

THE 148TH EDITION OF THE OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP

RETURNS TO PORTRUSH AFTER 68 YEARS

BY BENNY TEO

It was 1951 when Englishman Max Faulkner prevailed over Argentine Antonio Cerdá with two strokes to spare. It was significant for

two key reasons. This was Faulkner's first and only Major victory. It was also the only time that the oldest professional golf tournament in the world had moved outside of England and Scotland.

Looking back, it was clearly divine intervention that had made it so, if the eventual winner were to be believed. With a round still to be played, Faulkner held a six-stroke lead and was reportedly already signing autographs with the postscript '1951 Open Champion'.

Helped by what he termed, a "mystery guiding light", he went on to finish with a score of three-under-par and said later, "It was all I ever wanted. The Open meant everything to me."

It probably meant a lot to Royal Portrush as well but the period of the Northern Irish Troubles, involving various military and paramilitary groups as well as denominational factions, made it difficult for such an important international event to be held there safely.

However, this cycle of violence that had claimed thousands of lives had petered out and

when The Open returns from July 18 to 21, all that remains of intercommunal conflict would have receded to the point of near non-existence.

In all, it had taken 68 years for this Harry Colt original, otherwise known as Dunluce Links, to make a reappearance and the world awaits to see who will thrive there, against the gale force of unblocked North Atlantic winds no less.

In fact, it had been so far back that this is only one out of four golf links that longtime Open sponsor, Rolex, had not visited across its long-time partnership – the other three have practically stopped hosting the Open altogether ever since Prince's turn in 1932.

Coming to Portrush this year, it is truly, anyone's game.

Even Rolex Testimonee Tiger Woods, this year's Masters champion and a favourite with four Open victories across 19 years, had no clue what to expect.

"I've only played (Royal) County Down, I've never been up to Portrush and I'm looking forward to getting up there and taking a look at the golf course and trying to figure it out," he commented after finishing tied-21st at the recent US Open.

"I hope that my practice rounds are such that we get different winds, especially on a golf course that I've never played, to get a different feel how it could play for the week. I'll definitely have to do my homework once I get there," he quipped.

For the Americans, and for that matter, anyone outside of Northern Ireland, this would be the least prepared of all the Majors that they could ever have played.

It all points towards one, strapping local hero to put on the mantle of favourite and yet, he once pronounced he wasn't a fan of tournaments where the "outcome is predicted so much by the weather". That comment however was made in 2011 when he was a mere 22-year-old who

had just been torn apart at Royal St George's.

Rory McIlroy has since matured and mellowed down, much like how his once uncontrollably curly frock had gone away.

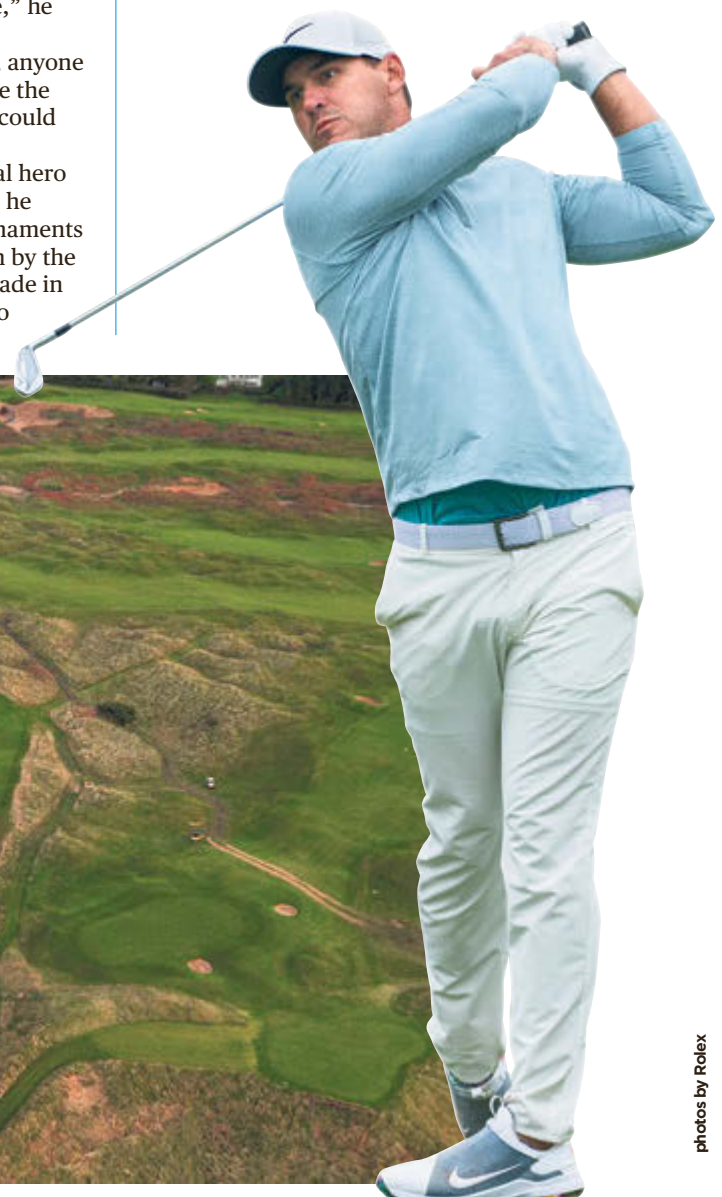
"I never thought I would play a Major in Northern Ireland. It would be the biggest achievement of my career if I was able to win it," he revealed in an interview earlier this year. Of course, he had since added four Majors to his name, including a Claret Jug at Hoylake in 2014.

Coming back home, with partisan support from family, friends, and indeed a nation keen to break out of more than half a century of civil strife and unite over a common cause, a Rory win would be monumental for the reasons cited above and more.

Come July 21, someone would be crowned "Champion Golfer of the Year" and bear the oldest trophy in the world alongside him. At the rate the Majors have been won, the only constant of late had been Brooks Koepka, another Rolex Testimonee, and no one would put it past the big guy to win back-to-back British Opens.

Apart from Koepka, only Jordan Spieth and McIlroy have had more than one Major victory since 2014, and all three have had successes on the links of the British Open. It could very well be anyone's game in Portrush but what a week it would be if a Northern Irish lad nicks it.

Rolex Testimonee Brooks Koepka (far right) hopes to do well at Royal Portrush (below).



photos by Rolex