like what does it do for the game of golf? What kind of view does it give off?**

**RORY McILROY:** Yeah, I watched -- I saw a lot of it. I saw sort of everything that happened Phoenix is fun, it's awesome. I think it's a novelty on Tour. I certainly wouldn't want every week on Tour to be like that, but I think these one-off events where that can happen I think is good for the game. I think it encourages people from different walks of life to get interested in the game of golf, to feel like it's not as intimidating.

So in that respect I think there are parts of it that are really good and I think it's a good look for the game of golf to sort of move with the modern times in the 21st century, but there's a certain line there to be -- yeah, just to sort of walk that line between something that is progressive but also doesn't endanger players, endanger fans, endanger volunteers and I think that was a line that was maybe crossed a couple of times last week. But whenever you get a bunch of people together there's going to be things that happen and that's just the nature of it. There's certainly more pros than cons.

**Q. Kind of a course question for you here. As great as Tiger's career has been, this is**

**the course he's played the most times without ever winning, does that surprise you and what would be your takeaway from that?**

**RORY McILROY:** I mean, from the outside it looks like a perfect golf course for Tiger. I don't know. I mean, he's human like the rest of us and he's going to have courses and weeks that aren't -- just aren't going to happen. I don't know how close he was to winning here, I'm sure he's had a bunch of chances maybe? No?

Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I know he's in here at 3:00, so why don't you ask him?

**Q. Rory, if I got this correctly, how was it to get back to the other Holywood and, I assume, have a chance to hook up in person with Michael Bannon?**

**RORY McILROY:** Michael's been -- he was with me before the Middle East in Florida for a week. It was nice. I hadn't been home in over two years just because of COVID, so it was nice to get back, nice to see some people, nice to introduce our daughter to her extended family.

It was nice. I got a stomach virus in the middle of that week, so I didn't see much of anyone for a while, which wasn't great. It was nice to be home. I don't think you realize how much you miss it until you go back and see some people. It was certainly nice, a nice way to get over the disappointment of Dubai.

**Q. Your practice round yesterday with the Collegiate Showcase winner, how did you guys get paired up and what did you learn about him?**

**RORY McILROY:** Yeah, I really enjoyed playing with Michael. I think the associate head golf coach at Wake Forest, Aaron O'Callaghan, was an Irish teammate of mine growing up, played boys golf together and sort of men's amateur stuff. So I roomed with Aaron when I won the European Amateur in 2006 which got me into The Open in 2007. It was one of the first nights I ever drank when I went out that night, and I was introduced to Jagerbombs that night. We were staying in this room and Aaron, we got back to the room, and Aaron was sick on his bed, fell asleep on my bed and I slept on the floor.

So, yeah, we've had some really good times together. Aaron came over here, was the golf coach at Louisville where John Murphy was, who has now turned pro after playing the Walker Cup. And Aaron's moved onto Wake Forest and obviously they have a great golf program there and he's done really well. Obviously Michael shot a great score on Monday to qualify.

It was good to be out there and play with him and sort of impart -- he was asking me a bunch of questions and I said you just shot 66 yesterday, what do you need to know? The golf course isn't going to change between Monday and Thursday. Yeah, great young player and it's nice to be in a position where you can do that and help the sort of younger generation coming through.

**Q. Rory, it's been almost a year since Tiger's wreck. Do you remember where you were when you heard the news and what does it mean to see him out here moving well?**

**RORY McILROY:** Yeah, he -- not he. I think we were all at The Concession playing the World Golf Championship there and then the reports started to filter through whenever that was, if it was a Friday or a Saturday. I don't know what time of the week. Maybe it was earlier than that.

Yeah, just, you know, I think at this point we're all just happy that he's around and moving well, as you said, and he's able to be a dad, just be this tournament's host and sort of just do all that sort of stuff.

Yeah, it was shocking and it was really -- I guess it was probably touch -- maybe not touch and go, but there was a lot of concern all around the world for him. To see a year later that he's doing well and, as you said, he's moving around, it's great to see.

**Q. A couple of kind of financial questions, I guess. In your position with the Tour now on the PAC and eventually the board, we talk a lot about increase in prize money and bonus programs, et cetera. Do you have any kind of sense what it's going to look like five years from now, 10 years from now?**

**RORY McILROY:** Yeah, there's a forecast through 2025, yeah. Any forecast that the PGA TOUR has produced in the last 10 years, they've hit their target.

Yeah, so the forecast for 2025, it looks good. I think the executive leadership team on the Tour are doing a really good job. It's sort of a turbulent time in the world of professional golf but I think we've got the right people sort of doing the right things.

**Q. When you talk about a forecast that looks pretty good, can you put -- how would you describe that in numerical terms, or can you?**

**RORY McILROY:** I mean, I don't know if I'm in a position to share that information. I'm not sure if that's something that I can share, but --

**Q. What if we just keep it right here?**

**RORY McILROY:** (Laughs.) I mean, there's a ton of guys out here that are going to get rich if they play well, put it that way.

**Q. Secondly, as it relates to the much talked about Super League or whatever we shouldn't describe it as, you made your position quite clear.**

**RORY McILROY:** Not so Super League.

**Q. Elaborate, please? Is there any part of you that is, A, tired of talking about it and --**

**RORY McILROY:** Oh, I'm so sick of it.

**Q. I'm not sure if I have a follow now. Is there any part of you just being in the position you're in that is the least bit curious to see who's going to be the first?**

**RORY McILROY:** Curious, I don't know if I'm curious, but -- yeah, look, I guess I'm intrigued who would -- certainly for the younger guys, like it just seems a massive risk and a -- I just don't see -- I can maybe make sense of it for the guys that are getting to the latter stages of their career, for sure. I don't think that's what a rival golf league is really -- that's not what they're going to want, is it? They don't want some sort of league that's like a pre-Champions Tour. I don't know -- yeah, like I guess -- I understand the financial part of it for guys that are later on in their career. You look at the people that have already said no, Rahm, No. 1 in the world, Collin Morikawa, myself. Like you've got the top players in the world are saying no, so that has to tell you something.

**Q. Rory, when you just said about you've been through the forecasts and the financials and everything else because you're on the board, why is it do you think that there are players out here that basically are suggesting that what you're saying isn't true?**

**RORY McILROY:** Maybe they're not educated enough on it, maybe they've got people in their ear that's giving them misinformation, but the numbers are right there in front of you. The Tour's financials are audited independently every year, this is what they are. And I've seen everything, I've been through it. I sat through the board meeting in Houston. I've seen it all. I think that's -- that has to -- and there's a lot of players that maybe aren't privy to that information and maybe that's on the Tour to educate the guys a little bit more, but the information's all there.

**Q. And when you hear somebody talk about media rights and how they're misused and how they shouldn't do this, do that, many different things, different options, what do you say to that because obviously you understand that the media rights are basically the anchor to how the Tour is built?**

**RORY McILROY:** I mean, what's the NBA do, what's the NFL do, what's MLB do? The Tour don't control the media rights in some way. There may be little things that they can be more flexible on, but the whole structure of it. I mean, the domestic media rights deal that basically just came into the Tour, that's a huge deal and if the Tour don't have that control, they don't bring in all that money.

So I can get some of the frustrations from some guys and in terms of some more flexibility here or there, but the overall structure of the thing, it's what every other sports organization does.

**Q. How do you see the Ryder Cup captaincy decision playing out?**

**RORY McILROY:** I mean, that depends on where guys see their future and where they want to play. I think -- I don't know if a decision's coming soon or not, I'm not a part of that sort of setup on that board, but yeah, it depends on where guys want to play their golf in the future is where -- is where the European captaincy is probably going to come from.

**Q. Could be a midsummer decision?**

**RORY McILROY:** Yeah, but I mean, I don't think that's a -- the players certainly aren't antsy for it to happen. We're certainly not talking about it. The Ryder Cup still seems so far away. If it is a midsummer decision, that's fine.

**Q. Not so far away is the first major of the year and I'm just curious if you have a schedule in mind leading up to Augusta.**

**RORY McILROY:** Yeah, I'm sort of doing what I sort of usually do. Here, Bay Hill, PLAYERS. Still on the fence about the Match Play, whether I'll play or not, but I'll definitely play San Antonio and then Augusta. Sort of want to play my way in. Say you don't make the weekend at the Match Play and you don't play San Antonio, you've basically got two weeks off before you tee it up in arguably the biggest stroke play event of the year, so your last competitive rounds are match play and then you've got two weeks off. That seems like a little much to me. And it's nice to feel like I play my way in. Played San Antonio once before and played pretty well, so going to do that.

**MICHAEL BALIKER:** Rory, thanks for the time, best of luck this week.