

NEUER REPLACES LAHM AS BAYERN'S CAPTAIN

BERLIN: Germany goalkeeper and captain Manuel Neuer will replace Philipp Lahm as Bayern Munich's skipper for next season, the Bundesliga champions' chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge has confirmed. "Our number one is the number one (choice) — Manuel Neuer," Rummenigge told Munich daily newspaper T.Z. "He is an established professional, who will take the armband from Philipp Lahm. "He has developed really well with the national team—not only on, but also off the pitch." World Cup-winner Neuer has been Germany's goalkeeper since Bastian Schweinsteiger made his final international appearance last August. The 31-year-old Neuer steps in to skipper Bayern after Lahm retired from all football in May after 22 years with the Bavarian giants. Neuer has sat out Bayern's current tour of China and Singapore to recover from a foot surgery, but is expected to be back for the German giants when the new Bundesliga season kicks off on August 18. — AFP



R&A CHIEF KEEN TO SEE AILING TIGER WOODS BACK

SOUTHPORT: The head of golf's governing body has expressed his hope that former world number one Tiger Woods will one day feature again at a British Open. This year's championship tees off on Thursday at Royal Birkdale in the town of Southport, north-west England, with Woods again absent. The 41-year-old's attempts to resurrect his career have been hit by a series of operations on his back since 2014, and he has made only one top-20 finish in the past two seasons. His absence this week means it is now seven straight majors that he has sat out. "I think the sport should be eternally grateful for the transformation he drove in golf. I would love to see him tee it up here again," R&A chief executive Martin Slumbers said at Birkdale yesterday ahead of the start of this year's Open. Woods has won 14 majors and once held the world number one ranking for a record 683 weeks. But this year Woods' rehabilitation from injury was overshadowed by his arrest in May for driving under the influence. "I hope he gets well. I hope he gets fit. I hope he falls back in love with golf. I hope he tees it up at the Open. He'd be extremely welcome," added Slumbers. Woods has won the Open three times, most recently at Hoylake, not far from Birkdale, in 2006. — AFP

ENGLAND SEAMER WOOD FIT FOR THIRD TEST

LONDON: England fast bowler Mark Wood has been passed fit for next week's Third Test against South Africa at The Oval after scans revealed no serious injury on his left heel. Wood has been blighted by injuries throughout his career, with ankle problems keeping him out of Test cricket for nearly two years from October 2015, with the seamer only making his comeback at Lord's two weeks ago. The 27-year-old sat out some of South Africa's second innings after suffering from soreness while bowling during England's humbling 340-run Second Test defeat at Trent Bridge. But the England and Wales Cricket Board confirmed Wednesday that Wood is available for next week-if selected. Wood's availability provides a timely boost for England with batsman Gary Ballance ruled out of the Third Test with a broken finger. The selectors will name their squad for The Oval on Friday or Saturday with at least one enforced change required due to Ballance's injury. The four-Test series is currently level at 1-1. — AFP



GOLF

MCILROY HOPING TO CATCH HIS WAVE AT BRITISH OPEN

SOUTHPORT: Just three years ago, Rory McIlroy was the best player in the world without a trace of argument. He won the final two majors of the year, with a World Golf Championship title in between. He had reason to believe his reign would last as long as he wanted it to.

Now he's simply trying to get back into the conversation. The starkest reminder of the state of his game was not so much missing three cuts in his last four tournaments. It was being told on the eve of the British Open that the bookies listed him at 20-1 to win at Royal Birkdale.

"Good time to back me," McIlroy said. "I mean, look, if I was a betting company and I saw my form over the past few weeks, yeah, that's probably a fair enough price. But again, all it takes is one week for those odds to go back."

He has been through these mini-slumps more than once in the 10 years since he first played the British Open at Carnoustie. McIlroy missed four of five cuts in 2012, including his title defense in the U.S. Open, and ended the summer by winning the PGA Championship to return to No. 1 in the world.

This one has been the most aggravating because it involves injury. The hairline rib fracture he suffered in January during the South African Open is no longer an issue, but it forced him to sit out nearly two months, and then he played only once in two months between the Masters and the U.S. Open in part because it was acting up.

It all led to what McIlroy describes as a start-and-stop year, one that to this point doesn't include a trophy. "But I'm in good spirits," McIlroy said. "I feel like it's all coming together. I'm just waiting for that round or that moment or that week where it sort of clicks and I'll be off and running. I've had little periods like this before in my career, and I've been able to bounce back



SOUTHPORT: Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy speaks during a press conference ahead of the British Open Golf Championship, at Royal Birkdale, Southport, England yesterday. — AP

from them. I'd say I was in worse positions than this. I feel like my game ... the pieces are all there, it's just about trying to fit them together."

AS FOR HIS ODDS?

That speaks to a broader picture of the 146th edition of the British Open, which starts Thursday at Royal Birkdale. Dustin Johnson, the No. 1 player in the world, and Jordan Spieth have taken turns as the favorite by the bookies.

Right behind them is Jon Rahm, the dynamic 22-year-old from Spain who already has won twice this year. Masters champion Sergio Garcia is right up there. There is no clear favorite. There is no clear plot that is any different from the previ-

ous few majors, except for the US Open held on a new course in Wisconsin. Johnson was close to being a dominant figure when he won three straight tournaments against the strongest fields of the year at the time, and then he slipped down the stairs on the eve of the Masters, wrenched his back and didn't swing a club for a month.

Jason Day ended last year at No. 1 in the world, and then found himself emotionally wrapped up in tending to his mother, who was diagnosed with lung cancer. McIlroy wouldn't have seen this coming at the end of last year when he won the FedEx Cup.

"But these things sort of crop up out of nowhere and they challenge us," he said. Maybe it's one shot, one round, one

week to get that spark. That's what Johnson is looking for since his return from back injury.

"It's taken me a long time to get everything back to feeling where it was," Johnson said. "I'm trying to get back to that point. It's definitely a lot harder." When he won the British Open down the coast at Royal Liverpool in 2014, McIlroy mentioned an adage he first heard from Tom Weiskopf. When a player is going well, he can't imagine what it was like to play poorly. And when he's playing badly, he can't imagine what it was like to play great.

SO WHERE IS HE NOW?

"I feel like I can hit the ball in the fairway, and from there I can hit the ball on the green," McIlroy said. "And if I get my line, I can put the ball in the hole from there. So it's not bad. It's not as if I can't see myself shooting a good score. It's all there. It's just a matter of putting it all together."

He has slipped so far from the dominant force in golf - McIlroy hasn't been at No. 1 since September 2015 - that he could win the next two majors and still probably not reach Johnson at the top of the ranking.

His odds would certainly get better, just like when he was the favorite at just about every major. He still remembers those days. "When you ride on the crest of a wave, it's easy to get caught up with those expectations and you start believing them," he said. "When I won those three tournaments in '14 and I was where I was in the game, of course I thought, 'OK, I really can keep this going.' ... And some things just come along that you don't expect."

"I'm in a place where I'm trying to figure out how I get back to that position where I was," he said. "I'm trying to get back there and I'm doing everything I can. And hopefully the start of that crest of a wave happens this week." — AP

TRUMP MAKES JASON A DAY LATE ARRIVING AT BIRKDALE

SOUTHPORT: Jason Day is hopeful he can figure prominently at this week's British Open despite arriving at Royal Birkdale later than planned thanks to Donald Trump. The Australian was due to be in England on Sunday but ended up putting back his departure by 24 hours because of flight delays in New York which he put down to the US President.

"I had three weeks off before this, so I could have got in early," Day said at Birkdale on the eve of Thursday's Open first round. "I was actually supposed to get here Sunday. And I was flying through JFK and President Trump was there and there was a bunch of delays. So I just decided to move my flight back a little bit later." Trump attended the US Women's Open in New Jersey last weekend, and the delays allowed Day to spend an extra day at home with his young children, and be there for his son's birthday.

The 29-year-old world number six's change of plans meant he did not practice on the Southport links on Monday, but he believes a lack of golf going into the championship could benefit him.

"Usually I get in here to places like this early. I usually get in Thursday or Friday and play a couple of practice rounds. I did it this year at Augusta and I was just truly knackered by the time I started Thursday," he said. "This week has felt a lot quicker to me. And I got some work in before I came in here. I think all in all I feel pretty ready and fresh going into tomorrow's round."

Day was presented with an award on Wednesday for ending 2016 as world number one. Since then he has dropped back due to poorer form, including a missed cut at last month's US Open.

PGA champion in 2015, when he also came fourth in the Open at St Andrews, Day admits to having had his mind elsewhere at the start of this year due to a cancer scare involving his mother.

"When you feel like you're going to lose someone that is very close to you, there's nothing you want to do more than just be with them and you don't even want to think about playing golf or even think about working," said Day. He plays with 2015 Open champion Zach Johnson and reigning Masters champion Sergio Garcia in the first two rounds as he chases a first win since the Players Championship over a year ago.

"I'm looking forward to trying to get back into the winner's circle this year, and hopefully I can do that this week," he said. — AFP

PREVIEW

BIG NAMES IN FIGHT FOR FORM COMING INTO BRITISH OPEN

SOUTHPORT: While uncertainty surrounds the form of leading names such as Dustin Johnson and Rory McIlroy, the British Open begins at Royal Birkdale today with a plethora of players hopeful of winning the Claret Jug.

When The Open last came to the links at Southport, near Liverpool on the coast of north-west England, it was 2008 and Tiger Woods had just won the US Open. That was his 14th major, but Woods has not won any since and no longer does a single player dominate the sport.

The last nine majors have all been won by a different name, going back to Jordan Spieth's back-to-back victories at the Masters and US Open in 2015. Indeed, the last seven majors have all been claimed by players who had never previously taken one of the sport's biggest prizes, including Brooks Koepka at last month's US Open and Henrik Stenson in The Open at Troon 12 months ago.

"I think it's a really impressive stat and it speaks to the state of the game. There are a lot of tremendous young players right now," Spieth, the 23-year-old world number three, said on Tuesday. "And then you've got guys like Henrik and Dustin, guys who are still young, but guys who have been around in contention many, many times, and it was sooner or later going to happen, and it did. It was just a matter of time for them." But, with the likes of Japan's world

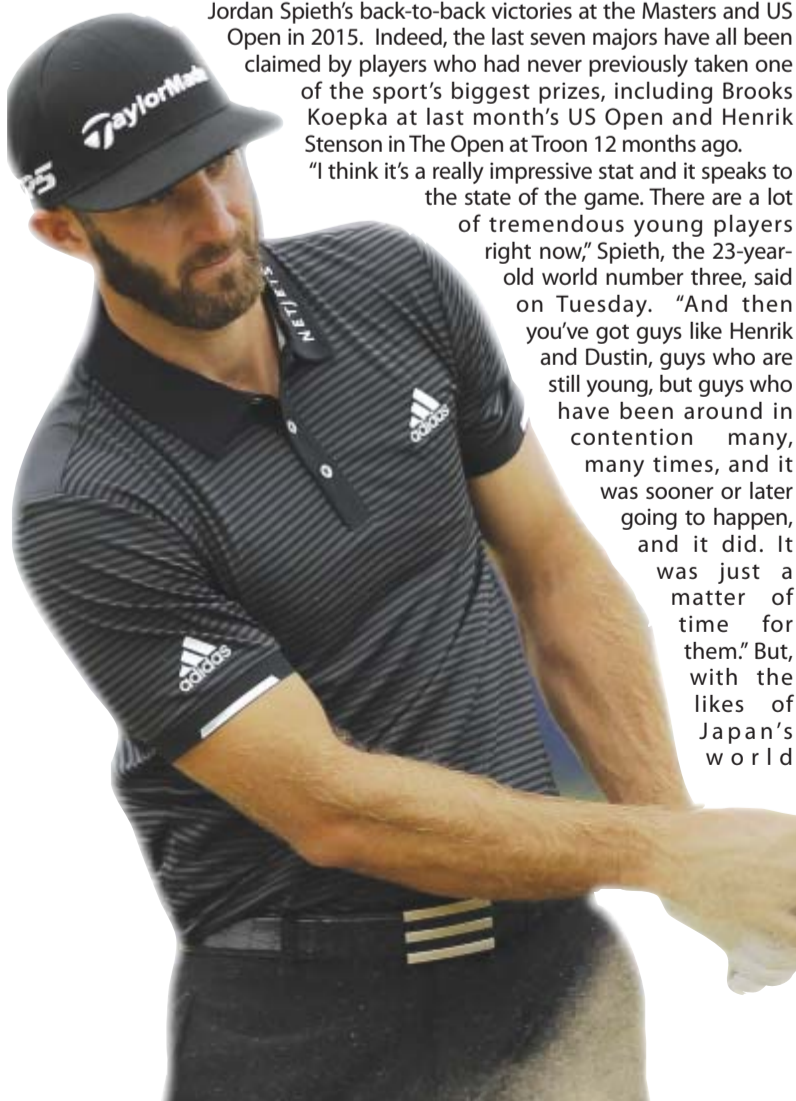
number two Hideki Matsuyama looking a threat, can another first-time winner lift the Claret Jug in front of Birkdale's distinctive white Art Deco clubhouse on Sunday evening? "I think there's a lot more guys who haven't won majors than guys who have that are playing, so the chances are it is going to be somebody that hasn't won one," added Spieth. Spieth's game is in a better place than world number one Johnson, who sat out the Masters with a back injury and missed the cut in last month's US Open at Erin Hills. Nevertheless, Johnson, 33, has remained the favourite for the \$1.845 million first prize with most bookmakers this week, while fourth-ranked McIlroy looks to climb out of a worrying slump. He has missed the cut at three of the last five majors and also failed to make the weekend on the links at the Irish Open and Scottish Open recently. Formidable challenge - Padraig Harrington was the last winner at Birkdale, a stunning par-70 course that winds its way through the sand dunes, nine years ago. He is the last player to

successfully defend the Claret Jug, and Stenson will hope that is an omen for him, although he must know the sort of golf that saw him defeat Phil Mickelson on the last day at Troon was once-in-a-lifetime stuff.

"I think once you win one, obviously that's off your shoulder. And it's more about putting yourself in contention again and trying to win a second one," the Swede, 41, said on Tuesday.

Five of the last six Open champions have been aged 39 or older. In 1998, Birkdale crowned the 41-year-old Mark O'Meara, although a fresh-faced 17-year-old Justin Rose finished fourth as an amateur. Rose, along with local lad Tommy Fleetwood, now look the best bets for a first English winner since Nick Faldo in 1992. Birkdale is hosting The Open for the 10th time all told, with Lee Trevino and Arnold Palmer

among the former champions here. The latter won the first of his two Opens at Birkdale in 1961, and a plaque sits by the 16th fairway to commemorate a famous shot he hit from a bush on his way to the title. The course has great history and poses a formidable challenge, not least if the weather deteriorates. Conditions were glorious on Monday and Tuesday but it is set to be much cooler and more unsettled for Thursday's first round and there is a risk it could be downright unpleasant by Friday. "I think it's the fairest links golf course we play, it rewards great golf," said Rose. "But we really haven't played this course in good weather. This week might not be great." — AFP



Dustin Johnson



Jon Rahm



Jordan Spieth