

US Masters Countdown

The master and main attraction



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From his first Augusta appearance in 2009, Rory McIlroy has always been the talk of the place, whether in contention or bombing out

1 Eyes down for a full house everyone. It's time for the 17th Masters tournament in the career of Rory Daniel McIlroy. Pay attention, now – there won't be 17 more. So he says anyway.

“Something has gone terribly wrong if I have to compete at golf at 50,” he said on his way to winning the Players Championship a couple of weeks back. Given that he's 36 next month it's fair to ask how many more times we're going to do this. Fifteen? Ten? Fewer than 10? Whatever the number time's a-ticking.

2 It's long forgotten now but McIlroy almost got thrown out of his first Masters. We were in the old press room at Augusta late at night on Friday April 10th, 2009, when word went around that he was being hauled in front of the green jackets to explain himself. Had he smoothed out the sand with his feet in between the two shots he needed to get out of a bunker on 18? If he was found to have improved his lie he was toast.

Now 2009 was one dull-ass Masters. The joint leaders that Friday were Kenny Perry and Chad Campbell. All the big names were a mile back. Sports Illustrated had McIlroy on the cover that week – the idea that the game's next big thing might get defenestrated for a rules violation sent a buzz through the whole place.

Especially when it became clear that he had left the course and was apparently in no hurry to come back. For fully four hours nobody knew whether he was in or out. Because of him the round three pairings weren't out until 9.30 at night, long after everyone back home had gone to bed. And frankly long after we were supposed to be at the bar.

Two rounds into his Masters career he was the absolute talk of the place despite being nowhere near the lead. Foreshadowing, much?

3 The next morning I chanced my arm and went over to him by the putting green.

And even though it was pre-round (you're not really supposed to go asking for interviews of players before their tee time) and even though he was about to play alongside defending champion Trevor Immelman, he was happy to give five minutes on what had gone down the night before.

Yes, he'd watched the tape back along with the Masters people, although he'd declined to come back to the course the first time they asked him because he felt he had no case to answer. No, he didn't think at any stage that he was going to be disqualified.

“I was never worried that anything was going to happen,” he said. “It was more that there seemed to be a bit of a panic in the press room about it. I wasn't bothered.”

As it turned out the delay was mostly due to the fact that the phone number he'd given the Augusta folk hadn't been working. Which sounded like just about the most teenagery excuse imaginable. Hard not to like a lad like that.

4 Look at him now. Sixteen years later and still trying to find a way to solve the Augusta sudoku.

The boy standing by the putting green that Saturday morning had one pro title to his name, Krusty The Clown hair tumbling from his hat and the chubby chin of a kid who was yet to see the inside of a gym. The man who is second favourite for the 2025 Masters is a dad and a husband, a 43-time winner approaching middle age carrying a welterweight's punch on a featherweight's frame.

He has done everything there is to do in the game. Except win the Masters. And yet every year we get to late March and the low drumbeat of Roryising starts to pick up rhythm and tempo. Can he do it this year? Will this finally be it?

5 Let's allow from the outset that it doesn't need to be. This isn't now-or-never.

Nick Faldo won his first Masters at his 10th attempt. Phil Mickelson needed 12 goes to finally get there. Sergio Garcia holds the record – he took until his 19th Masters to win a green jacket. So while 17 is at the upper end it's by no means out of the question.

At the far end of the spectrum Gene Littler played the Masters 26 times without ever winning it. Whatever else McIlroy mines out of his career, that's not a quiz question you want to be the answer to.

Mark O'Meara was 41 when he won the Masters at his 15th attempt. He is the oldest first-time winner. In all senses McIlroy has a bit to go yet.



6 Let's step back. If you never watched a round of golf in your life and only looked at the numbers you would be forgiven for wondering why anyone cares. So what if Rory Effing McIlroy never wins the Masters? Augusta has so many stories to tell why the obsession with a golfer who has seriously threatened just one Masters victory in 16 attempts?

We all know the old adage – the Masters only starts on the back nine on Sunday. Take out three missed cuts and McIlroy has made it to that unofficial start-line on 13 occasions. Here's where he stood teeing off on the 10th each time: T40, 1, T32, T38, T15, T5, T9, T10, T3, T25, T4, T3, T21.

With the exception of 2011 he was mostly no closer to winning the thing turning for home than in the years he missed the cut. In 2015 he was eight shots behind Jordan Spieth turning for home. In 2018 he was four behind Patrick Reed; same in 2020 with Dustin Johnson. In 2022 it was tied for third but lay seven shots back of Scottie Scheffler.

McIlroy has seven top 10s at Augusta. Only one close call though.

7 Since McIlroy first set foot on the property in 2009 there have been 64 rounds played at the Masters. He has led after three of them, all in the same tournament. On the night of Saturday, April 9th, 2011, he walked off the 18th green with a four-shot lead over Angel Cabrera, KJ Choi, Jason Day and Charl Schwartzel.

We know what happened next. He held the lead until the Masters began.

But then disaster. Duck-hook off the 10th tee, four-putt on the 12th green, came home in 43. Signed for an 80. Schwartzel took the green jacket but McIlroy was the only golfer everyone wanted to talk about. Again.

8 And it never goes away. Just a fortnight ago McIlroy caused a brief internet stir when he walked up to a heckler on a practice day at Sawgrass, took his phone and got him kicked off the course. The heckler was a college golfer called Luke Potter. By all accounts a pretty good college golfer at that.

Now it was hardly the heckle of the century. The best Potter could come up with in response to a skewed drive was: “Just like 2011 at Augusta!” If the golf doesn't work out for young Luke it feels unlikely that SNL will be giving him a call.

But McIlroy let it get to him. Even now, 14 years, four Majors, hundreds of millions of dollars later and one of the all-time great golf careers already in the books, he can still be needled by it. Why?

9 Maybe it's because 2011 is still as good as it ever got for him around Augusta.

In the 52 Masters rounds that have taken place since 2011, 41 different golfers have had at least a share of the lead at the end of a round. Jordan Spieth has done it

nine times, including a record seven in a row between 2015 and 2016. Scottie Scheffler has been the end-of-round leader six times, Brooks Koepka five.

But in all that time McIlroy has never managed it. Not so much as once, not even a share. The closest he's been is one shot back, at the end of round two in 2012 (Fred Couples and Jason Dufner) and again in 2016 (Spieth).

10 “I sort of feel that Augusta owes me something and I have come with that attitude. I have come here to get something that I should have had a long time ago.”

This was McIlroy on the Friday night in 2016, ahead of being paired with Spieth for round three. He went out and shot 77 on the Saturday. It was the first time in 80 rounds in Majors that he didn't have a single birdie.

Augusta owes nothing to nobody.

11 Least of all to McIlroy. Go back to that figure of 52 rounds since his 2011 meltdown. Not only has he not led after any of them, he has been within three shots of the lead after just five of them. There's a convincing case to be made that the Masters just ain't his thing.

Certainly the other Majors have been much more fertile ground. In the past three years alone he has led each of them at one stage or another. He's been inside

the top seven at the end of every US Open round since the Saturday in 2021. That's 14 rounds in a row at the toughest of all the Majors.

He should have won at St Andrews in 2022. Or at LACC in 2023. Or at Pinehurst last year. He had a chance at Torrey Pines in 2021. He was level with eventual winner Justin Thomas standing on the 12th tee at Southern Hills in 2022. Somewhere along the way he definitely ought to have ended his Major drought.

But when you dig into it the hard luck stories over the past 11 years have mostly happened away from Augusta. It's probably a bit mad that we fixate on it so much.

12 Except here's a list. Gene Sarazen, Ben Hogan, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Tiger Woods. The only winners of the career Grand Slam. The gods.

McIlroy has been a Masters victory away from joining them since July 20th, 2014. Why wouldn't we fixate on it?

13 McIlroy does an official pre-Masters press conference every year.

An interesting exercise would be to chart the timing of the first mention of the career Grand Slam year by year.

2015: 1st question; 2016: 1st question; 2017: 1st question; 2018: 9th question; 2019: 13th question; 2020: Zero questions; 2021: 17th question; 2022: 3rd question;

■ Rory McIlroy on the first tee during the first round of the Arnold Palmer Invitational in Florida in early March. PHOTOGRAPH: BRENNAN ASPLEN/GETTY

2023: 5th question; 2024: Zero questions.

So it ebbs and it flows. It was the first thought on everyone's mind – McIlroy's included – for the first few years. Vaguely unmentionable then for a while after that. In recent years, as he rose to the top of the sport again, back to the fore. You think it might come up for the next fortnight?

14 Ultimately, though, the career Grand Slam is a niche concern, strictly of interest to the golf fetishists. Out in the world it has no currency. Normal sports followers have a vague notion the Masters is on soon and that Rory McIlroy will be trying to win it. Maybe the best measure of his pull is that people will tune in on the basis of no more information than that.

We forget sometimes what we have in our lives here. A properly global star, someone who operates at the elite end of a world sport year after year, season after season. He has been ranked in the top 10 in the world for the vast majority of the past 16 years – the lowest he has fallen since late 2009 was 16th for a week in August 2021. He hasn't been ranked lower than third since June 2022.

McIlroy has won five tournaments since last year's Masters. That's a career for some players. But he gets graded on a different curve to everyone else.

15 That's by choice, it should be stressed. For each of the past two years his name has been brought up in the judging room for the RTE Sports Person of the Year awards. Not as a potential winner, granted. But as someone who is at least worthy of making the shortlist for the best performers in Irish sport over a 12-month period.

In 2023 he had two tournament victories, three top-10s in Majors and was the first ever Irish player to be solo leading scorer on a winning Ryder Cup team. Some of us argued that a shortlist that ignored someone with those credentials could look a little silly.

By way of reply it was explained that word had come from McIlroy himself to only judge him on Majors. He had made it known through his people that there is no point including him on any shortlist until he turns four Majors into five.

If it happens any year take it he'll be on the list. If it happens in the next fortnight everyone else will need something supernova to beat him.

16 And, look, it probably won't. That's the only outcome that makes sense, right?

Augusta is the one Major where you can track the chances of each player each year with some measure of reliability. McIlroy is well able to play Augusta and his base level of performance is generally good enough to crack the top 10 in a given year.

His length off the tee means he is 97-under-par on the Augusta par fives across his Masters career. His best four holes are the 15th (–29 in 58 tournament rounds), 13th (–24), 8th (–23) and 2nd (–19). His worst four are the 11th (+21), 10th (+15), 1st (+14) and 7th (+13). He's 54 over par on the par fours and 10 over on the par threes.

When it comes right down to it there's far too big a gap there between the holes he can dominate and the ones that can dominate him. He has missed the cut in two of the past four Masters. He has posted just one sub-70 round in the tournament since 2020.

When someone tells you who they are, believe them.

17 Yet we go again. With hope, somehow, that this time it will be different. McIlroy has won three of his last six tournaments. He's won twice in America before the Masters, something he never achieved before. He leads the PGA Tour in the Total Strokes Gained and Scoring Average stats categories. He's third in tee-to-green, fifth in putting, 10th in driving. He's been the best player on tour since the turn of the year. You'd imagine that might all count for something.

Scheffler is still the best player in the world but he hasn't won since September. Xander Schauffele gathered in two Majors last year but hasn't won since July. Jon Rahm and Joaquin Niemann are the best players on LIV but we won't know what that means until we know what that means. At the very least McIlroy ought to be in there pitching.

But look. All of this has been said before. and all of it will be said again.

18 Nothing lasts forever. McIlroy has been so good for so long that it can be hard to imagine what it will be like when he finishes up. But the only certainty is that there will come a time when we don't have this, when the arc of the greatest tournament in golf doesn't happen to cross with the peak years of the best golfer ever to come from here. Where, finally, he won't be the talk of the place.

This is the best of times, right now. Whether McIlroy wins the Masters this year or whether he bombs out – or most likely something in between – this is a living chapter in one of the great Irish sporting sagas. A carnival ride that swoops and dips and rattles and rolls, all for our viewing pleasure.

It won't always be like this. It's amazing that it ever was.