

2011 Masters Preview

Written by {ga=mitch}

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It's finally here.

As far as I'm concerned, it's not the opening day of baseball, but the start of the Masters that truly signifies that Spring has arrived. The first major of the year. The only major played at the same venue year in and year out. The azaleas and dogwoods in full bloom. The tradition. The grandeur.

Sorry...I'm starting to sound like Jim Nance.

Yes, I know that there are other issues, and that Masters Chairman Hootie Johnson is about as big of a bigoted redneck as you can find in all of sports, but Hootie doesn't hit the ball, so he's is "out of sight, out of mind".

This year's Masters is shaping up as one of the most interesting in quite some time. We have a new #1 player in the World this year; the first time we've seen that in several years. Martin Kaymer is still a relative unknown in the U.S., with many people seeing him for the first time last

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year when he won the PGA Championship. But that sums up this new world of golf; the Europeans are just as strong as the Americans now (as was so obviously exhibited last fall at the Ryder Cup).

There are only four Americans in the Top 10, and only one in the Top 5. But that one is Phil Mickelson, who is coming into the Masters on a hot streak, and is beyond doubt the world's most popular player.

The number one spot is totally up for grabs this week. Six players could end up in the #1 slot with a win in Augusta. In addition to Kaymer, #2 Lee Westwood, #3 Mickelson, #4 Luke Donald, #5 Graeme McDowell, and #7 Tiger Woods could all vault to the top as the companion prize for winning the Green Jacket (for some reason that I don't understand, #6 Paul Casey would only rise to #2 if he were to win).

If you look further at the [World Golf Rankings](#), you find only nine Americans in the Top 25. Sadly for the U.S., most of those are getting up there in years (Woods, Mickelson, Steve Stricker, Matt Kuchar, Jim Furyk). The future is currently represented by Dustin Johnson, Nick Watney, Bubba Watson, and Hunter Mahan...but if you look a little further down the list you see some hope with Rickie Fowler, Ryan Moore, and Anthony Kim. However, that group is quite small compared to the younger international players.

So is golf heading the way of professional tennis; with international players dominating and the Americans nothing more than afterthoughts? Perhaps...but I don't see it getting quite that lopsided.

Although that is the possible future; here in the present we have one hell of a tournament shaping up...on a course where experience counts. Do we get the incredible drama we had last year? I'm not sure how anything could top Lefty's unbelievable second shot on 13 that came within millimeters of hitting two trees, and then floated over the water and onto the green eight feet from the pin.

But we can hope.

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▣ **My Picks.** I think these may surprise most people, as there are so many in the top ten who just aren't playing well enough coming into the Masters to contend. It's not that they can't handle the spotlight, it's just that the season is too young, and there are issues with their games that will keep them out of contention.

Favorites:

Phil Mickelson – Showed last week in Houston that he is more than ready to defend his title as he absolutely dominated on Saturday and Sunday. After years of being “almost”, Phil has turned into the 800 pound Gorilla of Augusta. It's a perfect course for his length, his gambling style, and his short game. The only question is if his putting will hold up. We know his confidence will be at an all time high. If his putter is on, he'll be very hard to beat. Like 2006, Phil will be carrying two drivers, varying in length and loft...that will prohibit him from having a 3 Iron or Hybrid club in his bag, but Phil says that in the warm weather, there should be no circumstances where he would need those clubs. Guess he needs to always leave room for the five or six wedges he carries.

Ian Poulter – Once again, confidence is the name of the game at Augusta: If you don't have it, you have no chance (see also Kaymer, Martin). Poulter has never been short of it, but I'm getting the vibe that he really thinks this might be his year. He has the game, so unless his bravado was all bluster, expect a top five performance at the least.

Hunter Mahan – Has all of the shots, the length, the short game, and the putting needed to win at Augusta. I've always questioned his attitude though. Not that it's bad per se; but Mahan can often seem totally disinterested. But when he is on his game and focused, he can dominate.

Bubba Watson – It's the Masters, so length off the tee is key, and that has never been Bubba's problem. Can his putter hold up, and can he handle the pressure? I have a feeling that he'll be able to, and I expect to see him in one of the last groups on Sunday.

Contenders:

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Lee Westwood – Always plays well in the majors, and as mentioned, has a chance to move to #1 in the world with a win. So why isn't he a Favorite? A very shaky putter over the past few weeks...which is Death in Augusta. If he pulls that part of his game together, he can certainly win it.

Graham McDowell – The worldwide #5 is another European who is having a bit of a shaky start to 2011. No doubt he has the talent, but he needs to pull things together and show the same moxie he exhibited at the US Open.

Justin Rose – He's been on the verge of breaking through for so long, you forget how young he is.

Luke Donald – See Justin Rose. Then again, Luke won the Par 3 competition, which means he cannot win a Green Jacket.

Dustin Johnson – Should have had a major a couple of times already. The types of meltdowns he's had reminds me of all of the near misses once seen from Mickelson. He certainly has the length to contend, so if he puts it all together, he could be the one to break out of that pack of younger players waiting to snag the first of possibly several majors.

Padraig Harrington – Maybe this is just my personal admiration of the affable Irishman showing, but on the other hand, I've seen glimpses of his game coming back where it was when he won three majors in two years. The strange thing with Paddy is that even if he's playing well, he'll keep tweaking his game, which has cost him over the past two years. But now he's familiar with those changes...so I think he'll either contend for a title; or miss the cut.

Ricky Fowler – Of all of the true under-25 "Young Guns" on the Tour, I think Fowler is the only one whose game and mental makeup is up to snuff for Augusta.

Dark Horses

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Paul Casey – Under the radar, and often overlooked compared to the other Brits (Poulter, Rose, and Donald). But he could put together four solid rounds and find himself in Trevor Immelman territory.

Anthony Kim – All of the talent in the world, but I still think he's two or three years away from being ready to win here. Then again, he has the ability to put together four incredible rounds and shock the world.

Matt Kuchar – Might be considered one of the most bland golfers on Tour...but as a consistent of a ball striker as you will find...and sometimes that ends up being enough (see also; Johnson, Zach and Weir, Mike)

Steve Stricker – A slightly older version of Matt Kuchar.

Aaron Baddeley – The Aussie version of Matt Kuchar (are you sensing a theme here?)

Big Name – Little Chance

Tiger Woods – He could possibly surprise and be in the Top 10 with a strong Saturday/Sunday finish. But I think it's 50-50 as to him making the cut. At least E\$PN will be able to show every single shot of his for the first two rounds.

Martin Kaymer – The World Number One player is Dead Man Walking. As good as he is, his game isn't really suited for Augusta, and Kaymer has admitted as much. Martin isn't exactly the type to play head games and talk down about his game just as a ploy. He truly doesn't believe he can contend, so of course he has no chance.

Jim Furyk – Too short off the tee. With the Augusta greens, you have no chance trying to fire in and stick a five iron when everyone else is able to loft in a seven or eight iron on the same hole.

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Camilo Villegas – Has the length, but not the touch.

Rory Mcllroy – He'll win it someday...but that day is at least five years away.

Roy Ishikawa – Same as Mcllroy...but has the potential to maybe win in the next three years.

Sergio Garcia – I've never been a Sergio basher (unlike most Americans), so I feel really bad that his career has gone all David Duval on him. I'm just hoping that he'll make the cut.

Trevor Immelman, Zach Johnson, Angel Cabrera, Mike Weir – Yeah, you've all won a Green Jacket in the last ten years...but you aren't going to win one in 2011. I'll be mildly surprised if any of these get a Top 20 finish.

Vijay Singh, Ernie Els, Retief Goosen, Davis Love III – I will make my one wild prediction and say that one of these old warhorses will be in contention on Sunday. The other three will be watching on TV.