

BY JOHNNY BARTON



2015 OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP

FINDING FOCUS IN THE MIST

LINE TOPICS TO CLEAR THE FOG AT ST ANDREWS

1 OPENING REMARKS

Once every five years, the faithful from around the world are called upon to return to their Holy Land, the sacred, mediaeval fairways of St Andrews, for a week-long golf celebration; a time of ritual, observance and dedication to this most peculiar of pursuits.

They've been playing some kind of golf here for the better part of a millennium – since the 1100s, according to one estimate. St Andrews was described as a “metropolis of golfing” as long ago as 1691.

The Old Course, one of four that run out and back on an odd strip of linksland wedged between the Eden Estuary and St Andrews Bay, is the original, the archetype, golf's blueprint, the source of the game's magnificent river.

British Opens at St Andrews are special, an opportunity for the game's elite practitioners to walk the same holes, breathe the same air and take divots from the same turf as every famous golfer through the ages (apart from Ben Hogan, who on his one trip to the United Kingdom, to win the 1953 Open at Carnoustie, couldn't be bothered to take a small

detour to visit the home of golf).

“If you're going to be a player people will remember, you have to win the Open at St Andrews,” says Jack Nicklaus, who checked that box in 1970 and '78.

2 CHANGES TO THE COURSE

This year is the 144th playing of the Open, and the 29th on the Old Course. The layout has changed since the last Open here five years ago.

When the alterations were announced by the St Andrews Links Trust in 2012, there was outrage. Architect Tom Doak was “horrificed”.

Architecture critic Darius Oliver described the changes as a “desecration of this golfing monument”.

There was an online petition. A digital soapbox was created (#savetheoldcourse).

Message boards lit up with rage directed at the barbarians responsible for such vandalism, or stupidity, or evil: R&A secretary Peter Dawson and house architect Martin Hawtree.

“We will not forget what they have done to the Old Course,” Oliver said. “And we cannot forgive.”

Why are the fundamentalists so furious? What drastic, dramatic de-

facements have occurred? Well, a few little bumps were added, and others were reduced. Some bunkers were moved a little, a couple of new ones were made, and a few old, obsolete ones were filled in. Bits of green were smoothed or ruffled.

The most heinous crime in the eyes of the critics? The Road Bunker on the 17th hole was widened by a foot or two. Sacrilege!

The reality is that the course is es-

sentially unchanged – it will total 7,297 yards for the Open, eight yards less than in 2010. And if the minor changes don't work, guess what? They can be changed back.

THE ONLY CONSTANT TO THE LAYOUT ON THIS TIMELESS STRIP OF TURF IS CHANGE.

Major-championship courses have had to protect themselves from ever-advancing firepower by expanding and sharpening the challenge they present.

3 BREAKING GOLF'S FOUR-MINUTE MILE

Johnny Miller was the first person to shoot 63 in a Major, in the 1973 US Open at Oakmont.

Astonishingly, this has been achieved 26 times, by 24 golfers – Greg Norman and Vijay Singh have done it twice – including eight times at the British Open, most recently by Rory McIlroy at St Andrews in 2010.

But no one has yet recorded a 62. The Old Course feels like a likely and fitting place for it to happen.

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4 FAREWELL, TOM WATSON...

St Andrews is a place where golfers come to say goodbye. Arnold Palmer played his final Open here in 1995; Jack Nicklaus followed in 2005.

You hit your last tee shot that matters on the 18th, walk on tired old legs to the Swilcan Bridge, then stop to take in the scene. You pose for photographs, shed a tear and accept the adulation of the crowd, fellow competitors and golf dignitaries. You remember the moments, the good and the bad, and you are grateful for all of it. You are nearly home.

This year it's the turn of Tom Watson, 65.

It was 40 years ago that young Tom showed up at Carnoustie with a tartan flat cap and Danny Noonan hair for his first tilt at the title, and he won in a play-off with Australia's Jack Newton.

Watson took to the British way of golf, and the British crowds in turn took to him.

He went on to win the title five times and would have made it six,



A desecration? After changes, the old course is 7,297 yards, eight yards less than in 2010.

tying Harry Vardon's record, but for overclubbing at the 71st hole at St Andrews in 1984, or at the 72nd hole at Turnberry in 2009.

At the latter, old Tom played like Tom of old – 59-year-olds generally have no business on Major-championship leaderboards – and the crowd loved him all the more. (The oldest winner remains Old Tom Morris, who was 46 when he won in 1867.)

Watson played alongside Nicklaus in his 2005 valediction and was clearly moved. He's an emotional man not given to public displays of emotion, but cometh the hour

expect all British reserve to be reversed, inside and outside the ropes.

5 ...AND FAREWELL, NICK FALDO...

Also doing the whole Swilcan Bridge farewell will be Nick Faldo, or Sir Nick Faldo, as he likes to be known. The former world No. 1-turned-CBS announcer turns 58 during the Open.

He played in his first Open at 18, less than five years after taking up golf, tying for 28th, and won it three times, including a masterful dismantling of the Old Course in 1990.

The British don't always stand on ceremony in quite the same way Americans do. Brits celebrate underdogs; Americans venerate overdogs.

For the home crowd, more upsetting than the news that Faldo's hour of strutting and fretting is almost up is the rumour that dulcet-toned first-tee announcer Ivor Robson might, after 40 years, be making this Open his last.

When Faldo strikes a heroic, will-ye-no'-come-back-again pose on the home hole, he might briefly recall being there in 1988, playing in the Dunhill Cup.

A thick fog had rolled in, and Faldo, always a rather dour and deliberate presence on the course, refused to play his approach shot.

Capturing the attitude of so many towards not just the man but to the game in general, a loud British accent boomed through the mist with an inimical imperative, sound advice for us all, in and out of golf: “Get on with it, you plonker!”

6 ...AND FAREWELL TO PETER DAWSON

It will be the last Open, too, at least in an official capacity, for Peter Dawson, who will retire in September as head of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club.

Succeeding him, with a name straight out of a P.G. Wodehouse novel, is Martin Slumbers, who has been shadowing Dawson since March.

Slumbers is a 55-year-old, two-handicap accountant turned investment banker, most recent-

ly Deutsche Bank's head of global business services – not your typical headmasterish, former military British golf-club secretary.

Dawson took over from Sir Michael Bonallack in 1999 and steered what was a sleepy, slightly inebriated old boys' club towards a path of becoming a modern, professional governing body.

Among his achievements:

- In 2004, “The R&A” was created, a separate entity from the members' club, run more like a business than an amateur committee.
- Dawson was a key figure in securing golf's return to the Olympics after a 112-year absence – the event in Rio de Janeiro a little more than a year from now is

IT WILL BE THE LAST OPEN FOR TOM WATSON, NICK FALDO, PETER DAWSON AND, PERHAPS, IVOR ROBSON.

sure to recruit a new generation of golfers the world over.

- The R&A's male-only status had long been the biggest challenge to its legitimacy as the global governing body and custodian of the game (outside the US and Mexico, which is the USGA's patch). All that changed in February when seven figurehead women members were appointed as honorary members: Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal (Anne), Dame Laura Davies, Renee Powell, Belle Robertson MBE, Lally Segard, Anika Sorenstam and Louise Suggs. This change was long overdue, and happened reluctantly, grudgingly even. It has a whiff of too-little-too-late tokenism. But the R&A is now, technically at least, a mixed club.

7 THE OLD COURSE IN CONTEXT

The R&A uses about £5 million (\$\$10.6 million) of the profits from the Open to support the growth of the game around the world.

It might, for example, pay for a range in Colombia or send lawnmowers to Zimbabwe.

Recently, the R&A funded a four-year project to create a definitive database of golf courses around the world, including establishing the first “official” count of the world's golf courses (something Golf Digest has been doing in its Planet Golf section since 1999).

The intention is to publish a biennial report so that the growth of the game can be tracked. According to the report, “Golf Around The world 2015”:

- As of the end of last year, 34,011 golf facilities have been identified in 206 countries.
- The vast majority (79 per cent) of that supply is in the Top 10 golf countries.
- Forty-five per cent of the world's courses are in the US.
- Of the 34,011 facilities, 71 per cent are open to the public.
- Worldwide, measured in 18-hole equivalents, there are 696 new golf courses under construction or in advance planning.
- Asia is home to the most new golf projects in the world, with 207 courses under development. Many would argue that the best of the 34,011 courses are the British and Irish seaside links courses. Best course in the world? The Old Course, of course.

8 WHO WILL WIN?

Approximate betting odds as of early last month:

- 4-1: Rory McIlroy
- 10-1: Jordan Spieth
- 14-1: Tiger Woods
- 16-1: Dustin Johnson
- 20-1: Justin Rose
- 20-1: Adam Scott
- 22-1: Henrik Stenson
- 25-1: Rickie Fowler

McIlroy, the defending champion, opened with a 63 in 2010. (Albeit, he followed that with an 80 but did finish the week tied for third.)

Spieth is the Masters and US Open champion, but he is also a St Andrews rookie with only two British Open appearances.

Woods won two of his three British Opens at St Andrews, in 2000 and 2005, with golf that was about as good as it gets: He averaged 67.875 for those eight rounds.

But come on – at the time of writing, he's ranked 205th in the world.

Justin Rose has a poor British Open record as a pro – his tie for fourth as an amateur in 1998 is his only Top 10 finish – but this is as good a year as any for that to change.

Fowler's worst performance in a Major last year was T-5. He has played only five British Opens but has shown great affinity for links golf.

I predict that Dustin Johnson eagles the 18th the first round – two-iron, three-foot putt – for a 60 but finishes nowhere; missed cuts for Spieth and Woods; and a victory for McIlroy, pushed all the way home by Rose and Fowler.

9 LAST WORD

These predictions are bound not to come true. But what we can predict with certainty is that there will be a new “champion golfer of the year”.

And there shall be, as the golf Poet Laureate John Betjeman wrote in his famous verse on seaside golf, “splendour, splendour everywhere”. ☪

photos by Dom Furren