

GOLF

McIlroy returns to competition as Spieth looks for third major

By DOUG FERGUSON
Associated Press

SHEBOYGAN, Wis. — Rory McIlroy faces a different set of questions from the last time he played, and he had answers for most of them.

His left ankle, with swelling the size of a tennis ball after he heard it snap while playing soccer with friends in early July, felt fine when he got off the plane and began preparing for the final major of the year. His game is good, and he sees no one reason why that will change when the PGA Championship starts Thursday. One other question was a little more tricky.

Who's the best player in the world?

McIlroy is No. 1 in the world ranking. He also has watched Jordan Spieth produce an inspiring year in golf by winning the Masters and U.S. Open, and then coming within one shot of a playoff at the British Open. Spieth has four wins this year, one more than McIlroy, though two of them are majors.

"If you were to go by this year, you would have to say Jordan," McIlroy said. "If you go over the last two years, I would say it's



AP Photo/Chris Carlson

Rory McIlroy hits a shot during a practice round for the PGA Championship on Wednesday.

probably a toss-up between Jordan and myself. That's a hard one. OK, we've got the rankings there, but it's all a matter of opinion."

And what was his opinion?

"I'll tell you at the end of the week," McIlroy said with a smile.

The shine came off golf when Spieth's bid for the Grand Slam ended at St. Andrews. It returned

when McIlroy began posting photos and videos last week that indicated he would be playing at Whistling Straits, his first tournament since the U.S. Open.

They face off Thursday afternoon, in the same group with British Open champion Zach Johnson. It will be the third time in the last eight majors that McIlroy and Spieth have played together the opening two rounds.

It has never received attention like this.

"I think that's just what you guys want to see," Spieth said. "I think he and I just want to go out there and try and win the tournament. We have to beat each other in order to do that, along with ... 155 other guys. It's great. We're all very happy to see him back. I'm excited to just share a couple days with Rory, and Zach as well."

"Hopefully, we can all get into contention, and it will certainly be exciting."

McIlroy, the defending champion, said he never targeted the PGA Championship as his return. His test came in Portugal last week when he played — and walked — 72 holes. There was no pain, no swelling. And he knew he was

ready.

"If I hadn't passed that test, I wouldn't have been here," he said.

For all the attention Spieth has earned with his four victories (along with playoff losses at the Colonial and Houston Open), McIlroy hasn't been a mere spectator to this sensational season. He has three victories, one of them a World Golf Championship, and he had top 10s in both majors he played.

Still, there is a degree of uncertainty about his game. It will have been 53 days without competition when McIlroy tees it up Thursday.

"Expectation levels are the same," McIlroy said. "I have played quite a number of rounds of golf. I've been practicing for over three weeks getting my game ready, getting my game sharp. I feel like I'm playing well, hitting it well on the range. I've taken that onto the course in practice rounds and from there, it's being able to take it into tournament play with a card in my hand."

At Chambers Bay, Spieth would find the worst part of the putting green to rap 6-footers before the weekend rounds to prepare him for some bad bounces. During his final nine holes of practice Wednesday,

he was tossing balls in some quirky spots around the green, even down on the sandy bank of Lake Michigan.

He wants no surprises. He is prepared for a tough test.

And he has the same attitude he had going into the British Open. This isn't a chance to make history. It's a chance to win a major.

At stake for Spieth is an opportunity to be the first player to sweep the three American majors in the same season. A victory would make him No. 1 in the world (provided McIlroy doesn't finish second) and make him the first \$11 million man on the PGA Tour.

Spieth has never played the weekend in two previous trips to the PGA Championship. And his goal at the start of the year was to make the cut in all four majors and contend in at least one of them.

So one box has been checked in a major way.

"That first part of that goal has yet to be accomplished," he said with a smile. "So I've got some work to do these first two days and from there we'll adjust and work our butts off to try and get a third major, which would be a pretty cool place in history."

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