

COMMENTARY

Month between majors leaves little time to get ready

By DOUG FERGUSON
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The Masters in his rear-view mirror, Justin Rose is excited about what he calls the next stage of the golf year.

Except in this case, objects might be closer than they appear.

Because while the next major is in two weeks, the first one ended only two weeks ago.

Still fresh for Rose is a Masters plan that went awry. For a five-month stretch, no one played better than Rose. He won twice, was runner-up twice and had a pair of third-place finishes over 10 tournaments that took him to No. 1 in the world. He took a five-week break to recharge, felt a little flat in his return during the Florida swing and then missed the cut at Augusta National for the first time.

But there’s no time to reflect.

The PGA Championship moving to May for the first time since 1949 is causing Rose and several other



Xander Schauffele tees off on the first hole during the first round at the RBC Heritage golf tournament in Hilton Head Island, S.C., on April 18, 2019.

players to adjust their plans. The new schedule features a major a month, which doesn’t allow players time to think, much less play.

“It is different, for sure,” Rose said Tuesday at Quail Hollow. “There was a big focus on Augusta, and then in some ways you had until the U.S. Open so you could forget about major cham-

pionship golf for at least a few weeks.”

The Wells Fargo Championship figured to be a big winner in the compact schedule. The tournament typically had one of the strongest fields of May, and now that only four weeks separate the Masters from the PGA Championship, it would seem to be the perfect

place to get geared up for the next major.

That hasn’t been the case. Missing from the field this week is Tiger Woods, who rarely missed Quail Hollow when his health was in good order. He said last week that winning the Masters for his first major title in 11 years took a lot out of him and he simply wasn’t ready to get back to work just yet.

That means he will not compete between majors for the seventh time in his career. On two of those occasions, he won the next major — the 1999 PGA Championship in August and the 2008 U.S. Open in June, right before knee surgery. He missed the cut at the U.S. Open in 2006, when he took off nine weeks to deal with the death of his father.

With only a month between majors, does a player risk losing form in such a short period of time?

“This seems like a leading question,” Henrik Stenson said with a grin. “Is there someone who’s going to do this in particular? Someone who maybe won at Augusta?”

Maybe.

But it’s not just Woods. That schedule also fits Justin Thomas, the No. 5 player in the world who pulled out of Quail Hollow as a precaution because of a wrist injury. Bryson DeChambeau is not on the list to play next week in Dallas, meaning he also will go a month between majors.

Others are not too far removed.

Dustin Johnson, the No. 1 player in the world, played at Hilton Head the week after the Masters and is likely to have three weeks off before the PGA Championship unless he decides to add Dallas at the last minute. Ditto for Francesco Molinari and Xander Schauffele.

Rose and Rory McIlroy are playing only at Quail Hollow between the majors, and Rickie Fowler appears to have the same plan.

“It’s what works best for you,” said Stenson, who is keeping the busiest schedule of all. Because he was recovering from an arm injury late last year and did not make his first PGA Tour start until February, the Swede is playing seven out of eight weeks.

“I like the schedule with us having one big event every month now,” Stenson said. “It gives the players a chance to prepare more in the way you like, if you want to play the week before or you want to play the week after, whatever is your preference.”

Omaha Beach is 4-1 favorite for Kentucky Derby, draws No. 12

By GARY B. GRAVES
Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Knowing their favored horses won’t start the Kentucky Derby on the rail left Richard Mandella and Bob Baffert more relieved than happy.

What matters for the Hall of Fame trainers is turning workable starting spots into victory — and a long-sought celebration for Mandella.

Omaha Beach is the 4-1 early favorite for Saturday’s 145th Run for the Roses after drawing the No. 12 post position on Tuesday.

That could be a good sign for the colt and Mandella, considering that the horse favored to win the Derby has taken the past six.

“I hope it comes out that way,” Mandell said.

Baffert-trained Game Winner is the 5-1 second choice from the No. 16 post in the 20-horse field for the first leg of the Triple Crown.

Game Winner will start inside stablemate Roadster, the 6-1 co-third choice with Improbable, a Baffert colt who will go off from the No. 5 hole in the 1¼-mile race at Churchill Downs.

Omaha Beach enters the

\$3 million showcase on a three-race winning streak. The dark brown colt is coming off a one-length victory in the slop over Improbable in the Arkansas Derby, a race that demonstrated his recent knack for getting up front quickly and staying there.

Mandella believes Omaha Beach and Hall of Fame jockey Mike Smith, who won last year’s Derby for Baffert aboard Justify, will make the most of his spot.

“It’s really important if you get luck with it,” Mandella said. “If you get a bad

luck, a good post position doesn’t work.”

Baffert aims to match Ben Jones’ record with his sixth Kentucky Derby win and second straight. He won last year with Justify, culminating in the Triple Crown. That came three years after he took the Triple Crown with American Pharoah.

It remains to be seen how the Derby will unfold hitting the first turn with so many horses vying for the same spot, but Improbable is in a relatively good spot.

Game Winner, who won the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile here last fall, and Road-

ster will have their work cut out for them, starting from post positions that are a combined 4 for 87 in the Derby. When it was noted that Roadster’s No. 17 post is 0 for 40, nervous laughter grew in a crowded room of horsemen including Baffert, his connections and the media.

Baffert later took all of his horses’ slots in stride, if only because none was on the rail. War of Will drew that unenviable spot and was given 20-1 odds as a result.

“I like the 16 hole, it’s a good spot,” he said of Game Winner’s position.

“Roadster, he’s out there. I don’t know. I always get two horses together. A lot of times in California they draw so ... I’ll be watching those two leaving there.”

Points leader Tacitus will start from the No. 8 post with 10-1 odds. Another 10-1 choice is unbeaten Maximum Security, who starts from the No. 7 hole. and will try to follow up his victory in the Grade 1 Florida Derby.

Todd Pletcher entries Spinoff and Cutting Humor face 30-1 odds after drawing the Nos. 19 and 10 post positions.

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