



AUGUSTA, Georgia: Tiger Woods of the United States plays his shot from the ninth tee during a practice round prior to the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club on April 4, 2022. —AFP

## Tiger-mania builds at Augusta

**AUGUSTA, Georgia:** Tiger Woods practiced before thousands of supportive spectators on Monday at Augusta National ahead of the 86th Masters, where he hopes to make his first start since a car crash 14 months ago left him with severe right leg injuries. The prospect of an astonishing comeback by the 46-year-old US star, who says it will be a "game-time decision" if he tees off Thursday, built an electric atmosphere at the famed course, which welcomed a full crowd for the first time since Woods' 2019 win due to Covid-19 limits.

"Tiger just walked out of the clubhouse to scenes and atmosphere like you've never seen before," three-time Masters winner Nick Faldo of England tweeted. "Patrons cheering and flocking to cram around the putting green. And it's only Monday at the Masters." Bryson DeChambeau, the 2020 US Open champion, was practicing his massive tee shots when the roar erupted. "From the driving range, we could hear the loud roar when he came out of the clubhouse up to that first tee," he said. "That was pretty special to see, or hear at least."

With fans cheering in support, Woods played nine holes with 2017 PGA Championship winner Justin

Thomas and 1992 Masters winner Fred Couples, who said Woods looked "phenomenal" and "very impressive" in the session. "To go what he has gone through, to be playing today - I'm sure he's going to tee it up Thursday," Couples said. "Now it's just the walking part. If he can walk around here for 72 holes, he'll contend." Woods was hospitalized for weeks and unable to walk for months after the Feb 2021 automobile accident, saying he was lucky to be alive and not have his leg amputated. So it's no wonder players and fans alike were thrilled by the prospect the 15-time major winner might make chase another major triumph. "It's exciting there's the possibility he's going to play this week," said 2013 Masters champion Adam Scott of Australia. "I really hope he does. No matter what, it would just be epic."

Scott warned that if he plays, Woods is a true threat to win a sixth Masters green jacket - matching the all-time record of Jack Nicklaus - and 16th career major title, two shy of Nicklaus's all-time mark. "I've learned long ago never doubt the guy," Scott said. "If he can get around, which seems to be the question, you can't doubt his golf."

Woods required major rehabilitation just to play in an event with his son last December, when he could use a cart and didn't have to walk the entire course. However, after giving no timetable for a return, Woods played an 18-hole practice round last Tuesday at Augusta National, testing his fitness to walk the hilly course.

### 'Not surprised, amazed'

"I'm not surprised. I'm amazed," said 37th-ranked Max Homa. "I'd be surprised if it was anyone else that has ever lived. It's a true testament to his work ethic. It's remarkable really." A quarter-century after Woods won his first major title by an astonishing 12 strokes at Augusta National to launch "Tigermania", he is again thrilling the Georgia crowd after spectators were banned in 2020 for his title defense - the most recent official event Woods has played.

Spectators lined the first hole three and four deep to watch Woods, showing how much it means to them to have Woods even attempt such an incredible return. "If I'm in his shoes, I don't do everything I've done for the last few months and show up here and not play," world

number 13 Billy Horschel said. "The only thing stopping him, I think, would be if he gets some kind of injury. I'm guessing he's going to play and I'm going to be just as excited as everyone else to see him tee it up out here on Thursday."

With storms forecast for Tuesday and Wednesday, Monday could mark the last opportunity for Woods and other players to test themselves over the record 7,510-yard, par-72 layout. Woods, who fell to 973 in Monday's world rankings, has already made an extraordinary comeback at the Masters, winning in 2019 for his first major triumph since 2008 after spinal fusion surgery.

Should Woods play and manage a fairytale triumph on Sunday, he would become the oldest Masters winner and third-oldest major champion in golf history, trailing only last year's PGA Championship victory at age 50 by Phil Mickelson and Julius Boros, who won the 1968 PGA at age 48. At 46 years, three months and 11 days, Woods would be a day older than Old Tom Morris when he won the 1867 British Open and three weeks older than Nicklaus when he won the 1986 Masters. —AFP

## Rivals say Tiger can handle difficult walk at Masters

**AUGUSTA:** Tiger Woods looks ready to manage the challenge of walking 72 holes at Augusta National only 14 months after suffering severe right leg injuries in a car crash. That's what rivals of the 15-time major champion said Monday as Woods played his first public practice round ahead of his "game-time decision" about whether or not to attempt a comeback at the Masters. "He looked good walking," said 1992 Masters winner Fred Couples of Woods after playing nine holes with Woods on Monday. "The way he looked, it's very impressive. (The course) is brutal to walk."

Couples said Woods "is never going to let you know he's in pain" but his game didn't suffer if he was. "He was bombing it," Couples said. "He didn't miss many shots, drove it great... this guy, he's just unreal. Cameron Davis, an Australian who played the final five holes with Woods in a Sunday practice round, said the five-time Masters winner was "still a little slow going up a couple of hills on 17 and 18". "He's striking it well. He's hitting it far enough to play the holes the way you need to play them. I don't see any reason why he wouldn't be able to put rounds together out here."

Woods said he was lucky to survive a February 2021 automobile accident in Southern California and not have his right leg amputated. He battled through rehabilitation to give himself the chance to play this week, walking confidently Monday as spectators



Fred Couples

screamed their support for his comeback bid. A start by Woods in Thursday's opening round would be among the more astonishing injury fightbacks in sports history, the five-time Masters champion not having played since defending his title at the 2020 Masters, played in November due to COVID-19.

"He's hitting the shots you should hit," Davis said. "He was playing well. Everything was looking pretty solid. It will be great to see him out here if he decides to tee it up on Thursday. "Just looked like the work he's been putting in has set him up pretty well for this week if he feels ready." Four-time major winner Brooks Koepka, seeking his first green jacket, played last year's Masters two weeks after knee surgery and struggled getting around the layout. "This place isn't exactly an easy walk. I understand what he's up against. It'll be difficult. But if anybody can do it, it's him." —AFP

break from golf after his comments on the Saudi-backed super league, spearheaded by Greg Norman, provoked a furor.

DeChambeau, the 2020 US Open champion, was asked about his good friend as he spoke to reporters at Augusta National. "I've tried to reach out, but he's gone dark," DeChambeau said of Mickelson, the reigning PGA Champion. "There's no contact."

DeChambeau has been a rare sight on tour this year himself. He missed six weeks due to hand and hip injuries, returning last month for the WGC Match Play - where he failed to make the round of 16 - and missing the cut at the Texas Open last week. "I'm

## Morikawa would rather make Masters history than study it

**AUGUSTA:** Collin Morikawa admits he's no student of golf history, and the two-time major champion says that can be an advantage at the Masters where the weight of the past can be overwhelming. The 25-year-old American has more than proved he's got the game for Grand Slam tournaments. He followed his 2020 PGA Championship victory with a triumph at the 2021 British Open at Royal St. George's - becoming the only golfer to win two major titles in his first attempt at each.

He'll be teeing it up for the third time Augusta National on Thursday, and said Monday he's figured out that what he needs to do to contend is focus on his own game, and not the fabled course or the myriad memorable moments it has produced.

"I think the biggest thing is, I need to play my game," Morikawa said. "You hear how much you need to hit draws, and you have to hit it high and you have to do certain things, but that's what I did wrong the past two years. This year I just made sure everything was finely tuned and I go out there (to practice) and figure out how to play the course to my strengths. Speed and putting is going to be really key out here. You can't be hitting things three feet, five feet, six feet by and three-putting."

From the floral fireworks of azalea and dogwood blooms to Magnolia Lane and the presentation of the green jacket in Butler Cabin, the Masters is steeped in tradition. And the course that flows under towering



Collin Morikawa

pinetrees has produced a litany of legendary champions.

Morikawa, who was two months old when Woods won his historic first Masters title in 1997, said the Augusta campaign he remembers most is Woods's stunning fifth victory in 2019 to claim a 15th major championship and cement his return from spinal fusion surgery.

"I'm not really zoned in on focusing on every shot, but 2019 was where we were all just glued to the couch and glued to the TV," Morikawa said of following the tournament with his college golf teammates - a year before he would make his own debut.

But Morikawa doesn't see others' past glories when he walks Augusta National. He has picked the brain of former champions like Mark O'Meara, but said that unlike practice partner J J Spaun he couldn't have recreated O'Meara's winning putt. "Don't take it the wrong way," Morikawa said, "I respect the sport fully. I just want to win. I want to be out here. I want to make history." —AFP

huge risk a couple weeks ago," he said. "It was probably not one that my doctors recommended, but I decided to do so because I wanted to give this tournament a run."

DeChambeau said the injuries have made him "a little smarter" in how he practices, limiting the number of balls he hits. "Today was the first time I can just go and hit golf balls for a long period of time and just get really comfortable and dialed in, so I feel pretty nice and comfortable going into this week so far," he said. And DeChambeau insisted it wasn't completely unrealistic to think he can contend for a green jacket. —AFP

## DeChambeau says Mickelson has 'gone dark' after row

**AUGUSTA:** Three-time winner Phil Mickelson is sitting out the Masters for the first time in 28 years, and his friend Bryson DeChambeau said Monday the US veteran has "gone dark". Mickelson said in February he was taking a "desperately" needed