

# ILLINOIS GOLFER

## THE OPENING 9

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## The Golf War comes to Chicago

TIM CRONIN REPORTING

Since hosting the Solheim Cup in 2009, Rich Harvest Farms, the backyard course on the 1,800-acre estate of software tycoon **Jerry Rich**, has welcomed the Western Amateur, the NCAA Championship for men and women, and a pair of Arnold Palmer Cups.

Those drew attention, and in the case of the NCAA two weekends, a fairly large number of fans. This weekend, Rich hosts the fifth tournament in the LIV Golf series, the new limited-field tour backed by Saudi Arabia's investment wing that has lured several dozen regulars from the PGA Tour and the DP World (nee European) Tour.

Never before has there been such upheaval in golf. A sport that tries to portray itself as the epitome of gentlemanly conduct has been torn asunder and ended up in court. Witness:

- The Saudi funding has been severely criticized, especially because of the country's abysmal human rights record – murdering journalist-critic **Jamal Khashoggi** in 2018, and its longstanding poor treatment of women and other groups over the decades – to pick two glaring examples. Curiously, the Saudis have gotten little criticism for funding six tournaments on the Ladies European Tour through Aramco, its oil company, or for hosting a Formula 1 race.

- The mere existence of another circuit has been questioned, especially after **Greg Norman**, who tried and failed to form a breakaway tour in the mid-1990s, became involved.

- Insults have been exchanged and friendships broken between players once under the same umbrella and now on rival tours. **Rory McIlroy** and **Phil Mickelson**, for instance, will not be dining together soon.

Throw in the bonus money / guaranteed contacts for signing, the massive



Rory Spears / Golfers On Golf

**SIGN OF THE TIMES** The billboard at the roundabout approaching Rich Harvest Farms tells the story.

purses, the no-cut nature of the tournaments, the shotgun starts, and the most recent change, allowing players to wear shorts, and there's plenty of ammunition for those who love the status quo of the PGA Tour to beef about LIV Golf all day long.

Now the LIVers have arrived in greater Chicago, with Rich Harvest, tucked away off Interstate 88 in Sugar Grove, hosting the LIV Golf Invitational Chicago through Sunday. There will be \$25 million up for grabs, \$20 million in the individual purse for the 48 starters – \$4 million for first, \$120,000 for last – and another \$5 million pot for the team competition, which Norman and his players find intriguing and most others pay little mind to.

Rich Harvest higher-ups – and there is no higher higher-up than Rich himself – are hoping for a turnout akin to the Solheim across the three days of play commencing on Friday. They say their corporate sales have been brisk and individual ticket sales have been as well, though there was at least one 25

percent discount link on Twitter earlier in the week.

With that as the introduction, here's a look at what to expect this weekend:

**1 Name players** In the early stages, PGA Tour purists could point to the LIV lineup and say Norman and Co. were signing golf's over-the-hill gang, players in their 40s with name recognition who hadn't won recently – though Mickelson, the \$200 million man, is, thanks to his victory at 50 in last year's PGA Championship – the outlier.

But more recently, LIV has made inroads, with British Open winner and world No. 3 **Cameron Smith** of Australia, **Joaquin Niemann** of Chile and this week **David Puig** of Spain, who turned pro after playing in two of the first three LIV tournaments as an amateur.

Puig thus abandons his Arizona

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State team with two years left – he could have been at Olympia Fields this weekend instead, playing in the Fighting Illini Invitational – much as **Matt Fitzpatrick** did at Northwestern a semester into his college career. That turned out all right for both Fitzpatrick, last seen winning the U.S. Open, and for the Wildcats. Fitzpatrick and NU golf guru **Pat Goss** remain on good terms.

Puig's signing is the equivalent of the American Football League's gambit of signing top players to contracts under the goalposts at the Senior Bowl, ensuring the established NFL didn't grab them. Expect more as older players age out or are relegated to the Asian Tour, like a failing soccer team in the Premier League drops to the next division.

This week's field has the winners of 12 of the last 26 major championships, headed by Smith, Mickelson, **Dustin Johnson** and **Bryson DeChambeau**. And, countering the over-the-hill line, 35 of the 48 players are in their 20s or 30s.

**2 Real golf** The contracts with massive bonuses are criticized from here to Sunday by the purists, who, along with the no-cut aspect, call the LIV tournaments exhibitions. That's been wrong from the start. Major team sports all pay their players regardless of performance, but nobody calls those exhibitions. What's more, the majors pay everyone, including those not making the cut.

A fortnight ago, the LIV Boston tournament went to the wire and beyond before Johnson rolled in a 30-foot eagle putt on the first hole of sudden-death to win the week's \$4 million jackpot. Nobody who saw it thought Johnson or the rest of the field was playing hit-and-giggle golf.

**3 Mornings off** Aside from today's program, all play is in the afternoon thanks to the shotgun start. The action starts at 12:15 p.m., threesomes on 16 of the 18 tees. At first blush, that means there's room to expand the field to 54 players, but this team aspect LIV is so committed to means they want to stay at 48 with 12 four-man squads. (That also kills their chances of world ranking points, which allows players in the top 50 access into the four majors. The ranking system

demands 72-hole tournaments with at least 75 players and a cut for points. For what it's worth, the field has 10 of the current top 50.)

**4 Slow play** It's taken about five hours to get these 48 players around the course. Honestly, with one threesome a hole and two holes open, they can't play in four hours or less? Guessing the LIV gang will never tee it up on Village Links of Glen Ellyn, which invented the Keep Pace system a generation ago.

**5 The team scheme** The idea is to not only hand out 20 percent of the purse each week to the top three teams – and fully \$75 million in the season-ending team championship – but to eventually coax well-heeled individuals or companies into buying the teams in conjunction with some players who have been awarded equity in their groups.

No, really. The LIV brass think these teams will be worth \$100 million each – and where they'll make back their considerable investment. So far, no executive answers to the name of **Max Bialystock**, but we're still checking.

It is, at least, moderately easy to tell who's who. The caddie bibs have logos and team colors.

**6 National teams** At least a handful of squads are lined up along national or ethnic lines. Punch GC – the names seem to have been devised by a grade-school marketing team – boasts four Australians in Smith, **Marc Leishman**, **Matt Jones** and **Wade Ormsby**. Fireballs GC is Spanish-speaking, with **Sergio Garcia**, **Abraham Ancer**, **Carlos Ortiz** and **Eugenio Chacarra**. If that brings out the crowd, more power to them.

**7 Rich Harvest on display** The layout is a difficult walk, as the first and last three holes are all but separated from the other 12 by a thick forest. It's not the top 100 course *Golf Digest* raters have

been coaxed into believing, but there are a handful of standout holes, along with some that are humdrum. As estate courses go, it's not nearly the equal of Mill Road Farm, the layout in advertising titan **Albert Lasker's** backyard from 1927 to 1941. That was the most difficult course in Chicago at the time, tougher than Medinah No. 3.

**8 Sideshows** This is the aspect of the LIV operation easiest to criticize and that which plays into the circus criticisms. Some holes have loudspeakers playing music. Any serious a golfer wants to get away from the world when playing, and that means without music.

There are also post-tournament concerts on the weekend, which isn't new. It reminds one of when the John Deere Classic had a band ready to play each night the final putt on 18 dropped. It drove those nearby trying to write a story crazy, but didn't affect play.

**9 TV coverage not on TV** The LIV Golf telecasts are slickly produced and the announcers, starting with **Arlo White**, are less inclined to constantly tout LIV as the greatest thing in the history of golf than they were at first. The camerawork is generally good – whispers have it that freelance technicians are getting close to double the rate networks covering the PGA Tour pay – and the scoring graphics (pictured above left)

are modeled on auto racing. This is the Formula 1 leaderboard converted to golf.

The problem is finding a way to watch it. In the U.S., it's online or nothing via the LIV website, YouTube, or DAZN. And that's it.

In Canada, weekend rounds are on one English-language station, CHCH in Hamilton, Ont., which is on satellite and cable TV across Canada the way WGN once was in the U.S., and all rounds are on a French sports network.

Norman says they're negotiating with four U.S. outlets for broadcast/cable coverage in 2023. They only need one.

ROUND 1			
10 TO PLAY			
1	SMITH	-5	
	GOOCH	-5	
3	NIEMINN	-4	
	WOLFF	-4	
5	JOHNSN	-3	
	DECHAM	-3	
	WIESBR	-3	
	KAYMER	-3	
9	NA	-2	
	REED	-2	
	BLAND	-2	
	KAEWK	-2	
	LAHIRI	-2	
	WESTWD	-2	
	HOWELL	-2	