

Schwartzel celebrates win as golf power struggle deepens



ST ALBANS: South African golfer Charl Schwartzel celebrates with the trophy during the podium ceremony after winning the LIV Golf Invitational Series event at The Centurion Club on June 11, 2022. — AFP

ST ALBANS, United Kingdom: Charl Schwartzel's victory at the first event of the rebel LIV Golf series brought the curtain down on one of the most dramatic weeks in the history of a sport now in deep turmoil. The breakaway circuit, fronted by former world number one Greg Norman and bankrolled by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, is now a real and present threat to golf's established tours.

The stars at the opening tournament outside London, which finished on Saturday, included six-time major winner Phil Mickelson and two-time major champion Dustin Johnson. But there were other big names in the 48-man field too, including major winners Schwartzel, Sergio Garcia, Martin Kaymer, Graeme McDowell and Louis Oosthuizen. During the event at the Centurion Club in St Albans, the organizers trumpeted the signings of 2020 US Open champion Bryson DeChambeau and former Masters winner Patrick Reed. Organizers have vowed to "supercharge" golf, offering 54-hole tournaments with no cuts, simultaneous "shotgun starts" and a team element.

Play got under way on Thursday but was quickly overshadowed by a brutal statement from the US PGA Tour, banning the rebel golfers, who had not been given permission to play in the LIV tournament. Ten of the 17 listed had already resigned their membership. PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan said the "same fate holds true" for any players who compete in future

LIV events, with Reed and Bryson DeChambeau due to be in the field in Oregon later this month.

There was uncertainty in the run-up to the inaugural event about who would be in the field. Norman himself had previously said the tournament did not need the biggest names to be an instant success, arguing it could be a showcase for future stars. But the Australian managed to attract enough big names to make the sport's power brokers sit up and take notice and he can now count nine major winners on his books. A number of high-profile players had previously pledged their allegiance to the PGA Tour, including Johnson and DeChambeau, before making U-turns. Others are staying loyal - at least for now. Four-time major winner Rory McIlroy, currently playing in the PGA Tour's Canadian Open, said Monahan had simply enforced membership regulations and had "done the right thing".

Court battle?

The dispute could be heading for the courtroom if any of the players banned by the PGA Tour pursue a legal challenge. Norman's big pitch is for a "free and open market" in golf and he has pledged to back his players to the hilt, even saying LIV Golf would pay any fines. Ryder Cup star Ian Poulter plans to appeal against the PGA Tour ban, saying it makes "no sense" to limit players' choice.

The DP World Tour, previously known as the European Tour, has yet to react but the LIV players have been reassured they can play in next week's US Open. Another unknown is the issue of world ranking points, currently unavailable at LIV tournaments. The points are crucial because they help players qualify for the four majors, which are the sport's marquee tournaments.

Aside from the bitter power struggle, two issues have pursued players at the event in St Albans - accusations of greed and questions over human rights. The money involved is undeniably mind-blowing. There was a record \$25 million prize pot at the Centurion Club and there is a total of \$255 million on offer at this year's eight tournaments.

Mickelson did not dispel rumors he was receiving a fee of \$200 million to compete, while Johnson is reportedly getting \$150 million. Norman said last month he had secured an extra \$2 billion to turn the initial eight-event invitational series into a 14-event league by 2024.

Mickelson faced an uncomfortable grilling by reporters on the eve of the tournament over the Saudi funding but insisted he did not "condone human rights violations", adding that golf could be a force for good. The questions are unlikely to go away as LIV Golf heads to the United States, with the sport braced for the next instalment in a gripping drama. — AFP

PGA, LIV Golf stars to fight for major title at US Open

BROOKLINE, Massachusetts: Expect some uncomfortable moments for Phil Mickelson and Dustin Johnson at this week's US Open, where LIV Golf rebels and US PGA loyalists chase a major title in formidable conditions. Players who departed for the rich new Saudi-funded series that debuted in England last week were suspended from US PGA Tour events, but the US Golf Association is allowing them to play in the 122nd US Open.

That's going to add to the intensity when the showdown starts Thursday on The Country Club's 7,254-yard, par-70 layout in suburban Boston. "I'm sure it will be awkward," said Justin Thomas, who won his second PGA Championship last month. "When I saw DJ last week, I didn't know what to say, if it was a congrats or a bye or whatever it was. I think we're all grown-ups and we understand there's going to be some guys you can make some jokes to and some guys you have to leave it alone, but in the end, we're all there to win a major." Sixth-ranked Thomas knows there won't be much time for small talk. "I would say a lot of guys, myself included, aren't at a US Open to socialize," the 29-year-old American said. "I'm not there to have a conversation and catch up." Former world number one Johnson and six-time major champion Mickelson were among several stars who jumped to LIV Golf, which had a record \$25 million purse for its inaugural three-day event.

Other major winners on the PGA banned list include Sergio Garcia, Graeme McDowell, Louis Oosthuizen, Martin Kaymer - who withdrew from the Open on Saturday due to injury - and Charl Schwartzel, who won the \$4 million LIV Golf debut event. Bryson DeChambeau and Patrick Reed, also major champions, joined LIV Golf over the weekend.

The US PGA Tour banished those who played the LIV tournament from any PGA Tour events. But the USGA stuck with its Open qualifying standards and rewarded all who had made the field of 156. "We simply asked ourselves this question - should a player who had earned his way into the 2022 US Open, via our published field criteria, be pulled out of the field as a result of his decision to play in another event? And we ultimately decided that they should not," the USGA said in a statement.

American Kevin Na, who opted for LIV Golf, was happy to hear it. "Majors are very important to me," Na said. "That's one thing that's missing in my career and that has been a dream of mine, to win a major championship, since I can remember."

Tiger skips US Open

Tiger Woods, a 15-time major winner making a comeback from severe leg injuries suffered in a February 2021 car crash, will skip the US Open to better prepare for the British Open, which starts July 14 at St Andrews. "My body needs more time to get stronger for major championship golf," Woods tweeted. "I'm excited to get back out there soon."

Woods, 46, made the cut at the Masters in April and last month's PGA Championship, but withdrew from the last day at Southern Hills after limping to the third-worst major round of his career. He has also supported the PGA Tour, citing its legacy to such legends as Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus. Shotmaking accuracy will be at a premium with the US Open's usual lightning-fast greens and thick rough. American Billy Horschel, who won the Memorial earlier this month, took his only top-15 finish at a major by sharing fourth at the 2013 US Open. "I've always felt like US Open venues and the way they set them up favors me very well," Horschel said. "Obviously my major record is pretty abysmal, but I feel very confident."

American Will Zalatoris, who lost a PGA playoff to Thomas at the PGA Championship, expects a difficult test at Brookline. "I played the US Am there in 2013. It was the hardest golf course I ever played," he said. "It was a big-boy golf course. US Open. Expect nothing different." The Country Club has hosted three prior US Opens, all won by Americans, including the historic 1913 triumph by amateur Francis Ouimet, and the 1999 Ryder Cup, when the Americans rallied on the final day to defeat Europe in the "Battle of Brookline." — AFP



JAKARTA: Denmark's Viktor Axelsen poses with his gold medal after the men's singles final at the Indonesia Masters badminton tournament on June 12, 2022. — AFP

Badminton number one Axelsen wins Indonesia Masters

JAKARTA: Danish badminton ace Viktor Axelsen clinched the men's singles title at the Indonesia Masters on Sunday, beating Taiwan's Chou Tien-chen in straight sets. The world number one beat Chou 21-10, 21-12 in a 41-minute match held at the Istora sporting arena in Jakarta. "I love playing here in Istora and I always dreamt of winning a tournament at Istora. It's a legendary venue, so to have done that is something that is really special to me," 28-year-old Axelsen told reporters.

Norwegian climber sets her sights on 14 peaks record

KATHMANDU: A Norwegian climber is on track to beat the time record for summiting the globe's 14 highest peaks, part of her quest to change how the mountaineering world views women athletes. Kristin Harila has already climbed six mountains over 8,000 m high, including Everest, in the last two months.

The 36-year-old hopes to match or surpass Nepali adventurer Nirmal Purja and his groundbreaking 2019 record of six months and six days, an achievement that smashed the previous record and was profiled in a popular Netflix documentary. "In history and until now, it has been the strong macho men going out climbing mountains," Harila told AFP this week. "When I talk to people that are not in this sport, they believe



This handout photograph taken on May 13, 2022 shows Norwegian mountaineer Kristin Harila posing on route to summit Mount Everest. — AFP

that men are more capable than women... If we are going to change, we need to get attention and show that women are just as capable." Male climbers and guides far outnumber women in the top tier of the sport, with only a handful of women mountaineers getting attention and sponsorships for their expeditions. Out of nearly a thousand climbers who visited Nepal's famed Himalayan peaks this year, only around a fifth were women, according to Nepali government data.

"I am very pleased to get the gold medal today. I faced some difficulties during the game but I'm very pleased to overcome them and secure the win," world number four Chen said. Chen secured a place in the final after defeating compatriot He Bingjiao 21-17, 21-14 in the semis. After the Indonesia Masters, the Indonesia Open is set to begin on June 14 and will last until June 19. The back-to-back tournaments were highly anticipated by badminton fans after almost three years without live audiences in the Indonesian capital due to the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

Harila's first notable climb was on Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro in 2015, but she made headlines last year for becoming the fastest woman to travel between the summits of Everest and Mount Lhotse in Nepal. She accomplished that feat in 12 hours, but broke her own record this year, knocking four hours off her time. But neither record was enough to convince major sponsors to back her current endeavor.

"There are lots of girls and women (who want) to climb, they want to have the sponsorship from the brands," she said. "It's easier for the brands to believe in what the men are presenting." The former cross-country skier was able to find support from Bremont Watches and some other brands, but still had to sell her apartment to fund the project, she said.

'Inspire women'

Only around 40 people in history have summited all 14 of the world's 8,000-m-plus peaks. None have come close to Nirmal Purja's 2019 expedition. He demolished the previous record for accomplishing the feat with supplemental oxygen, set by Poland's Jerzy Kukuczka in the 1980s at seven years, 11 months and 14 days. Harila said the Nepali climber was an "inspiration". "But for me, it is not a competition against him, I don't care much about that," she added.

Nonetheless, she climbed her first six peaks in just 29 days, accompanied by her Nepali guides Pasdawa and Dawa Ongju Sherpa, breaking an earlier record set by Purja. "She is a very strong and determined climber. The first phase has been record-breaking," Lakpa Sherpa of 8K Expeditions, Harila's expedition organizer, told AFP.

The team is now preparing to leave for Pakistan to climb their next five mountains, including K2 and the 8,126 m Nanga Parbat, while she raises more funds for the expedition. Maya Sherpa, the president of the Everest Summiters Association, said Harila's project was a welcome effort to bring more women into the male-dominated climbing world. "Climbers like her are very important to set an example," Sherpa said. — AFP

Mo Donegal wins Belmont as Rich Strike finishes sixth

NEW YORK: Mo Donegal won the 154th Belmont Stakes on Saturday, giving trainer Todd Pletcher a one-two finish ahead of stablemate Nest in the 1 1/2-mile event as Kentucky Derby winner Rich Strike finished sixth. Pletcher claimed a fourth Belmont triumph after wins with Rags to Riches in 2007, Palace Malice in 2013 and Tapwrit in 2017. Fifth in the Kentucky Derby, Mo Donegal went off as the 5-2 favorite with Irad Ortiz in the irons.

He swept past early pacesetter We the People and powered down the stretch for the win. The filly Nest, ridden by Irad's brother Jose Ortiz, stumbled out of the gate but also closed strong to take second ahead of Skippy Longstocking. "We were really pleased with the way both horses were training," Pletcher said. "It was sort of deja vu when Nest stumbled, but she recovered and got in good position and I thought both horses travelled great the whole way."

It was an emotional win for Mike Repole, the New York native who is a co-owner of both Mo Donegal and Nest. "This is my Derby," Repole said. "This has been a dream that I've had for 40 years. This is the biggest goal I had in my racing life, and I just accomplished it, and I ran one-two."

"I used to cut out of school and it made me an entrepreneur. I used to bet \$20 and that's a lot of pressure when you had to pay back your parents. I'm always going to be Mike from Queens. This is New York's biggest race and to win it here, with my family and friends and 70 people here, this will be a big winner's circle."

We the People, saddled by US-based French trainer Rodolphe Brisset and ridden by French jockey Flavien Prat, broke smartly from the first gate and led for almost a mile before finishing fourth. Rich Strike, who stunned the racing world with a Kentucky Derby victory as an 80-1 longshot, couldn't repeat the magic.

Breaking from the fourth post in the eight-horse field with Venezuelan Sony Leon again aboard, Rich Strike trailed the field early and unlike at Churchill Downs five weeks ago couldn't find a way through and finished sixth. "I guess we made a mistake not putting him on the fence," trainer Eric Reed said of the decision not to have Leon take Rich Strike to the rail, hoping instead to "give him a good, open run where he could take off."

He said Rich Strike "was not aggressive" running in the middle of the track and never dug in for a late move. "I think we made a tactical error," Reed said. "We'll have to teach him how to run around horses." After his Kentucky Derby upset, Rich Strike sat out the Preakness Stakes, won by Early Volting over heavily favored Epicenter - neither of which ran in the Belmont. — AFP



ELMONT, New York: Mo Donegal with Irad Ortiz Jr up celebrates in the winner's circle after winning the 154th running of the Belmont Stakes at Belmont Park on June 11, 2022. — AFP