

Open Season for Rory



Rory McIlroy's joining Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods on the '25' list underlines his golfing brilliance.

Rory McIlroy's standing within the pantheon of golf's greatest ever players was copper-fastened by Sunday's Open Championship victory at Hoylake.

To join Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods as the only other player to have won three major titles by the age of 25 is, even by McIlroy's vaunted standards, a pretty astounding achievement. Consider, in all likelihood, how long it will be before someone else joins one of the most elite groupings in professional sport?

To have someone from this island on that list is, irrespective of the tiresome jurisdictional claim over McIlroy's nationality, something golf fans on either side of the border can be justly proud of. It really is an extraordinary feat.

Just as extraordinary is the fact that Irish golfers have won four of the last eight Open Championships, with only the United States claiming more major victories since 2007.

McIlroy produced bells-and-whistles golf for three stunning rounds at Royal Liverpool, ensuring the Claret Jug was essentially his to throw away on Sunday morning.

A fourth round which entailed his keeping matters 'between the ditches' was exactly what McIlroy produced, a round of 71 ensuring he saw off the challenges of a resurgent Sergio Garcia and Rickie Fowler.

I had to re-read Nick Greenslade's 'Sunday Times' piece from Hoylake when he stated that Fowler was "incredibly, six months McIlroy's senior", all the more incredible given the wispy, barely adolescent-looking facial hair on Fowler's chin.

That McIlroy is delivering on the potential long since identified within GUI circles, and by his father Gerry who picked up a sizeable wager last weekend after his son's victory (on a bet laid a decade ago!) is somewhat of a relief.

After an indifferent 18 months by McIlroy's standards, victory in Wentworth suggested a return to the form which had made him the global golfing heir apparent to Nike stable mate Tiger Woods.

Given the highly 'Twittered' nature of his relationship, engagement and break-up with Caroline Wozniacki, his changes of management and the subsequent legal fall-out, the distractions from McIlroy's game were as personal as they were many.

To befall the fate which has blunted Woods' edge, probably to the detriment of his dream of overtaking Nicklaus' haul of 18 majors, is surely something McIlroy and those closest to him will do all to prevent.

And it would be a tragedy (of sporting dimensions alone) if the greatest talent in the modern game didn't make good on his golfing gifts.

So one hopes that calmer personal waters and a growing sense of maturity (hinted at in last Sunday's back nine) will see McIlroy not only complete the career grand slam at Augusta, but become the planet's dominant player.

To have three Irish players in the top 10 at Hoylake offers further albeit stunning proof of the strength of the game here at present. Shane Lowry's growing consistency is bringing him closer to his dream of breaking into the world's top 50, while Graeme McDowell dug in to once again demonstrate his unquestionable class.

And what a delight it was to see a trimmed down and fitter than ever Darren Clarke mixing it so well in a major once more. Who knows, should Clarke's form hold these next few months, Paul McGinley may well consider his good friend for a Ryder Cup wild card slot.

As for the boy McIlroy? Well, the golfing world is at his feet. What a talent.