

OPEN SEASON

JOHNSON LOOKS TO SECURE MAJOR VICTORY AS U.S. OPEN HEADS TO WINGED FOOT GOLF CLUB

By **DOUG FERGUSON** | AP GOLF WRITER

Dustin Johnson capped off a torrid stretch of golf and ended the PGA Tour season by winning the FedEx Cup, a feat worthy of celebration and then a nice break. Except there was no time for that. The U.S. Open was right around the corner.

"This is weird for every one of us," Tiger Woods said.

Evidence of a year gone amok from the COVID-19 pandemic brings golf to September for the toughest test in golf. That's a big change considering the U.S. Open was last held in September in 1913, the year amateur Francis Ouimet beat Harry Vardon and Ted Ray in a playoff and put golf on front pages of U.S. newspapers for the first time. The toughest test? That's no change at all, especially at Winged Foot Golf Club.

The storied A.W. Tillinghast course in Mamaroneck, New York, has held the U.S. Open five times, and only two of the 750 players who have competed in them broke par — Fuzzy Zoeller and Greg Norman in 1984, with Zoeller winning in a playoff. It was at Winged Foot in 1974 when Sandy Tatum of the USGA so famously said, "Our intention is not to embarrass the greatest players in the world, but to identify them." Hale Irwin won at 7-over par.

Expect no different, even in September. Woods stopped by

for a practice round a month ahead of time and declared it ready to host the U.S. Open that day. Along for the ride was Justin Thomas, who declared it his favorite after one look. "It is probably the most U.S. Open venue that I've seen," Thomas said.

But this won't be a typical U.S. Open.

By moving from June to September, the field has been reduced from 156 players to 144 players because of about three fewer hours of daylight. Most painful to the USGA is it had to do away with qualifying, the hallmark of its championship. It began the year by rolling out a new marketing campaign called, "From Many, One." The idea was that some 9,000 players could sign up for the U.S. Open, go through various stages of qualifying and eventually one champion emerges. The spread of the coronavirus made it impossible to hold 18-hole and 36-hole qualifiers. Instead, the USGA had to make this an all-exempt field.

It still has Johnson, the No. 1 player in the world, along with Woods and Phil Mickelson, now 50 and facing another chance to end a quarter-century of U.S. Open heartache and get the final piece of the career Grand Slam.

A QUIET U.S. OPEN

The USGA wasn't even sure it could stage a U.S. Open because Winged Foot was so close to one of the hot spots of the coronavirus. It proceeded without spectators, just like the rest of golf for what likely will be the rest of the year, including the Masters. The PGA Championship at Harding Park in August raised two questions about the lack of noise. Did it ease the pressure on contenders? Did it take the advantage away from those who have experience handling the pressure?

MICKELSON MEMORIES

Mickelson holds the wrong kind of U.S. Open record with six silver medals for finishing second. None was more spectacular than Winged Foot in 2006, when he took a one-shot lead into the final hole. He sliced his drive off a hospitality tent and then made a decision that should haunt him. Instead of playing to the fairway and leaving a wedge into the green, he opted for 3-iron. It hit a tree and came back toward him. His next shot plugged in a bunker. His fourth shot went through the green. His chip raced by the hole. He made double bogey and finished one behind Geoff Ogilvy. "I am such an idiot," Mickelson said.

QUALIFYING

The U.S. Open prides itself on being the most open of all majors. Roughly half of the field typically has to go through a qualifier. The pandemic didn't allow for that, so the USGA had an all-exempt field to try to get the same mix of tour professionals, amateurs, and players from the Korn Ferry Tour. This is the first time since 1924.

TIGER TALES

Winged Foot in 2006 is where Woods missed his first cut in a major as a professional, his first tournament since the death of his father. What to expect this year? Because of his limited schedule, and the three-month shutdown brought on by the coronavirus, Woods has played only six times in 2020. He has only one top 10, and that was at Torrey Pines in January, the only tournament he broke par all four rounds. Even if he pulls this off, he would tie the U.S. Open record with four victories.

FACTS & FIGURES

Dates: Sept. 17-20

Site: Winged Foot GC (West)

The course: The West Course at Winged Foot was built in 1923 by A.W. Tillinghast, who was told by club founders to "give us a man-sized course." It has been a man-sized test for the U.S. Open five times and the PGA Championship in 1997. Winged Foot is best known for the severe slopes on the greens and the deep, penalizing bunkers.

The date: The U.S. Open was to be played

June 18-21 until golf was shut down for three months because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the majors were rescheduled. It will be the first time since 1974 the U.S. Open was not held on Father's Day.

Length: 7,477 **Par:** 70

Cut: Top 60 and ties

Playoff (if necessary): Two-hole aggregate immediately after 72 holes are completed.

Field: 144 players

Purse: \$12.5 million. Winner's share: \$2.16 million.

Defending champion: Gary Woodland

U.S. Open champions at Winged Foot: Bobby Jones (1929), Billy Casper (1959), Hale Irwin (1974), Fuzzy Zoeller (1984), Geoff Ogilvy (2006).

Grand Slam, Part VI: Phil Mickelson gets his sixth attempt at trying to complete the career Grand Slam. His six runner-up finishes are a record.

Tiger tales: Tiger Woods has played only six tournaments this year, and only at Torrey Pines in

January has he broken par all four rounds.

Noteworthy: Only two players in five U.S. Opens at Winged Foot have finished under par. Fuzzy Zoeller and Greg Norman were at 276, and Zoeller won the playoff.

Quoteworthy: "If it gets firm like some of the USGA guys told me they want it to be, I don't see how any of us shoot under par. Of if we shoot under par, it would be somebody winning by a lot." -- Jon Rahm.

Streaming (all times EDT): Thursday, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. (Peacock); Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. (Peacock); Saturday, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. (Peacock); Sunday, 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. (Peacock).

Television (all times EDT): Thursday, 7:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. (Golf Channel), 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. (NBC); Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Golf Channel), 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. (NBC); Saturday, 11 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. (NBC); Sunday, 10 a.m. to noon (Golf Channel), noon to 6 p.m. (NBC).

DUSTIN JOHNSON

celebrates on the 18th green after winning the FedEx Cup in the Tour Championship golf tournament on Sept. 7 at East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta.



2020 U.S. OPEN | PLAYER CAPSULES

DUSTIN JOHNSON



Age: 36
Rank: 1
Country: United States
World ranking: 1
Worldwide victories: 24
Best of 2020: Winning three times in three months and finally capturing the FedEx Cup.

Majors: US Open (2016)
U.S. Open memory: Having a 12-foot eagle putt to win in 2015 at Chambers Bay, three-putting to finish one shot behind Jordan Spieth.

Backspin: Easily the best player with only one major, especially with five runner-up finishes, the most recent at the PGA Championship. Winged Foot is one of the toughest U.S. Open tracks, and Johnson won his only U.S. Open at Oakmont, reputed to be the toughest U.S. Open test.

JUSTIN THOMAS



Age: 27
Country: United States
World ranking: 3
Worldwide victories: 13

Best of 2020: Playoff win at Sentry Tournament of Champions and winning his second World Golf Championship.

Majors: PGA Championship (2017).
U.S. Open memory: The 3-wood into the 18th at Erin Hills that set up eagle for a 63 in the third round in 2017.

Backspin: He reached No. 1 in the world, albeit briefly, as further testament to his place as one of the game's elite. His major record is lacking since winning the PGA Championship at Quail Hollow with only one top 10 in the eight majors since winning one.

XANDER SCHAUFFELE

Age: 26
Country: United States
World ranking: 7

Worldwide

victories: 4

Best of 2020: Having the low score at the Tour Championship. He didn't get a trophy. He did get \$4.5 million.

Majors: None
U.S. Open memory: Finishing double digits under par (10 under) to tie for fifth in his U.S. Open debut in 2017 at Erin Hills.

Backspin: He began the year by three-putting the 18th at Kapalua to fall into a playoff that Justin Thomas wound up winning. Much like Brooks Koepka, minus the trophies, has a reputation of showing up on the biggest stages. He has top 10s in six of the 12 majors he has played.

RORY McILROY



Age: 31

Country: Northern Ireland

World ranking: 4

Worldwide

victories: 26

Best of 2020: The birth of his daughter, Poppy, will be hard to top. Got back to No. 1 in the spring, if only for a few months.

Majors: US Open (2011), British Open (2014), PGA Championship (2012, 2014).

U.S. Open memory: Setting the 72-hole record at 268 in his eight-shot victory at Congressional in 2011.

Backspin: He contended nearly every week from last October to March. Since the return from the pandemic, he rarely contended at all. Some of that was distraction of his wife's pregnancy, some of that from not having energy from the fans. He has gone 20 majors since winning his last one.

BRYSON DECHAMBEAU

Age: 27 on the Wednesday of U.S. Open week
Country: United States
World ranking: 9
Worldwide victories: 7

Best of 2020:

Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Along with his 6,000-calorie intake, winning the Rocket Mortgage Classic and making 350-yard drives routine.

Majors: None

U.S. Open memory: Giving up his exemption as U.S. Amateur champion and qualifying for 2016 U.S. Open at Oakmont, and then tying for 15th.

Backspin: He has become must-see golf this year by adding 40 pounds of mass to fuel his 200 mph ball speed that has led to drives upward of 400 yards. His emotions still get the best of him, but his tie for fourth in the PGA Championship was evidence that his method is working. That was his first top 10 in a major.

JON RAHM



Age: 25

Country: Spain

World ranking: 2

Worldwide

victories: 11

Best of 2020:

Winning at Memorial and his 65-foot birdie putt to beat Dustin Johnson in a playoff at Olympia Fields.

Majors: None

U.S. Open memory: Opening with a 76 in his debut in 2016 at Oakmont, following with a 69 to make the cut and tying for 23rd to be low amateur.
Backspin: When a career begins with multiple victories in each of the first four seasons, a major championship seems like it's not too far behind. His patience will be tested at Winged Foot. Rahm showed dominance at the Memorial and resilience at the BMW Championship.

PHIL MICKELSON



Age: 50

Country: United States

World ranking: 51

Worldwide

victories: 47

Best of 2020:

Winning in his PGA Tour Champions debut.

Majors: Masters (2004, 2006, 2010), British Open (2013), PGA Championship (2005).

U.S. Open memory: Six silver medals as runner-up. The most shocking loss was at Winged Foot when he lost a one-shot lead on the final hole with a double bogey. Worse might have been Merion, when he twice turned birdie chances into a bogey with a wedge in his hand on the back nine.

Backspin: He needs the U.S. Open to complete the career Grand Slam, and this will be a stark reminder considering how it ended last time at Winged Foot. Even at age 50, he can't be ruled out because he's Mickelson. He said at the start of the year he wouldn't ask for a special invitation. He got in when the USGA had to go to an all-exempt field and widened the world ranking category to top 70.

TIGER WOODS



Age: 44

Country: United States

World ranking: 20

Worldwide victories: 93

Best of 2020: Very little, though he did get a top 10 at Torrey Pines in his first event by breaking par all four days.

Majors: Masters (1997, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2019), US Open (2002, 2002, 2008), British Open (2000, 2005, 2006), PGA Championship (1999, 2000, 2006, 2007).

U.S. Open memory: Winning by 15 shots at Pebble Beach in 2000, regarded as the most dominant performance in major championship history.

Backspin: Winged Foot was the first major that Woods missed the cut in 2006, a month after the death of his father. His play in the majors has been uninspiring since his Masters victory a year ago in April. When he's feeling good and his game is on, he's still as good as anyone else and has the mind for majors.

COLLIN MORIKAWA



Age: 23

Country: United States

World ranking: 5

Worldwide victories: 3

Best of 2020: Winning a playoff at Muirfield Village, winning a major at Harding Park.

Majors: PGA Championship (2020)

U.S. Open memory: Going from commencement at Cal to a tie for 35th in his U.S. Open debut at Pebble Beach last year.

Backspin: Just over one year removed from college, he has graduated into a star. Along with two victories, he lost in a playoff at Colonial. Everything about Morikawa is polished, from his swing to his attitude. Already with one major and three PGA Tour wins, this will be only his 32nd start as a pro.

DANIEL BERGER



Age: 27

Country: United States

World ranking: 13

Worldwide

victories: 3

Best of 2020: Winning playoff at Colonial, being noticed for not being in the Masters.

Majors: None
U.S. Open memory: Being part of a four-way tie for the 54-hole lead at Shinnecock Hills in 2018, closing with a 73 and tying for sixth.

Backspin: One of the best players since golf returned, and doing well even before the pandemic. Along with his win at Colonial, he has finished in the top 10 in seven of his last 11 tournaments to go from outside the top 150 in the world to a career-best No. 13.