

Masters Preview 2019

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Approaching Major Season in the World of Golf, Augusta National Golf Club could potentially host its most talented field in the 83-year history of the tournament. With Tiger back at full health for the first time in years and a plethora of young stars playing well, this tournament doesn't lack any headlines. If one thing is certain, its that all eyes from lifelong golfers to casual fans will be on the most prestigious venue in golf the second week of April.

The season's first major features some of golf's most memorable holes, as well as bringing the spotlight on the game's past and current greats. From the par 3 contest to the ceremonial first tee shot on Thursday, no tournament does better encapsulating the tradition of the sport better than the Masters. For this reason, no tournament creates more buzz throughout the entirety of the week including Monday and Tuesday practice rounds.

With just under a month to go until the tournament tees off, many players young and old have found their stride early in the 2019 season. I will take a look at each of their outlooks and chances as they prepare to travel to Georgia in the coming weeks.

Dustin Johnson



Current world number one golfer Dustin Johnson has had a strong start to his 2019 season, with 3 top 10s in 5 events, as well as a win in his last start at the WGC event in Mexico. His last victory extends his streak of a staggering 12 straight PGA tour seasons with at least one win, the longest active streak on tour. His game has been especially hot the last few years, making his way into the winner's circle 10 times from 2016-2018. Despite his consistent success in tour events through the years, it is a wonder as to how Johnson only has one major win in his storied career.

Aside from cruising to a 3 shot victory at Oakmont Country Club in the 2016 US Open, Dustin Johnson has surprisingly failed to leave any other majors with any hardware. As for his performance at The Masters, Dustin's top finish was T4 in the same year he won the US Open. He finished T10 in his last appearance in 2018, marking his third straight top 10 finish in his starts at Augusta National.

Between his past results at the tournament as well as his exceptional ball striking display early this season in Mexico, DJ will definitely be one of the favorites going into this event. The elevation of his shot making abilities in recent years has tailored his game to perform better on narrower courses seen in major championship. This versatility developed in his game as well his always impressive length off the tee will allow Dustin to attack Augusta and enter the week on the short list of favorites to claim the Green Jacket.

Rickie Fowler



Outside of Tiger, Rickie Fowler will most likely be the fan favorite to win the 2019 Masters Championship. The beloved Fowler has been no stranger to the leaderboard in this event, finishing inside the top 12 in 4 of his last 5 starts at Augusta. In fact, he even teed off in the second to last pairing on Sunday in 2017, before shooting a disappointing 76 en route to Sergio Garcia claiming his first career major at age 37. In his return, Fowler posted a career best solo 2nd finish at the Masters in 2018.

Rickie is off to an excellent first leg of his 2019 season, most notably winning the Waste Management Open at TPC Scottsdale. He also holds two other top 5 finishes this season, finishing T2 at the Honda Classic and T4 at the Shriners Hospitals for Children Open in Las Vegas. Part of his successes can be contributed to his putter which has caught fire as of late, ranking 8th in 2019 in strokes gained putting. His performance on the greens has directly translated into birdies on the scorecard, with Fowler ranking 6th on tour averaging 4.86 per round.

With experience on his side making his 9th start at the Masters, Rickie Fowler should be pretty familiar with what it takes to put himself in contention when the weekend rounds come around. After all, it always seems like his name is lingering around the front page of the leaderboard when the lights shine brightest. Maybe 2019 will be the year Rickie finally breaks through and gets everything to click, cracking his name onto the esteemed list of Major Champions.

Brooks Koepka



Three-time major champion Brooks Koepka definitely knows how to dial up the intensity and sharpen his focus when it matters most. In fact, three of his five wins on tour have come in the majors, including his back to back US Open titles in 2017 and 2018. His clutch performances have produced hardware in the other majors, yet Brooks has historically struggled at Augusta, with his highest finish coming in 2017 at T11. In 2018, an injury held him out of competing in his 4th visit to the most exclusive venue in golf.

Playing a relatively light load of a schedule for the early part of the 2019 Tour Season, Koepka has only appeared in 6 events thus far. In those events, he has fared well logging 4 top 25s, 2 top 10s, and one victory while playing overseas in Korea. He has also been an exceptional weekend player up to this point of the season, with an amazing 68.7 weekend scoring average in 2019.

Digging deeper into the numbers, Brooks Koepka is having one of his best years of ball striking, averaging .961 strokes gained per round from tee to green. This figure lands him at 29th on tour, as his powerful full swing not only provides a great model to study for students of the game, but also quality results on the course. Consistent and precise iron play is one of the most important factors in navigating Augusta, and Koepka will need a great week of approach shots to have a chance to make a weekend run at his first Green Jacket.

Rory McIlroy



Will 2019 be the year Rory finally breaks through and completes the fourth leg of the career grand slam? Off to a scorching hot start in the 2019, it definitely seems like Rory is the one to chase as the frontrunner in almost any tournament he plays in. In his 5 starts made on tour this year he's finished no lower than T6 in any event with no missed cuts. This shouldn't be much of a surprise to fans as he's carded 65% of his rounds in the 60s including a pair of 63s throughout the month of February.

As always, Rory McIlroy is dominating and overpowering golf courses sitting at 4th overall in driving distance averaging a whopping 313.8 yards off the tee. This statistic directly correlates to the fact that Rory leads the PGA tour in strokes gained off the tee, as well as total strokes gained tee to green. His ability to bomb it off the tee plus his strong weekend performances hint at success next month in his annual trip to Georgia, however his past at the tournament should not go unnoticed.

Placing in the top 10 each of the last 5 years has turned the tide on people's memories of Rory at Augusta, however his collapse in 2011 will never leave his mind. Going into that Sunday, McIlroy was 4 clear of the field at the top of the leaderboard. That last round however would spell disaster as he shot his worst round of his career at the Masters, carding an 80 and finishing at T15. Reflecting on the past, I'm certain that McIlroy will not forget choking on that Sunday and missing out on a green jacket and will use it as motivation in order to achieve the last leg of the career grand slam at the age of 29.

Jordan Spieth



2015 Masters Champion Jordan Spieth has had no shortage of prosperity at Augusta National with 4 top 3 finishes in 5 appearances at the tournament. This run might be in jeopardy as Jordan endures ongoing struggles with his full swing that have been bothering him since late 2018. An offseason of swing changes has yielded negative effects in Spieth's scoring average, as the changes have apparently clogged the mind of the young phenom and overwhelmed his swing motion.

Touching a little more on Jordan's struggles, they surprisingly seem to stay under wraps until the weekend rounds roll around. Digging into the numbers, I found that in his Thursday and Friday scoring average of 68.71 is actually quite impressive, landing him inside the top 25 ranks on tour for those days. The swing troubles are sure to roll around for the weekend and in turn have plagued his finishes in tournaments, as he's averaged a lackluster 73.1 scoring average in weekend rounds this year. For this reason, Spieth has failed to record a top 25 this season, his best finish coming at the Farmers Insurance Open in San Diego at T35.

Even in the face of swing troubles, the Masters always seems to bring out the best in Jordan's game year after year. Between his runner up finish in his first appearance, tying Tiger's 72-hole record, or making a quadruple bogey 7 on a par 3, Spieth always seems to steal the headlines at Augusta. Patrons should expect no less this year as Jordan Spieth looks to get his game and his season on track at his favorite course. Personally, I'd be more surprised if Jordan wasn't in one of the final pairings on Sunday than if he was.

Justin Rose



The 2nd ranked golfer in the world is flying under the radar on the list of contenders heading into the 2019 Masters tournament. Justin Rose has served as one of the models of consistency on tour the last decade, playing some of his best golf as he approaches the age of 40. Throughout his impressive career, Rose has found the winners circle 22 times, including his most recent victory at the Farmers Insurance Open in January.

As for his performance at the Masters, Justin Rose has fared well historically, making the cut in all 13 of his trips to Augusta and never finishing below T39. In recent years he's really seemed to figure out the lay of the land, finishing in the top 2 twice in the last 4 years. Carrying the momentum and landing his name on the front page of the leaderboard should almost be expected from such a solid player in the big events.

With 14 top 10s throughout his career in majors including multiple in each of the 4 events, playing well is not the question with Rose. It should however be noted that in roughly 15 years as a mainstay on tour, Justin Rose has only one major win that came back in 2013. Another key factor to look at is his putting, which has been his game's biggest weakness historically. If Rose navigates the twists and turns of Augusta superbly as in the past and has his putter catch fire, he will be a force to be reckoned with in the first major of the year.

Justin Thomas



Budding star Justin Thomas is no stranger to the Bentgrass greens found at Augusta National, having spent his childhood and college career in the American Southeast. The former All-American at Alabama has also been long compared to best friend and competitor Jordan Spieth, who won the Green Jacket back in 2015. A win at this year's Masters would go a long way in strengthening his accolades and successes when stacked up against his peer.

2017 PGA Champion Justin Thomas has only made three appearances in the Masters in his young career at age 25. In these jaunts to the most exclusive venue in golf, Thomas has made it to the weekend each time, making 3 cuts in as many attempts. That being said, he has never cracked a top 10 in the event, never finishing above T17 in 2018. Off to a hot start in 2019 leading the tour averaging over 5 birdies a round, his ability to light up the scorecard should bode well to an Augusta course that has rendered lower scores in recent years.

With a very frontloaded schedule to kickstart the 2019 season, Justin Thomas will hopefully have the dust knocked off his game, hitting a number of erratic shots in his early appearances this season. Improving his finish every year since his first start, JT will be a shoe-in on my short list of favorites to win it all come April. His ability to grind around the greens and play a multitude of shots in his arsenal to save par could push him to the top on Sunday.

Tiger Woods



Four-time Masters Champion Tiger Woods will without a doubt be the crowd favorite at Augusta National regardless of how remarkable the rest of the field is playing. The roars emerging from his pairing on the weekends of Majors tremble the entire course, and it will be no secret to his competition if he is playing well in his Sunday red and black. For many, this feels like the first time Tiger is really ‘back’ after being at limited health or unable to compete altogether due to a string of injuries.

Sitting at the second most wins all time in the history of the tournament, it is shocking that Tiger hasn’t won the Masters since 2005. However, this shouldn’t dampen the hype surrounding his chances as he has performed increasingly well in the majors looking back to the 2018 season. After a slow start barely making the cut at Augusta and being cut from the US Open, he went on to share a lead on Sunday at The Open and finished solo 2nd at the PGA Championship. He then went on to end his season with a victory at the Tour Championship, showing in fact he does still have some juice left in the tank.

Thus far in the season, Tiger’s numbers look impressive across the board in all four phases of the game, and he appears well rested after his first ‘full’ season back since 2015. A win for him at the Masters could go a long way and create an enormous buzz and draw of attention to the sport it has lacked since Spieth’s 2015 campaign.