

ILLINOIS GOLFER

THE OPENING 9



Thursday,
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It happens every spring

Reporting from Chicago, Illinois

The Masters is upon us. There was a 2 1/2-hour delay before play got underway, and many of the late starters won't finish today, but the chase for the green jacket and the hefty check tucked inside began today in Augusta, Ga. With that, the golf season really gets underway for those of us in the thawing north. Here's our opening Opening 9 of the year:

1 Fred Ridley, the velvet-gloved Florida lawyer and expert golfer who chairs Augusta National and the Masters Tournament, dropped a small bombshell on Wednesday when he said the club agreed with the United States Golf Association and R&A that the golf ball was going too far.

Not, mind you, when you and I smack it, but when the pros do. Ridley said Augusta National backs the planned rollback of the ball the USGA-R&A want to implement in 2028 for top-level golfers and in 2030 for the rest of us.

His reasoning, at least publicly, was simple. Real estate. Augusta National has famously bought property from the adjoining Augusta Country Club to lengthen the par-5 13th hole, and less famously put a tee on the former Berckmans Road to extend the par-4 fifth, but there's nowhere left to go.

"For almost 70 years, the Masters was played at just over 6,900 yards," Ridley said as his news conference. "Today the course measures 7,550 yards from the markers, and we may well play one of the tournament rounds this year at more than 7,600 yards. I've said in the past that I hope we will not play the Masters at 8,000 yards. But that is likely to happen in the not too distant future under current standards. Accordingly, we support the decisions that have been



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SO MANY OPTIONS At Augusta National, where birdies and eagles fly and someone gets a new piece of clothing at the end of the week, thanks to signs like this, it is impossible to get lost.

made by the R&A and the USGA as they have addressed the impact of distance at all levels of the game."

Ridley said he hoped the PGA Tour would follow in the footsteps of the rule making bodies to avoid "a great deal of stress in the game, which it doesn't need right now.

"If you use 5 percent as an approximate number, a player hitting it 320 yards is going to lose 16 yards. So, I mean, that's not insignificant. What we found, though, over the years is that we lengthen the golf course, everybody says it's really long, and then two or three years later it's not so really long.

"So my guess is that even when this change is implemented that maybe other aspects of technology that are within the rules and the physicality and ability, technical ability of the players will catch up," Ridley added. "I mean, I don't believe that we will start building new tees closer to the greens. It's a possibility, I suppose, but I doubt it. Particularly since this is not going to be implemented for quite some time.

"So I think we have some time to look and see what's going to happen. We have some more room, but we don't have a lot. So I'm holding to that 8,000-

yard red line, and I just hope we never get there."

This is significant because the longer the course gets, the more difficult it is to create the approximate second shots that architect **Alister MacKenzie** and club co-founder **Bobby Jones** wanted the players to tackle. And that's something Jones and fellow founder **Clifford Roberts** were dealing with just after World War II, when Augusta National had only been open some 15 years.

In the first edition of "The Story of American Golf," published in 1948, **Herbert Warren Wind**, who was close to Jones, wrote, "Although Bobby Jones and his aides have continually revamped tee positions and hazards and green decks, a number of the holes are now not as testing for the pros as they were intended to be. Under ideal conditions, six of the two-shotters now play as drive-and-pitch holes. Two of the par fives can be birdies by the pros a shade too regularly, without requiring brilliant shots. The added length the present-day

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pack has cultivated had made the difference.”

In 1948, when Augusta National was playing about 6,800 yards, the big hitters who could also score regularly were **Sam Snead** and **Ben Hogan**. **Byron Nelson** was playing part-time by then.

Augusta hovered around 6,900 yards for decades. Only the arrival of the hard ball – thank Acushnet’s Titleist ProV1 for that – has caused the expansion in the last 20 years.

Wind added, “One cannot emphasize too strongly that golf will benefit immeasurably if, proceeding naturally but with judgment, golf remains essentially the same game that was played by **Charlie Macdonald**, **Jerry Travers**, the young (**Francis**) **Ouimet**, and their followers so that the wonders they wrought will always have a contemporary application, a continuing pertinence and vitality. The golfer in 2030 should be able to recognize instinctively the genius that fashioned the Grand Slam.”

Wind wrote that 76 years ago. How’s that worked out?

2 Can **Rory McIlroy** be classified as a sentimental favorite this year? That appellation is usually reserved for those with no real chance. McIlroy has a very good chance, but he’s a decade removed from his last major title, has scar tissue from almost having an arm in a sleeve of the green jacket, and has to be feeling the pressure of completing the grand slam. He was among the last to register this year, on Tuesday, buzzed through a 10-minute news conference and was off to the range.

If you’re acting about for sentimental favorites, how about **Gary Woodland**? The former U.S. Open champion is playing in his first major since brain surgery. The golf gods smiled on him Wednesday with an ace in the Par-3 Contest.

3 The real favorite has to be **Scottie Scheffler**. Forget the No.1 world ranking and look at his putting. When that’s on, as it has been more often than not this season, Scheffler is unbeatable. And everyone up to **Verne Lundquist** will tell you putting is key at Augusta. Right, Verne?

“Yes, sir!”

4 The weather delay means it’ll be impossible for **Tiger Woods** to finish the first round today. He’ll be up early tomorrow to finish his round, maybe the last six holes, and then have to play 18 more. That’s tough for a guy with as many ailments as he has, but especially that tender angle on Augusta’s steep hills.

5 Monday’s solar eclipse, dramatically total just a few hours south of IG World Headquarters, was only partial at Augusta National, but that didn’t stop the club from handing eclipse glasses to incoming fans.

It’ll be a long time until the next hint of totality in these parts, but examples of said glasses are now on eBay from \$6.25 and up, along with all the other usual Masters goodies.

6 The Masters has offered a myriad of online streams for the last few years, and there’s nothing like firing up a tablet and a computer for online coverage to go along with ESPN’s weekday shows. But how the wizards can have a featured-groups channel and not have the grouping of Scheffler, McIlroy and **Xander Schauffele** on it is unfathomable. The good news is, the delay in starting means most of their round falls in the conventional TV window. ESPN will not ignore the trio.

7 Three of the eight winners in this year’s Drive, Chip and Putt national championship at Augusta National qualified in the regional at TPC Deere Run. **Madison Pyatt** of Eureka, Mo. (Girls 7-9), **Texas Terry** of Manor, Tex. (Boys 10-11), and **McKenna Nelson** of Beaver Dam, Wis. (Girls 14-15) were regional winners in Silvis. Deere Run has a history of first-time winners in the John Deere Classic, and now has the same rep with the younger set.

The two Chicago-area contestants, **Lucy Wiertel** of Oswego and **Emory Munoz** of Lockport, didn’t fare as well. Wiertel, who qualified at Scioto Country Club, finished ninth in Girls 7-9, while Munoz took seventh in Boys 7-9, up from ninth a year ago.

8 If you are a golf architecture lover, you’ll want a new book covering the course history of Chicago Golf Club. “The Prairie Raynor,” co-authored by Chicago Golf Club historian **John Moran** and Dr. **Rand Jerris**, the latter of USGA museum fame, has just been issued by Grant Books of England. It’s \$200 but promises to be a bargain, and will quickly be hard to find. Only 300 of the 1,000 copy run has been allocated to non-members. See <https://www.grant-books.co.uk/> for the details and to order.

9 Finally, you won’t find a word of it on the Bolingbrook Golf Club website, but there’s chatter the KemperSports-operated course will host a LIV Golf tournament in September, replacing Rich Harvest Farms as the area site for the upstart circuit’s third visit to the Chicago area. Clued-in St. Charles Country Club superintendent **Chuck Barber** was the first to say so on Twitter/X on April 4.

To date, KemperSports has not confirmed that Bolingbrook will host, but our guess is a tee time there in late September – the approximate dates LIV visited Rich Harvest the last two years – will be impossible to come by.

Detractors of LIV are many, some because of the Saudi financing, some because of the division it has wrought in the previously chummy world of golf, some because they don’t like 54-hole shotgun starts. But LIV has recognized that a tournament in a big city can attract spectators, and if upwards of 15,000 a day, to use a conservative estimate, trekked to Rich Harvest on each weekend day for two years, closer-in Bolingbrook could be an even better draw. Among the pluses for Bolingbrook is 10 hours of national television time on the weekend.

Logic says LIV and Bolingbrook would want to make formal the announcement next week, after the Masters, and ideally from their point of view, be able to promote the newest wearer of the green jacket as a competitor in it. Current LIV players have won seven of the last 15 majors, so it’s no stretch to bet it will be eight of 16 after Sunday’s back nine.

– **Tim Cronin**