

BY DOUG FERGUSON
AP GOLF WRITER

THE MASTERS FIELD SEEMS Wide Open

Rory McIlroy had the Masters green jacket on his shoulders and an enormous weight off his back when he looked ahead to the 90th edition of the Masters by saying with a coy smile, “What are we going to talk about next year?”

Next year finally arrives Thursday and McIlroy will be spared questions that dogged him for years about if he was ever going to conquer Augusta National. Now that burden falls to those who felt they had one arm in that coveted jacket, a list that includes Justin Rose and Bryson DeChambeau, Xander Schauffele and Brooks Koepka.

By all accounts, the Masters would seem to be the easiest of the majors to win. Not only does it have the smallest field – fewer than 100 players for the last 60 years – but it includes six amateurs and seven Masters champions now on the senior circuit. But the mystique that comes from being on the same glorious grounds every year since 1934 brings pressure unlike any other.

“Golf is such a mental sport, it really ticks that box in terms of being hard to win,” said Schauffele, a two-time major champion who has had two close calls at the Masters. “You have a one-shot lead going into 18 at Augusta, those trees have gotten a lot bigger and that window has gotten a lot smaller. Augusta checks off that mental box because of history, knowing the holes coming and knowing what guys have done.”

Five-time Masters champion Tiger Woods won't be around for the second straight year. He

was arrested March 27 in Florida for suspicion of driving under the influence after his SUV struck a trailer and flipped on its side. Woods wasn't hurt. He has entered a not guilty plea. But he announced he was stepping away to seek treatment for his health.

Golf fans will have waited 263 days since Scottie Scheffler won the British Open until the first tee shot in the Masters, and the anticipation is great as ever. McIlroy will try to become only the fourth player to win back-to-back. Scheffler is going for a third green jacket in six years. The list of newcomers includes two players among the top 20 in the world, Chris Gotterup

and Ben Griffin.

Augusta National is roughly the same, except for perhaps the color. The azaleas and dogwood were blooming two weeks before the gates open. No matter. Amid what seems like constant change in golf, the Masters brings a degree of normalcy as golf's rite of spring – and for many, the true opening week of the sport.

THE STARS

Scheffler is approaching three full years at No. 1 in the world and is the betting favorite everywhere he plays, particularly at Augusta National. Both times he won the Masters, he walked up to the 18th green leading by at least four shots. He has been so

consistently great that a slight dip in form has raised questions. His last two starts he finished out of the top 20. And he was off for three weeks while awaiting the birth of his second child.

THE SHOW

Twenty years ago, television viewers had 14 hours of Masters coverage, eight hours on the weekend. Augusta National now has three TV partners in Amazon Prime Video, ESPN and CBS. There will be 12 hours of weekday coverage and 14 hours on the weekend, which includes eight hours of streaming (Prime and Paramount+). That doesn't include the Masters' digital channels offering about 140 hours of various holes and featured groups.

THE LIV EFFECT

LIV Golf has 11 players at the Masters, and two stand out. DeChambeau played in the final group with McIlroy last year. He goes into Augusta National coming off two straight victories in the Saudi-funded league. Jon Rahm won in Hong Kong, his first victory since 2024, and in his last nine LIV starts he has six runner-up finishes and a victory. He also has a score to settle after a poor year in the majors.

EMERGING FACES

Gotterup has won three times since the last Masters and is now among the top 10 in the world. Griffin has won twice and played in the Ryder Cup. Jacob Bridgeman won at Riviera and moved into the top 20. Throw in Akshay Bhatia winning at Bay Hill and Cameron Young winning The Players Championship, and the talent pool – and list of potential Masters contenders – is growing.



Last year's winner Rory McIlroy.

MASTERS Players to Watch

Bryson DeChambeau

UNITED STATES



Age: 32
Worldwide wins: 15.
Majors: U.S. Open (2020,

2024).

Masters appearances: 9

Best finish: Tie for fifth in 2025.

Masters highlight: Playing well enough to get in the last group with Rory McIlroy on Sunday in 2025.

Masters lowlight: Complaining after the final round last year that McIlroy wouldn't talk to him.

Tap-ins: The Masters will determine if he is the hottest player in golf. He won in back-to-back weeks on LIV Golf with its short field, both times with clutch moments. Leading briefly on Sunday last year should inspire him. But he has never broken 70 in the final round at Augusta National.

Rory McIlroy

NORTHERN IRELAND



Age: 36
Worldwide wins: 41.
Majors: Masters (2025), PGA

Championship (2012, 2014), U.S. Open (2011), British Open (2014).

Masters appearances: 17

Best finish: Won in 2025.

Masters highlight: Dropping to his knees after his 3-foot birdie putt to win the playoff last year and complete the career Grand Slam.

Masters lowlight: Covering his eyes with the crook of his elbow on his way to an 80 in the final round in 2011 to lose a four-shot lead.

Tap-ins: McIlroy will try to join Jack Nicklaus, Nick Faldo and Tiger Woods as the only repeat Masters champions. His last win was the Irish Open last September.

Cameron Young

UNITED STATES



Age: 28
Worldwide wins: 2.
Majors: None. Masters

appearances: 4

Best finish: Tie for seventh in 2023.

Masters highlight: Getting his first piece of crystal for an eagle on the par-5 13th in the final round of 2023.

Masters lowlight: Four-putting the 16th green from 12 feet for triple bogey that caused him to miss the cut.

Tap-ins: He is a big talent who finally has some trophies to show for it. He won the Wyndham Championship in a runaway last summer and then rallied to win The Players Championship three weeks ago. His vastly improved putting bodes well for him at the Masters.

Brooks Koepka

UNITED STATES



Age: 35
Worldwide wins: 17.
Majors: PGA Championship

(2018, 2019, 2023), U.S. Open (2017, 2018).

Masters appearances: 10

Best finish: Runner-up in 2019 and 2023.

Masters highlight: Starting 65-67 in 2023, his first Masters since he joined LIV Golf.

Masters lowlight: Losing a two-shot lead to Jon Rahm in the final round in 2023.

Tap-ins: Koepka has been working his way back to the old normal in his return to the PGA Tour. He has posted a series of good finishes after coming off a year in which he missed the cut in three of the four majors.

Justin Rose

ENGLAND



Age: 45
Worldwide wins: 25.
Majors: U.S. Open (2013).

Masters appearances: 20
Best finish: Runner-up in 2017 and 2025.

Masters highlight: Making a 20-foot birdie putt on the 18th hole for a 66 that forced a playoff in 2025.

Masters lowlight: Becoming the only player to twice lose a Masters playoff without ever having won a green jacket.
Tap-ins: Rose talked about an “Indian summer” that does not appear to be ending. He won earlier this year in convincing fashion at Torrey Pines. And he remains one of the great drivers of the golf ball. His hopes depend on a good putting week. But he has reason to hope.

Tommy Fleetwood

ENGLAND



Age: 35
Worldwide wins: 9.
Majors: None.

Masters appearances: 9

Best finish: Tie for third in 2024.
Masters highlight: Making five straight birdies on the back nine on Saturday in 2018 for a 66.

Masters lowlight: Posting only one top 10 in nine trips to the Masters.

Tap-ins: The FedEx Cup champion is coming off his best year and produced top 10s against three of the strongest fields this year. He has stepped up his game in every major except this one.