

154th Open Championship

Spieth optimistic delayed returns can see him back to the top



Philip Reid
at Royal Birkdale

Former world number one has slipped to 51st and is without a tour win since 2022

The stress-free environs of the Monday before a Major were evident at Royal Birkdale as players indulged in a new pastime of bouncing golf balls on the baked fairways and playing catch, repeating the exercise time and time again as if barely able to believe their eyes. It confirmed the concrete-like hardness of the scorched earth, conjuring up memories from almost a decade ago, Jordan Spieth with a smile on his face when his improbable escapology en route to the Claret Jug in 2017 was mentioned. Remember his drive on the 13th that was so wild he finished up on the practice ground? He was allowed relief and ultimately managed to walk away with an unlikely bogey that prompted a closing stretch which saw

him birdie the 14th and then eagle the 15th, birdie the 16th and 17th, and par the last to win. That sequence of bogey-birdie-eagle-birdie-birdie was what made Spieth so special, a cavalier approach with a huge self-belief that carried him to a third Major championship, adding to his US Masters and US Open wins of 2015. Since then, however, he has been unable to complete the career Grand Slam at the US PGA, or add another Major to his tally.

Self-belief Spieth hasn't won on tour since the Heritage in 2022 – his 13th success on the PGA Tour – and, currently 51st on the official world rankings, hasn't managed a top-10 finish since last year's Memorial tournament almost 14 months ago.



But the self-belief remains that the former world number one can climb back to those great heights. "I'm quite frustrated with the results, considering I know where my game is at. It's better than it was four or five years

ago when I got back to top-10 in the world. It's without a doubt better than it was then; it's just not quite showing up in results," he said of his recent form. "At the same time, it's a stay-the-course mentality, and

“Knowing me, when the lid pops off the hole, I feel like I can go on a run about as hot as anybody can run. I'm just waiting for that opportunity.” – Jordan Spieth, the 2017 champion at Royal Birkdale

sometimes stuff like that is delayed. Sometimes you get rewarded right away, like I did back then, maybe in a bit of a lucky fashion, and I understand that sometimes it's delayed. That's how it feels like it is right now. Knowing me, when the lid

pops off the hole, I feel like I can go on a run about as hot as anybody can run. I'm just waiting for that opportunity."

'Good opportunity' He skipped the Genesis Scottish Open to arrive in England early, taking in nearby links at Formby as well as getting reacquainted with Birkdale. "Winning The Open Championship was a significant highlight of my life," Spieth said. "It's arguably the best tournament in the world and the greatest trophy in the world to attain, and the most worldly golf tournament in the world. So, on the list of goals, it was right up there at the top." At 32, his belief in his own ability is evident. "I feel better than my results have shown. (There's) a mix of reasons why,

but there's a really good opportunity this week to believe that, trust that. The more difficult the venue, it requires me to really dial-in mentally a little bit more, which I think is going to be a good thing. "Then being able to handle whatever comes your way on a difficult Major venue and kind of react a bit less. It should be a really good opportunity this week ... I feel like I have a lot of great golf in front of me. I feel like I'm way more optimistic than I've been at a lot of different points in my career." Spieth has made the cut in all three Majors so far this year without truly contending: tied-12th at the Masters, tied-18th at the US PGA and tied-56th at the US Open. A timely return to the mix at Royal Birkdale would be fitting.

Hometown hero Fleetwood chasing his Major dream at Royal Birkdale

Gavin Cooney
at Royal Birkdale

Englishman is arguably the best golfer yet to win one of the big four events



■ Tommy Fleetwood in action at the Scottish Open. 'Whatever happens in my career, I'll be able to look back and say that I gave it everything.' PHOTOGRAPH: WARREN LITTLE/GETTY IMAGES

There is a long-standing gag that Southport is the seaside town that never sees the sea, as the length and flatness of the beach means the water rarely encroaches upon its iron pier. Southport's most famous golfing son is still waiting to see the tide in his own affairs. Tommy Fleetwood is arguably the best golfer on the planet yet to win a Major championship, so the prospect of ending his drought at Royal Birkdale this week is the plotline that will prove most irresistible to the galleries. Fleetwood is the hometown hero and his face is daubed all over Liverpool. There's a 50-metre mural of him splashed on the wall of the Southport and Birkdale Sports Club less than a mile from Royal Birkdale, while a 1,000-square-metre portrait of his face has been installed outside the Liverpool One shopping centre. Fleetwood first started swinging a golf club at Southport Municipal and became a member at Formby Hall. His exposure to Royal Birkdale was limited to occasional, clandes-

tine raids with his father, when they would sneak through a gap in the trees to hit shots on the fifth hole. That hole has been adjusted to a risk-reward par-four for this edition of the Championship, but Fleetwood has had to patiently explain to reporters that his insight into the course's subtleties are not as valuable as they might have thought. "Birkdale was always hallowed turf for people that lived in Southport," said Fleetwood, "and I definitely didn't get to play here as much as I would like to." Plus, he laughed, he only snuck on to the fifth hole once or twice – it wasn't like he was doing it every day. Southport is a town in which innocence feels impossible these days. The end of July will

mark two years since three young girls were killed in an attack at a dance class in the Meols Cop area, just over three miles from Royal Birkdale. With a public inquiry into the attacks ongoing, locals are repeatedly confronted with the day's horror whenever they tune into local news. **Happy distraction** Fleetwood himself knows this is no context in which to freight golf with any added meaning, though he spoke through a choke of emotion two years ago at the prospect of his silver medal at the Olympic Games in the aftermath of the attack bringing some modicum of joy. The hosting of the Open and an opportunity to cheer for Fleet-

wood this week is another happy distraction. Fleetwood was seven when the Open came to Birkdale in 1998. He chased Tiger Woods around for an autograph but had to be content with signatures from Colin Montgomerie and Retief Goosen. He was between the ropes in 2017, the last time the Claret Jug stopped off in his neighbourhood, but quickly took himself out of contention with an opening-round 76. He addressed his slow starts to co-lead the first round of the 2023 Open, only to slip down the leader board at a saturated Hoylake and fall off Brian Harman's stately pace. He says he treasures thoughts of the support he has had while in conten-

tion at Majors, but these memories are too few for a player of his quality. He has two second-place finishes at golf's biggest events: the first came at the 2018 US Open after a barnstorming final round left him a single shot from Brooks Koepka, the second came a year later when he distantly trailed Shane Lowry at Portrush. While Fleetwood finally fulfilled his long quest for a win in the United States at last year's Tour Championship, he is refusing to allow his Major wait become a heavy burden. "I don't want to think that I have to win a Major to feel fulfilled," he says. "Like everyone else out here, we spend our lives giving it everything, and it might happen for me, it might not. "I don't want to think about it as if it doesn't happen; as if all of those hours I spent chasing my dreams, what was it all for? "Whatever happens in my career, I'll be able to look back and say that I gave it everything and I had an amazing time doing it. "I would definitely much prefer to have a Major or two, or three, on my resumé by the time my career is over. Whether that happens or not is sometimes out of your control, but I think making sure you have a great time chasing it is the ultimate thing. "Same as for everybody. Dreams do come true, we watch it all the time, but you'll never find out if yours will unless you chase it. Mine might come true; it might not."

Different Strokes

Philip Reid



Dean makes it through Last Chance door

The saloon found another late patron in Joe Dean after the 32-year-old Englishman – who has included working as a delivery driver for a supermarket chain among his professions in seeking to fund his career as a professional golfer – won the inaugural Last Chance qualifier into The Open at Royal Birkdale. As the 156th player into the field, Dean – who plays on the DP World Tour – will be making a third appearance in The Open championship, having made the cut at Royal Birkdale in 2017 and then finishing 25th at Hoylake in 2024. On this occasion, Dean – with his fiancée Emily on the bag, the pair due to

get married in two weeks' time – shot a two-under-par 68 in the new concept 12-man shootout to secure his ticket into the championship. Of his time working as a delivery driver during Covid and then more recently in 2024, Dean claimed it contributed to allowing him pursue his dream. "It was great," he said, "I never regret doing it. I was playing just one-day events, a lot of mini tours. I got to the point where Tour School was starting to get out of reach with the cost it was getting to. I had a great time doing it. Met some really good friends and (the experience) grounded me really well."



Word of Mouth

“You can hit a 5-iron from 140 yards and you can hit a sand iron from 150 yards, it just depends upon where the wind's blowing. It makes it a completely different challenge.” – Darren Clarke, playing in The Open for the 34th time in his career, on the challenge of playing links golf. A winner in 2011 at Royal St Georges, Clarke has won on the Champions Tour this year in teaming up with Ben Crane to win the Family Insurance Championship.

By the numbers

7 There are seven Irish players in the field for the 154th Open at Royal Birkdale: Rory McIlroy, Shane Lowry (together above), Pádraig Harrington and Darren Clarke (all past champions), Tom McKibbin, who earned an exemption as winner of the Hong Kong Open, and amateurs Stuart Grehan, winner of the Amateur Championship, and David Howard, who navigated his route through local and final qualifying.



Big day in the sporting calendar

Sunday will be one of the biggest days in the sporting calendar, bringing together a mishmash of ball sports that not only features the final round of The Open at Royal Birkdale but also the All-Ireland hurling final at Croke Park and the World Cup final in New Jersey. In a golfing context, Sunday – July 19th – offers some historical context in that it will be the first time in 17 years that the Claret Jug will be decided on that date.



The 2020 championship was due to finish on July 19th but it was cancelled due to Covid, so the last player to win The Open on that date was Stewart Cink at Turnberry (inset) in 2009. This year's final round also marks the 28th anniversary since Mark O'Meara's win at Royal Birkdale in 1998, the 34th and 39th anniversary of Nick Faldo's two wins at Muirfield in 1992 and 1987 and the 45th anniversary of Bill Roger's win at Royal St George's in 1981.

First-time champions hold sway

Will it be a case of another first-time champion? The sequence of new winners of the famed Claret Jug was extended to 12 when Scottie Scheffler won at Royal Portrush (inset) last year, a run which started with Phil Mickelson's success at Muirfield in 2013. Ernie Els, who won a second Open title at Royal Lytham and St Annes in 2012, was the last multiple winner ... since then, it has been a case of first-time champions all the way, a historically long stretch. Mickelson won in 2013, Rory



McIlroy in 2014, Zach Johnson in 2015, Henrik Stenson in 2016, Jordan Spieth in 2017, Francesco Molinari in 2018, Shane Lowry in 2019, Collin Morikawa in 2021, Cameron Smith in 2022, Brian Harmon in 2023, Xander Schauffele in 2024 and Scheffler last year. There was no Open in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic. The streak of 12 successive first-time champions is the longest in the championship's history, dating back to the first staging at Prestwick in 1860.

Social swing

Guys ... it is FIRM out here. – Michael Kim getting his first taste of the baked Royal Birkdale fairways. Where's the best spot for Sunday roast in Southport? – Billy Horschel (inset) bought into the traditional roast beef dinner by putting out a feeler on his social media accounts for suggestions. ... which ultimately led him to



Penelope's restaurant in Birkdale for the last fare. Another Open Championship. Another year of lost luggage. This year it wasn't British Error Ways, it was KLM (Keep Luggage Missing) but on a brighter note, there are pubs and pints. Go England – Golf Channel commentator Brandel Chamblee lost his bags but not his sense of humour.

CLASSIFIED EXTRA
LEGAL NOTICES
AN COIMISIÚN PLEANÁLA Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended NOTICE OF DIRECT PLANNING APPLICATION TO AN COIMISIÚN PLEANÁLA IN RESPECT OF A STRATEGIC INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT Proposed Upgrades to the Mortarstown Wastewater Treatment Plant and Kilkenny Road Pumping Station, Carlow, Co. Carlow County Carlow In accordance with Section 37E of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, Uisce Éireann gives notice of its intention to make an application for a 10-year permission to An Coimisiún Pleanála in relation to the following proposed Strategic Infrastructure Development (SID) at the site of the existing Mortarstown Wastewater Treatment Plant (WwTP) and Kilkenny Road Pumping Station in the townlands of Mortarstown Upper and Carlow, Carlow Town, Co. Carlow. In summary, the proposed development will consist of an upgrade to the existing Mortarstown WwTP, including the provision/refurbishment/demolition of various associated structures; decommissioning of existing Kilkenny Road Pumping Station; construction of a new inlet pump station at Mortarstown WwTP; construction of a new microtunnel gravity sewer along Kilkenny Road (R448) between the existing Kilkenny Road Pumping Station and the proposed new inlet pump station; construction of a new outfall chamber and outfall pipe including a microtunnel under the Kilkenny Road (R448); and landscaping, boundary treatment works, an upgrade to an existing borehole, and all ancillary site works above and below ground to facilitate the proposed development. The existing Mortarstown WwTP has a treatment capacity of 36,000 population equivalent (PE). It is proposed to upgrade the WwTP to increase its treatment capacity to 58,500 PE. The proposed upgrade to the WwTP will consist of the following: • Microtunnel Gravity Sewer (785m in length) connecting the decommissioned Kilkenny Road Pumping Station to a new inlet Pump Station. • New Inlet Pump Station. • Decommissioning of Existing Kilkenny Road Pumping Station. • New Outfall chamber, Outfall Pipe including a microtunnel for the section crossing under the R448. • Provision of various new structures at existing Mortarstown WwTP which comprise the following structures: ◦ New foul pumping station for local agglomeration adjacent to existing inlet works (supplemented by stand by generator). ◦ A new fuel storage tank and standby diesel generator to service the WwTP. ◦ New inlet works which includes the provision of a new odour treatment unit. ◦ 2 no. stormwater storage tanks and 2 no. stormwater return pumps. ◦ New primary settlement tanks and new primary sludge pumps. ◦ Provision of 4 no. air blowers and modifications to existing air delivery pipework. ◦ Provision of new air blower building and new bubble diffused air system. ◦ Provision of 2 no. final settlement tanks with half-bridge scrapers. ◦ Provision of new Return Activated Sludge (RAS) / Waste Activated Sludge (WAS) pumping station and station fitted with 2 no. RAS pumps and 2 no. WAS pumps. ◦ Provision of 2 no. additional picket fence tank thickener. ◦ Provision of 1 no. belt press, polymer prep unit and polymer dosing pumps. ◦ Provision of new pumped sludge transfer system. ◦ Provision of sludge import facility. ◦ Provision of minimum 6 no. odour control units. ◦ Provision of Mechanical, Electrical, Instrumentation, Control and Automation (MEICA) and Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) upgrades. ◦ New storage shed and associated gantry. • Refurbishment of the following structures at Mortarstown WwTP: ◦ Structural refurbishment of picket fence tanks. ◦ Mechanical and electrical refurbishment of existing picket fence thickener and conversion of second existing tank to a sludge blending tank. ◦ Modifications to existing administration building. • Demolition of the following structures: ◦ Existing inlet works structure. ◦ Existing storm tank. ◦ Various small chambers within the site. ◦ Existing sludge cake transfer facility. • Decommissioning of the following plant/items: ◦ Kilkenny Road Pumping Station. ◦ Existing rising main. ◦ Existing settlement tanks. • The installation of ground-mounted photovoltaic (PV) solar panels. • Diversion of existing ESB 38kV high voltage (HV) overhead lines and 10kV/20kV medium voltage (MV) overhead line on site (to be carried out by ESB). • The proposed development will also consist of all site development, landscaping and boundary treatment works, an upgrade to an existing borehole; and all ancillary works above and below ground to facilitate the proposed development. The Proposed Development will be constructed in the Carlow Town Agglomeration licenced under the Waste Water Discharge (Authorisation) (WWDA) Regulations 2007 (Discharge Licence No D0028-01). This application relates to a Proposed Development which requires a review of the existing WWDA Licence. The planning application is accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and Natura Impact Statement (NIS). The planning application, the Environmental Impact Assessment Report and Natura Impact Statement may be inspected free of charge or purchased on payment of a specified fee (which fee shall not exceed the reasonable cost of making such copy) during public opening hours for a period commencing on the 28th July, 2026 and ending at 5.30pm on the 15th September, 2026 at the following locations: • The Offices of An Coimisiún Pleanála, 64 Marlborough Street, Dublin 1 D01 V902 • The Offices of Carlow County Council, County Buildings, Athy Road, Carlow, Co. Carlow R93 E7R7 • The Offices of Laois County Council, Áras an Chontae, JFL Ave., Portlaoise, Co. Laois R32 EHP9 The application may also be viewed on and downloaded from the following website: https://www.mortarstownwwtp.ie/ Submissions or observations may be made only to An Coimisiún Pleanála ('the Commission') 64 Marlborough Street, Dublin 1 during the above-mentioned period relating to - (i) the implications of the proposed development for proper planning and sustainable development, and (ii) the likely effects on the environment of the proposed development, if carried out. (iii) The likely significant effects of the proposed development on the integrity of a European Site, if carried out. Any submissions/ observations must be accompanied by a fee of €50 (except for certain prescribed bodies) and must be received by the Commission not later than 5.30p.m. on the 15th September, 2026. Such submissions/observations must also include the following information: (i) the name of the person making the submission or observation, the name of the person acting on his or her behalf, if any, and the address to which any correspondence relating to the application should be sent (ii) the subject matter of the submission or observation, and (iii) the reasons, considerations and arguments on which the submission or observation is based in full (Article 217 of the Planning and Development Regulations, 2001, as amended, refers). Submissions that do not require a fee, can be made by hand, post, or email to laps@pleanala.ie. Submissions that require a fee can be made by hand, post, or by the Commissions online strategic infrastructure development submission portal: https://online.pleanala.ie/en-ie/sid/observation. Any submissions or observations which do not comply with the above requirements cannot be considered by the Commission. The Commission may at its absolute discretion hold an oral hearing on the application. (For further details see 'A Guide to Public Participation in Strategic Infrastructure Development' on the Commission's website www.pleanala.ie) The Commission may in respect of an application for permission decide to – (a) (i). grant the permission, or (ii). make such modifications to the proposed development as it specifies in its decision and grant permission in respect of the proposed development as so modified, or (iii). grant permission in respect of part of the proposed development (with or without specified modifications of it of the foregoing kind), and any of the above decisions may be subject to or without conditions, or (b) refuse to grant the permission. Any enquiries relating to the application process should be directed to the Strategic Infrastructure Section of An Coimisiún Pleanála (Tel. 01-8588100). • Any person may question the validity of any such decision of the Commission by way of an application for judicial review, under Order 84 of the Rules of the Superior Courts (S.I. No. 15 of 1986, as amended by S.I. No. 691 of 2011), in accordance with Section 50 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended. • Practical information on the review mechanism can be accessed under the heading 'information on cases/ weekly lists – Judicial Review of Planning Decisions' on the Commission's website www.pleanala.ie or on the Citizens Information Service website www.citizensinformation.ie