



Tiger Woods keeps his focus on the Masters.

MUCH TALK IS ABOUT WHETHER TIGER CAN RETAIN HIS MASTERS TITLE

BOGGED DOWN BY INJURIES AND MEDIOCRE RECENT FORM, IS WOODS READY TO MIX IT UP WITH THE YOUNG GUNS?

BY GODFREY ROBERT

The US Masters has an extraordinary twist compared to the other three annual golf Majors.

It is always held at the fascinating and iconic Augusta National Golf Course and has a selected field of between 90 and 100 players compared to the 144 for the US Open, British Open and the US PGA Championships.

The winner also wears the Green Jacket, exclusive to the Masters.

However, while this reservation will attract the creme de la creme of golf, the Masters could miss some exciting golfers who fall outside the exemption rule.

In the process of having a truly international field representing all the five continents, there is some dilution when you realise that a world-ranked 60th professional golfer could miss out while some little-known amateurs could find their places on the exclusive list.

And the fact that some of former winners of the event

receive an automatic playing exemption for a period of years could also mean that you could have a senior field that is not truly in the best of form. So Mike Weir, Fred Couples, Larry Mize and Vijay Singh will be there in the twilight of their careers.

Wisely, some past champions have indicated that they are unlikely to exercise their exemption status and play. Among them are Ben Crenshaw, Nick Faldo, Ray Floyd, Gary Player, Jack Nicklaus, Tom Watson, Ian Woosnam, Mark O'Meara and Fuzzy Zoeller.

MEGASTARS

But there is no doubt that the Masters is an assembly of megastars sprinkled with some "small fish" such as John Augenstein (2019 US Amateur winner), Lin Yuxin (Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship winner), Abel Gallegos (Latin American amateur champion) and Lukas Michel (US Mid-Amateur title-holder).

These names will hardly feature in the build-up to this unique Major which should give the game a spark in this Covid-impacted year where events have been held without crowds, the sure phenomenon that spices up golf with yells such as "In The Hole".

The ongoing Zozo Championship ending on Sunday will provide some measure of form with the Masters just three weeks away from Nov 12 to 15. In an erratic year American Brooks Koepka will be watched closely, as will Jordan Spieth, who has fallen out of reckoning in a poor year by the former world No.1's standards.

US Open winner Bryson DeChambeau takes strong spotlight for the manner in which he has honed his game and sucked in power in his shots following a strict gym regime and proper diet.

Former world No. 1 Dustin Johnson, laid off for a few weeks with coronavirus, has taken the bold stand in ensuring that he will make it to Augusta.

Jon Rahm, Justin Thomas, Rickie Fowler, Bubba

Watson, Adam Scott, Tommy Fleetwood and Collin Morikawa will surely make their pitch with some recent great showings.

But five serious contenders eyeing the jackpot are Matthew Wolff, Louis Oosthuizen, Justin Rose, Xander Schauffele and Sergio Garcia. Wolff seems to be in his best form while Oosthuizen has notched up several top 25 positions in a row and is on the upswing.

Englishman Rose has had a sweet-sour year, but he is one golfer who is capable of raising his game with his big-match temperament. Like him, Garcia can blow hot or cold, but if he finds his form he is unstoppable.

Schauffele is arguably the best player in the world over the last three months with his consistency. The Masters runner-up last year is due for a big one soon.

There are almost 20 past Masters in the field, but among them one name stands out. Tiger Woods, the defending champion and also winner in 2012, 2016 and 2018, is a very popular golfer with fans all around the world even if his win-

ning chances are waning as the years go by.

Woods, 45 in December, has been affected by a series of injuries and has stayed out some competitions, but the Masters is one event that he cherishes most. His tee-to-green play is not quite as sharp as what it used to be, but for the 15-time Major champion the carrot of chasing Nicklaus' record of 18 is a perfect motivation.

SURVEY

A recent survey of golf writers in the United States indicated that the majority did not fancy Woods retaining his title, but going by what happened last year when he had a lame build-up until he won the Zozo event out of nowhere, Woods is still somewhat fancied on a course that he loves.

While the writers' predictions vary from a top-25 to top-10 finish for Woods, Tiger-optimists would want the besieged American wonderboy to strike it right and etch his name on the trophy yet again on a course that tests control conditions.