

## Sports

# Masters patrons are a rare breed in wild world of sport

**AUGUSTA:** Augusta National patrons have proven for decades to be a different breed from fans at any other sporting event, providing a sort of golfing oasis for the world's best players each year during the Masters. At Augusta National, where the Masters began yesterday after three heavily-attended practice days, one might have better luck booking a tee time at the exclusive course than finding anyone doing things like shouting out of line or using a cell phone.

Augusta National has essentially managed to maintain a remarkable sense of civility and respect among those attending the Masters, despite operating in a time where sporting events often produce excessive fan behavior. "It's quite refreshing to have everything in control," said twice major champion Martin Kaymer of Germany. "You know what you are going to get here. It's a very peaceful place. "Everybody behaves perfectly fine, it's very respectful and I think sometimes we miss that in sport. So that's why it's a good week to come to."

Augusta National prides itself on tradition and while the club's strictly-enforced rules may not make sense to everyone who attends the year's biggest golfing event the list of no-nos are, for the most part, followed to a tee. And so it is no surprise that the first page of the Masters Spectator Guide begins with a passage written by club co-founder Robert Jones in 1967 that addresses conduct, customs and etiquette. "In golf, customs of etiquette and decorum are just as important as rules governing play," Jones wrote, going on to add that "most distressing to those who love the game of golf is the applauding or cheering of misplays or misfortunes of a player."

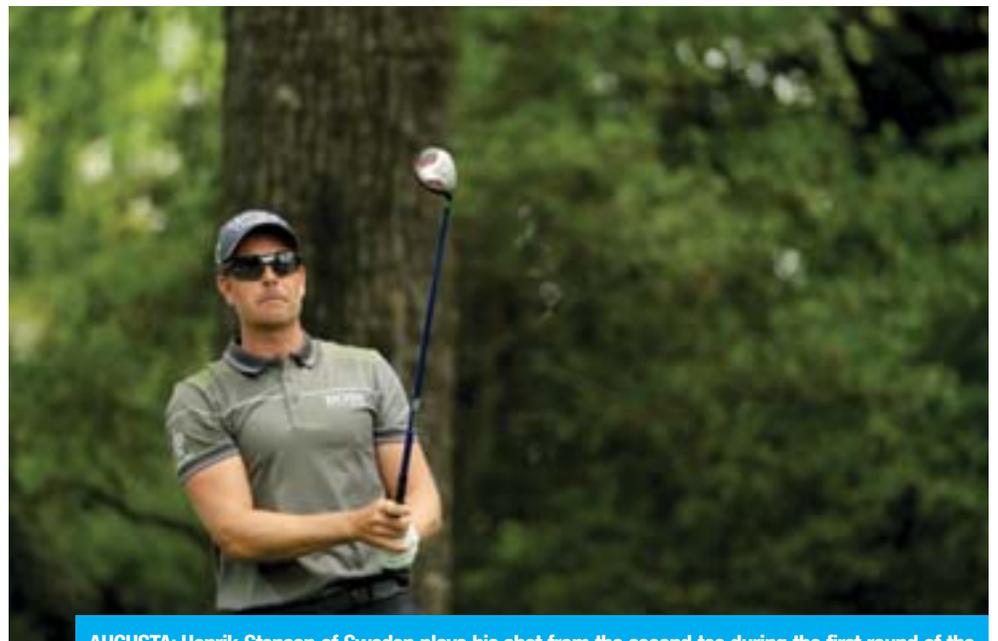
In many ways, Augusta National operates in a world of its own and has created an aura about itself that has appeared to permeate almost anyone who walks through its gates. As such, you are unlikely to see people sprawled out on the course's luscious grass, and if you do it will not be for long as they will quickly be asked to sit up properly. Running is also considered unacceptable. "There's something about Augusta National when someone walks through the gates, they know that it's a place of respect, of beauty, and honoring traditions and values of the game," said Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley. "It's something ... I certainly hope never changes."

One member of the media at this year's Masters was asked to remove his New York Mets baseball cap while eating breakfast in the Press Building's dining room. Even 2018 Masters runner-up Rickie Fowler fell foul of the hat rule when, as a 22-year-old Masters rookie, he showed up to a 2011 news conference at Augusta National wearing his cap backwards until a club member asked him to turn it around.

When it comes to cell phones, they are prohibited on the course and violation of that rule will subject the ticket holder to removal from the grounds and the ticket purchaser to the permanent loss of credentials. And gone are the random shouts of "mashed potato" directed at golfers the moment after hitting their tee shots during other PGA Tour events.

## Well-informed patrons

At Augusta National, such behavior is mostly absent among a cast of spectators that competitors say are well-informed of the intricacies of



**AUGUSTA:** Henrik Stenson of Sweden plays his shot from the second tee during the first round of the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club. — AFP

the game, respective and reserved. "If every week (on the PGA Tour) was like this week it would be awesome," world number 10 Xander Schauffele told Reuters. Those lucky enough to get tickets to the Masters do so not as a "fan" but as a "patron", and while the difference in the two is mostly semantic it is one Augusta National is adamant about as it considers each attendee a valued customer.

So polite are the patrons that many arrive

early to set up chairs at their preferred viewing areas and return hours later knowing their seat will still be there waiting for them. "It's a good thing," former FedExCup champion Billy Horschel said when asked about what it is like knowing there will be little to no outside distraction while playing the Masters. "Fans need to have fun but they need to understand that we are still trying to make a living for ourselves out here." — Reuters

## Rugby Australia to fire Folau over anti-gay rant

**SYDNEY:** Rugby Australia yesterday said it intends to terminate superstar Israel Folau's contract over his latest anti-gay rant, throwing the Wallabies' World Cup plans into disarray. Chief executive Raelene Castle said officials had made repeated unsuccessful attempts to contact the fullback since his incendiary Instagram post claiming "hell awaits" gays on Wednesday. "In the absence of compelling mitigating factors, it is our intention to terminate his contract," the statement said.

Folau is Super Rugby's all-time top try-scorer and one of the game's most electrifying runners with ball in hand. A stand-out for the Waratahs and on the international stage during his 73 tests, he had been considered crucial for the Wallabies' hopes at this year's World Cup in Japan. But his extreme religious views have repeatedly rankled with supporters, Rugby Australia and sponsors.

He was reprimanded for homophobic posts last year, but unabashed, on Wednesday the 30-year-old posted an Instagram banner that read: "Drunks, homosexuals,

adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists and idolators — Hell awaits you." He suggested they should "repent" as "only Jesus saves". Castle said in a joint statement with New South Wales Rugby that "whilst Israel is entitled to his religious beliefs, the way in which he has expressed these beliefs is inconsistent with the values of the sport".

Despite previous scandals Folau signed a multi-season, multi-million dollar contract. But his fate had appeared to have been sealed earlier in the day when Wallabies team sponsor Qantas publicly expressed its displeasure at the comments. The airline, whose CEO Alan Joyce is openly gay, said Folau's social media post was "really disappointing". The comments "clearly don't reflect the spirit of inclusion and diversity that we support", Qantas said. Some leading Australian commentators had called for him to be fired, including former Wallabies forward Peter FitzSimons. "Israel Folau has to go, and will go," FitzSimons wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald.—AFP

## McIlroy chases golf history at 'outlier' Augusta National

**AUGUSTA:** Rory McIlroy renews his quest to complete a career Grand Slam when the 83rd Masters tees off in the stately confines of Augusta National here. The atmosphere might not rival the serene, almost spiritual ambience that McIlroy experienced during a non-tournament week at the fabled course, but it certainly harks back to a more dignified — and less digitized — age in sports and life.

"It's pure golf," says four-time Masters champion Tiger Woods — the player most bedeviled by boisterous fans who at most venues these days are so busy snapping selfies they barely have time to watch him hit a shot. Not only are Augusta's "patrons" encouraged, if not required, to act with decorum outside the ropes, the throng of media that follows him is not allowed inside. "Some of the events, like the Open Championship — because the golf courses are so old that there's not a lot of room — there's sometimes 75 to 100 people inside the ropes following us," Woods said. "That gets a little distracting and it gets a little difficult at times."

"Here, it's just us playing and you see some of the greatest golf you've ever seen here. I think that's one of the reasons why." Mobile phones

are prohibited, with those breaking the rule escorted off the grounds. Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley knows the policy makes the club "an outlier" but he thinks patrons appreciate it. "It's refreshing," McIlroy said of seeing fans who "don't constantly have their face in the device."

There's no running, no sprawled in the sun sleeping, and no fan photography at the Masters, no "You da man" bombast and — if the marshalls have their way — no applauding of a less popular player's poor shot. It all creates an atmosphere like none other in modern golf, but it's the course itself that makes the Masters the ultimate experience for some of golf's greatest. "Some of my best shots I've ever pulled off have been here," Woods said of a course that is a test of creativity — and the ability to pull off a seemingly outlandish shot — as much as the US Open is a test of stamina.

"Augusta National allows you to do pretty much whatever you can imagine in your mind in each situation," said Spain's Jon Rahm, who tees off in his third Masters alongside 14-time major champion Woods and China's Li Haotong at 11:04 am.—AFP