



It's finally here. Masters weekend. The first major championship of the year, held at the famed Augusta National Country Club in Augusta, Georgia. The world's best golfers competing against one another on the world's finest golf course.

With round one just underway this morning, here's a little preview of this year's event, the 70th playing of this prestigious tournament.

THE COURSE

For the third time in the last seven years, Masters Officials pretty significantly lengthened the course for this year's event. The tees were moved back on six holes, stretching the course to nearly 7,500 yards. This year's Augusta is the second longest track in major championship history, eclipsed only by Whistling Straits, the host of the 2004 PGA Championship. The par three fourth hole is now a whopping 240 yards, forcing most some pros to actually use driver. The 11th hole, which starts the famed three hole stretch known as "Amen Corner", is now a 505 yard par four. And number 17, already a brutal uphill par four, now measures more than 440 yards.

THE WEATHER

Last year, rain delayed the start of the first round until about 1:30 PM, and wreaked havoc again on Sunday. The result was a long day of golf on Sunday, as many competitors had to hit the course early to finish their third round. This year, dry conditions are expected, with just a slight chance of rain on Sunday. It's been five years since this course played dry all week. Dry conditions = longer tee shots, and this could help mitigate the additional length the course possesses this year.

LAST YEAR

Despite being six strokes back of Chris DiMarco to start the third round, Tiger Woods pulled off a miraculous comeback to win his fourth Masters in a playoff. Woods memorable chip in on #16 is a shot we will all be seeing on replays for the rest of our lives, and it was that shot that spearheaded the comeback. Woods rallied to tie DiMarco at 12 under par, and then defeated him on the first playoff hole by sinking a 15-foot

birdie putt. Luke Donald and Retief Goosen tied for third place at 5 under par, and Vijay Singh, Rod Pampling, Trevor Immelman, Mark Hensby, and Mike Weir all tied for fifth place at 4 under.

THE BIG FIVE

Woods, Mickleson, Singh, Goosen, Els. Together, these five golfers have combined to win 16 of the last 25 major championships, and the chances are good that someone from this quintet will emerge as this year's Masters Champion. Woods is the prohibitive favorite at 3-1 odds, followed by Mickleson at 6-1. Els comes in at 9-1, Singh at 11-1, and Goosen at 13-1. Woods has won four Masters, second only to Jack Nicklaus's six titles. Singh won the event in 2000, and Mickleson finally broke through in 2004. Els and Goosen have yet to add a

green jacket to their wardrobes.

EURO STRUGGLES

After an incredible run of success throughout the 80's and 90's, no European has won this event since Jose Maria Olazabal did so in 1999. Only seven different European players have finished in the top ten since then. Most point to the additional length the course possesses, and the fact that most of the top Europeans are not long hitters. The candidates most likely to break through and end this streak for the Euros this year are Olazabal, Sergio Garcia, David Howell, and Luke Donald.

THE SLEEPERS

Outside of the Big Five, who else can win this thing? Despite both possessing a top 15 world ranking, David Howell and Henrik Stenson are both relatively unknown here in the states. Both have the distance and touch to win here this week. Some other guys I feel have a shot to compete this week include Lucas Glover, Scott Verplank, Stephen Ames, Aaron Oberholser, Robert Allenby, and Darren Clarke. Glover is an up and comer, playing in his first Masters, but playing very well right now. Rookies fared excellent in last years Masters, and this kid can bomb it. Verplank is just due. He's one of the best players in the world yet to win

a major, and is also playing well. Ames was superb two weeks ago at Sawgrass, and if he's still striking his irons that well, he's sure to have a shot on Sunday. Oberholser finally broke through with a win earlier this year, and has great talent. He is a long hitter with a deft putter, and a name to keep an eye on. Allenby and Clarke are also two of the better players in the world yet to break through at a major, and I like both to play very well this week.

THE PREDICTION

It's hard to pick against Tiger, but I feel this is Vijay Singh's week, and

that he walks away with his second green jacket. Singh tied for fifth last year despite being last in the field in putting, and has been rolling the ball better in 2006. He's yet to win this year, but has been in the top ten of nearly every event ... and I see him breaking through this week. I'm calling for a three way battle on Sunday between Singh, Woods, and David Toms, and another memorable finish. I see the top ten being filled out by the players mentioned above in the sleeper portion.