

MASTERSPREVIEW

THE SEASON'S FIRST MAJOR PROMISES FIREWORKS

AUGUSTA NATIONAL GOLF CLUB



Rory McIlroy can become the sixth member of golf's most exclusive fraternity – players who possess a career Grand Slam – with a win at The Masters this week.

MCILROY EYES CAREER SLAM

The Masters Is the Last Missing Piece on Rory's Résumé

If there is such a thing as magic in golf, it's the spell cast over the game the first full week of April each year when the world arrives at Augusta National for the Masters tournament.

It's the acres of emerald green grass, the banks of pink and purple azaleas, the soft scent of pine pollen.

It's Amen Corner, the ghosts of Aprils past and standing at the spot where Bubba carved and curved his name into history three years ago.

It's a pimento cheese sandwich, the big white scoreboards and the undeniable sense that something special is happening.

That's where Rory McIlroy steps into the story this year.

From the moment McIlroy wrapped his arms around the Claret Jug after winning the Open Championship at Royal Liverpool last July, thoughts — his and others' — have wandered toward the 2015 Masters and McIlroy's quest to complete the career Grand Slam before his 26th birthday.

After McIlroy won the PGA Championship in a dark, rainy finish at Valhalla last August, it felt as if the eight months until The Masters couldn't pass quickly enough.

"I started thinking about Augusta on the 18th of August when I won the PGA," McIlroy told reporters last fall.

Here's why McIlroy and this Masters matter more than most: Only five players — Gene Sarazen, Ben Hogan, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Tiger Woods — have won the modern career Grand Slam. McIlroy has the chance to join arguably the most exclusive

IN THE WAY TIGER WOODS ONCE SEPARATED HIMSELF WITH HIS ABILITY TO DRIVE PAST TROUBLE AND PAST HIS COMPETITORS, RORY MCILROY NOW LAUNCHES HIS TEE SHOTS INTO THE STRATOSPHERE AND INTO PRIME SCORING POSITION — AND AT AUGUSTA, POWER IS A HUGE ADVANTAGE.

club in professional golf. Phil Mickelson, still missing a U.S. Open trophy, is the only other active player within one victory of the career Grand Slam.

Then there's the fact that McIlroy won the last two major championships played. He became just the 21st player in history to win consecutive majors, and only two players — Hogan in 1953 and Woods in 2000-01 — have won three majors in a row.

A McIlroy win at The Masters would not only complete the career Grand Slam, but it would also send him to the U.S. Open at Chambers Bay in June chasing the Rory Slam. "It's beginning to look a little Tiger-esque," Graeme McDowell says. "I told the boys at The Open I didn't think we were going to see the new Tiger era, as in someone creating their own kind of Tiger-esque era just yet. I'm not eating my words but I'm starting to chew on them."

Each time he's been asked, McIlroy has said golf has been looking for a player to seize the moment, and he believes he's that player. He has delivered brilliantly.

"I've really found my passion again for golf," McIlroy says. "Not that it ever dwindled, but it's what I think about when I get up in the morning, it's what I think about when I go to bed. I just want to be the best golfer that I can be.

"And I know if I can do that, then the trophies are within my capability. I'd love to win a lot more and (I'm) really looking forward to ... trying to complete the Grand Slam."

MASTERS NOTEBOOK

- With one simple Tweet, **Tiger Woods** changed the complexion of this Masters. "I'm playing in the Masters. Thanks for all the support," he wrote on Friday.
- **Bubba Watson** became the second-fastest in Masters history to win two green jackets when he won in 2014. He did it in his sixth start. Horton Smith did it in just three, winning the inaugural in 1934 and again in 1936. Watson and **Phil Mickelson** are the only left-handed golfers with multiple major titles.
- **Jonas Blixt**, playing in his first Masters, shot four rounds under par in 2014. The only other Masters rookie to do that was Fuzzy Zoeller, who in 1979 also became the last rookie to win the tournament.

- **Jordan Spieth** became the youngest runner-up in Masters history at age 20.
- Watson became the fourth player in the last 22 majors to win multiple major championships, joining Mickelson, **Rory McIlroy** and **Martin Kaymer**. He is also the 17th player to earn more than one Green Jacket.
- Watson led the field in driving distance, averaging 305.62 yards off the tee, and was tied for fifth in greens in regulation, hitting 50 of 72 for the week.
- With a seventh-place finish in 2014, **Lee Westwood** is the only player to finish in the top 15 in each of the past five years.
- **Sergio Garcia** will head into the 2015 Masters with the longest active major streak. It will be his 63rd major championship start in a row.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE'S TAKE

The Masters has become the most watched and revered golf tournament in the world. There is no other event that stirs us into interest the way it does. Aesthetically, it has its own color of green and level of perfection, and because it is the only major played on the same course year after year, every shot has historical context. Indeed, none of us even need to hear commentary; we know the shots cold.

Eighty years ago, in 1935, Gene Sarazen was the heavy favorite to win at Augusta, and he did so in dramatic fashion. Three shots behind Craig Wood with four holes to play, he hit a four-wood from a tight lie, and the ball cleared the pond fronting the 15th green and rolled straight into the cup for a double eagle. Two thousand people were watching, and Grantland Rice wrote, "...the vocal cataclysm that sent its thunder over the red hills of Georgia must have lasted five minutes." It was the shot of his life and has come to be called the "shot heard round the world" thanks again to the aforementioned Rice. Sarazen won the playoff the next day, on April 8, 1935.

Part of the lore of that shot is that it gave Sarazen victories in all of the four majors: the U.S. Open, the Open Championship, the PGA Championship and The Masters. Sarazen was the first and so far only man to complete the career grand slam by winning The Masters.

TV COVERAGE

THURSDAY, APRIL 9
ESPN 3 P.M. - 7:30 P.M.

FRIDAY, APRIL 10
ESPN 3 P.M. - 7:30 P.M.

SATURDAY, APRIL 11
CBS 3 P.M. - 7 P.M.

SUNDAY, APRIL 12
CBS 2 P.M. - 7 P.M.

ALL TIMES EASTERN

CONTENTERS

There are horses for courses, and then there's Bubba at Augusta.

Bubba Watson and Augusta National present the perfect pairing of player and course. It's where his prodigious length and remarkable creativity serve him the best.

Rory McIlroy hasn't been at his dominant best so far in 2015, but he certainly possesses the tools and the temperament to complete the career Grand Slam this week.

Dustin Johnson's comeback from sabatocal has gone about as well as he could have hoped, with a win and three other top-6 finishes to show for his 2015 so far. He's too talented not to win a major, and soon.

Matt Kuchar remains the local favorite, and the former Georgia Tech Yellow Jacket has a streak of three straight top-8 finishes at Augusta.

Jordan Spieth nearly became the youngest winner in Masters history last year, and his play this year has done nothing to diminish the massive expectations surrounding the young Texan.

Jason Day is a popular pick to earn a breakthrough major at The Masters, where he has two top-3 finishes on his resume.

Nobody's playing any better this year than **Jimmy Walker**, who has two wins.

WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

"It's all about the lag putting. It's such a difference in weight of club and stroke and everything. I'm just trying to figure it all out."

— 2013 Masters champion Adam Scott, who is switching back to a long putter and anchored putting stroke for this week's Masters, in an interview with PGATour.com. The anchored putting stroke will become illegal on Jan. 1, 2016.



Compiled by Rob Doster.
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Photos by Athlon Sports



Rory McIlroy hopes to change that. Having won three of the four biggest events in golf and needing only The Masters to complete the career slam, he will be, like Sarazen eight decades ago, among the heavy favorites, and talk of his chances will dominate the media run-up to the year's first major.

Rory's chances aside, The Masters is never short of stories. It has been the one major, even through all of his injuries and off-course calamities, that has been perennially good to Tiger Woods. Of course Bubba Watson, who has won there twice, will be the defending champion, and it would surprise no one if he contended once again.

Wouldn't it be something if the three of them were all playing their best come Sunday? If it were any other tournament, I'd say the chances were slim, but since the inception of The Masters in 1934, no other event or course so consistently brings out the best in the best players.

Augusta National goads the players into taking chances, and it rewards high, arcing, creative shots like no other place in golf. It is that beauty of design that endures even more than the aesthetic appeal of the perfect green grass, which makes it the perfect course for players and patrons alike.

— Brandel Chamblee, Golf Channel