

Sports

Beyond bizarre: Justin Thomas has 'different feel' as PGA Tour returns

2020 is beyond a bizarre year so far, especially in the world of sports

LOS ANGELES: Justin Thomas says getting back into the swing of things on the PGA Tour after a three-month break due to the coronavirus pandemic has a different feel to it.

It means daily temperature checks, filling out health questionnaires, knowing where the hand-sanitizing stations are and social distancing on the tee boxes.

The Charles Schwab Challenge will be full of firsts as the PGA Tour's restart begins today in Texas with the 148-field teeing off at the Colonial Country Club.

"I would say 2020 is beyond a bizarre year so far, and especially in the world of sports it's just going to be different," said the former world number one Thomas.

"If we all want to get back and play the game that we love we're just going to have to get over the fact that it's going to be different and be a little weird."

World number one Rory McIlroy and second-ranked Jon Rahm of Spain lead a strong field that includes 15 of the world's top 20 players.

World number three Brooks Koepka, defending champion Kevin Na, Dustin Johnson and Phil Mickelson are also teeing up at the course in Fort Worth, Texas.

Some of the sport's top players from outside of North America decided to skip the event because travelling to the US would mean a two-week quarantine, including 10th-ranked Englishman Tommy Fleetwood.

FLOYD RESPECT

The biggest change, since the Tour was shut down in March at the Players Championship, is that organizers are not allowing any spectators this week. The Tour is also going to leave open the 8-46

am tee time and instead have a one-minute moment of silence to mark the death of George Floyd, who has become a symbol of racial injustice in America.

American Jordan Spieth said it is important for the Tour to show its support for the US black community.

"I think it's really cool. I think it'll be something that hopefully we can kind of stick with however long we need to. But I think it's certainly a really nice thing to do with the way things have been," Spieth said.

One player who will be notably absent is Tiger Woods who has won 15 major championships and is chasing Jack Nicklaus (18) for the most in history. Woods looked sharp in a recent exhibition match with Mickelson, Tom Brady and Peyton Manning.

Fellow American Thomas says it will be interesting to see how the social distancing works, especially on the tee boxes which can get pretty crowded with players, caddies and officials.

"What'll be weird is when you stand on the tee boxes trying to separate yourself a bit from your competitors."

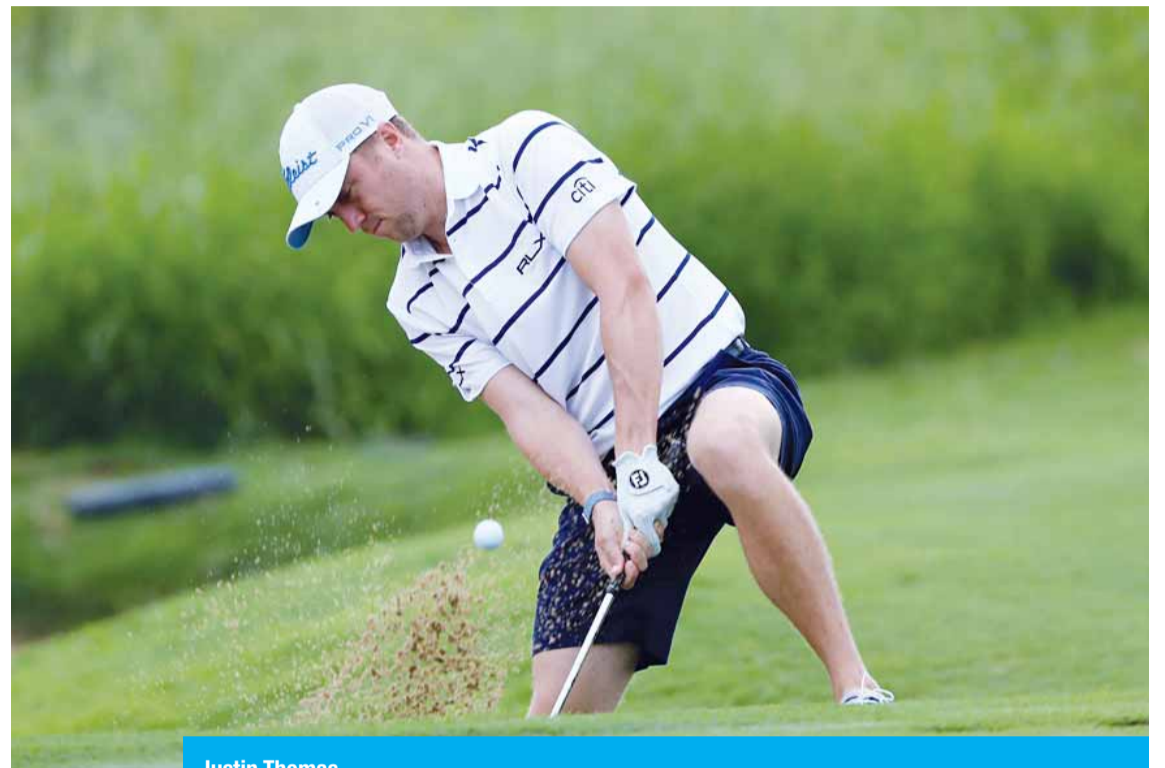
"Normally when you're on the tee box everyone is crunched up in the same area. It'll be a little bit unusual just trying to actually focus on social distancing on the tee."

Thomas said he got tested for the coronavirus and it came up negative.

"I think the (SARS-CoV-2 virus) swab test was probably the most uncomfortable so far. There was nothing comfortable about it," he said.

"But I've done the testing. I've gotten approved. I have my pass that gets me in the locker room, that gets me in the clubhouse, dining."

Thomas has been staying in shape by working out in his backyard and practising socially-distanced golf with friends. But he expects some rust



Justin Thomas

because of the length of the layoff.

FEELING 'RUSTY'

"It's not just going out and having a money game with your buddies," he said. "Every shot counts. It's cumulative score for four days, and that's the thing that's going to be the hardest because I sometimes feel rusty after two, three weeks off, let alone four months."

"The fact that that four-footer I have on the first hole matters. Yeah, if I hit this ball into a hazard that's a penalty stroke, or a penalty area or whatever. It's real."

The PGA Tour cancelled 11 tournaments during

its shutdown, and revised its remaining schedule.

The first five events of the restart, including the Charles Schwab, will be played without spectators. The first tournament to have fans will be The Memorial, July 16-19 in Dublin, Ohio.

After the Charles Schwab, the PGA Tour will feature the RBC Heritage (June 18-21) in Hilton Head, South Carolina; the Travelers Championship (June 25-28) in Cromwell, Connecticut; and the Rocket Mortgage Classic (July 2-5) in Detroit, Michigan.

The PGA Championship will be played August 6-9 in San Francisco and the US Open is rescheduled for September 17-20 in New York. —AFP

Leverkusen beat minnows to book place in Cup final

VOLKLINGEN: Bayer Leverkusen beat lowly Saarbruecken 3-0 away on Tuesday to reach next month's German Cup final and bring the fairy-tale run of the fourth division side to a jolting end.

Two goals inside the opening 20 minutes swiftly ended home hopes as top-flight Leverkusen advanced to the July 4 decider in Berlin where they will meet the winner of Wednesday's clash between holders Bayern Munich and Eintracht Frankfurt.

French flyer Moussa Diaby put Leverkusen ahead in the 11th minute and Lucas Alario added a second eight minutes later, before substitute Karim Bellarabi rounded off the scoring in the 58th.

Saarbruecken were the first team from the fourth tier to reach the last four of the cup, taking the scalps of

two top-flight and two second division clubs along the way, but had the odds stacked against them ahead of Tuesday's game.

They had not played for 94 days since the German regional league was suspended and then prematurely ended because of the novel coronavirus health crisis.

This was in contrast to their high-flying Bundesliga opponents, who resumed playing one month ago and whose superior match fitness was evident almost from the opening whistle.

Diaby timed his run perfectly to beat the offside trap and get onto the end of a clever forward pass over the defence, which he then hooked into the goal from close range.

Alario added a second from a tight angle after a mix-up in the hosts' defence. Leverkusen, also still contented for another trophy in this season's Europa League, continued their dominance and added a third goal, just before the hour, through Bellarabi after a series of slick passes.

Yet they were also guilty of squandering several good chances after that and could easily have won by a far



VOLKLINGEN: Leverkusen's Italian forward Lucas Alario (L) and Saarbruecken's Manuel Zeitz vie for the ball during the German Cup (DFB Pokal) semi-final football match 1 FC Saarbruecken v Bayer 04 Leverkusen in Volklingen, southern Germany on June 9, 2020. —AFP

larger margin.

Saarbruecken's Markus Mendler misused his effort in front of goal to squander their best chance for a consolation on the stroke of fulltime.

Leverkusen, who won the German Cup for the only time in 1993, last appeared in the final in 2009 when they lost to Werder Bremen. — Reuters

Ten years on, mixed results for WCup hosts S Africa

JOHANNESBURG: Today marks the 10th anniversary of South Africa hosting the World Cup, the first and only time Africa staged the biggest single-sport global tournament.

A decade on, the report card about football in the republic is mixed with successes including a thriving national league and multi-sport use of virtually all the World Cup stadiums.

Negatives include a poorly performing national team, the absence of South Africans from four of the five major European leagues and a national association beset by personality clashes.

Here, AFP Sport looks at five successes and failures of South Africa 10 years after drawing with Mexico in the opening game and subsequently becoming the first hosts not to reach the last 16.

Oyarzabal urges Real Sociedad to give season a final flourish

MADRID: "I am happy where I am, I feel loved," says Mikel Oyarzabal, Real Sociedad's captain and creator, often linked with Manchester City but whose best chance of playing in the Champions League next season might be to stay where he is.

Real Sociedad are fourth in La Liga, one point ahead of Atletico Madrid, after Oyarzabal's penalty helped them beat Eibar on March 10, the league's

last match that was played behind closed doors before fixtures were suspended completely.

A week earlier, another Oyarzabal penalty sent La Real through to their first Copa del Rey final in 32 years, this one against Basque rivals Athletic Bilbao for the first time ever. In February, they had each knocked out Real Madrid and Barcelona on the same night. Oyarzabal, together with Martin Odegaard who is flourishing on loan from Real Madrid, has been at the heart of it. The Spanish number 10 who marauds off the left has been fouled twice as much as Lionel Messi and sits below only five players with 14 goals and assists combined.

It has already been a brilliant season and it is tempting to wonder if it will be judged a success

ful, regardless of how Real Sociedad place at the end of La Liga's sprint finish that begins on Thursday.

"Listen, not for me," Oyarzabal says, in an exclusive interview with AFP. "We are a few points ahead so what we all want is to sit in the Champions League, to live that competition next year. "Everyone is completely plugged in now and it feels like a good time to fight for where we are."

It is not only about where they are but how they got there, with many seeing Real Sociedad as the best team to watch in Spain this season. "People can say nice things but it's more about what we feel," says Oyarzabal. "We feel comfortable, we feel happy and I think that shows in how we play. —AFP

Malaysia badminton ace eyes golden future

KUALA LUMPUR: Lee Zii Jia's charge up the badminton rankings has sparked hopes that Malaysia has found a successor to the legendary Lee Chong Wei — and someone who can finally win the country a first Olympic gold.

The 22-year-old jumped to world number 10 after establishing himself in the sport's elite with some big-name scalps at the start of this year before play was suspended because of the coronavirus.

He defeated China's Olympic champion Chen Long to reach the semi-finals of the prestigious All England Open in March, and beat China's ninth-ranked Shi Yuqi at the Malaysia Masters in January.

But he remains relaxed about being touted as the heir to fellow Malaysian Lee Chong Wei, a three-time Olympic silver medallist and one of the greatest players of his generation until his retirement last year.

"From the beginning, everybody said I am the next Lee Chong Wei, that I am going to replace him," he told AFP.

"It made me (feel) pressure but now, slowly, I have become more mature.

"I am starting to accept those pressures, and turn them into motivation."

The major disappointment in former world number one Lee Chong Wei's glittering career was that he failed to win badminton's biggest prizes, being beaten to gold by his nemesis Lin Dan of China in the 2008 and 2012 Olympic finals, and the World Championships in 2011 and 2013.

But Lee Zii Jia, despite the weight of expectation, is downplaying his chances of winning gold at the virus-delayed Tokyo Games next year, which would be his first Olympics. "I don't think about it... I will just go and try my best to gain some experience," he said. "For me no pressure, just go and fight, and try my best."

PACKED CALENDAR

He has received advice from the elder Lee, 37, and is using the same two coaches his compatriot did before the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Lee Chong Wei, who retired last year after failing to regain form following successful cancer treatment, made it to the men's singles finals in Rio in 2016 only to be defeated by China's Chen, who a year earlier had also relegated him to silver at the World Championships.

"Their combination, I think, is very good," said Lee Zii Jia of the backroom team of head coach Hendrawan and assistant Tey Seu Bock.

"They have worked with Lee Chong Wei for many years, maybe they will share some experiences with me about how he trained." Lee Zii Jia has an attacking style but in recent matches has shown more patience and consistency, such as during his 21-12, 21-18 victory over Chen in his first appearance at the All England Open. —AFP