



# Eagle Eyed

A well made Merion: Darren Kilfara finds five talking points from the 113th National Open

## The Winner

In its own way, Justin Rose's Sunday at Merion was every bit as special as Adam Scott's at Augusta. Rose hit only two bad lag putts and one truly poor shot (from the bunker at #14) all day. His ball-striking was pure enough to make Ben Hogan smile – OK, maybe just nod once in approval – from the grave; in particular, his approach at #18 was a worthy successor to Hogan's famous 1-iron in 1950. He bounced back from his first three bogeys with immediate birdies, two of which he followed with additional birdies as well. His win felt... just right. He was due, and he delivered, and I'm really happy for him. Now, will a single major quench his thirst, or can Rose rise again and kick on from here?

## The Runners-Up

Jason Day has now played in 11 majors and finished second or third four times. He's 25 years old; his best days surely lie ahead.

As for Phil Mickelson? If the hole were a quarter-inch wider he'd have won by 10 shots, but he just couldn't get enough good putts to drop. More worryingly, he still makes too many silly Sunday mistakes, both physically and mentally: the wedges he hit on #13 and #15 were ghastly, and the double-bogeys he made in not knowing how to cut his losses at #3 and #5 cost him the tournament. Plus, does anyone really need five wedges? One down with one to play, don't you need a driver in your bag? When asked what he'll take away from Merion, he responded simply "heartbreak", and I fear Mickelson will become this century's Sam Snead; not the worst golfing fate by any means, but his US Open chances are running out.

## The Course

Merion simply doesn't work as a modern tournament venue – its main property is too compact for silly things like hospitality tents, practice ranges and spectators. I'm afraid we'll never see the world's best golfers there again, but wow, what a swan song: among recent US Open venues, I rate only Shinnecock

Hills more highly. Both architects and administrators should study Merion's wonderfully sloping terrain very closely to understand how a soft, 6,996-yard course with perfectly puttable greens managed to defend par so successfully. (Hint: acreage is overrated).

## The USGA

Kudos: The USGA's gamble in returning to Merion succeeded, and Mike Davis's familiar course setup helped produce another memorable tournament. (Who doesn't like watching pros hit drivers into par 3s?) Brickbats: Saturday's final threesome of Mickelson, Luke Donald and Billy Horschel took 170 minutes to complete nine holes. I've played with Scots who complain when 18 holes take that long; the USGA's new campaign to fight slow play is off to an inauspicious start.

## The Tiger

For the first time in his life, Tiger Woods looks mentally trapped. He's on the back nine of his career, his body looks increasingly frail, and he's still four down in majors to Jack Nicklaus. He cares about four events each year, and it shows: the Players Championship and the Farmers Insurance Open don't get him closer to the magic number of 19. If your life depended on it, would you bet on Tiger to win his next major before he misses his next major cut? Muirfield is up next, and I know where my money is.



**Left: Darren Kilfara offers his best Ben Hogan moment on a Merion fairway**



14th hole from the tees with the village of Machrihanish in background, Machrihanish Dunes Golf Club

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# The Golf Trip: Kintyre

So you have a few spare days for a golf trip with your buddies. Where should you go? This is the first article in an occasional series which will offer some possible answers.

I lived in London for four years. To maintain my sanity, every spring I escaped the city by journeying to Machrihanish. This involved a long train ride to Glasgow, an even longer bus ride to Campbeltown, and seven days spent almost entirely between course, clubhouse and B&B. The bus can be replaced with a (beautiful) flight, and more luxurious accommodation is now available, but Kintyre's back-of-beyond charm was and is always worth the effort to get there.

There are now three courses worth playing on the peninsula. The newest, Machrihanish Dunes, was designed by David McLay Kidd – of Bandon Dunes fame – and opened in 2009. Though its conditioning is yet to fully mature, the design testifies to the wonderful state of modern golf course architecture: of its 259 acres, only seven were disturbed during its construction. This creates a wild ride

up, down and around some of the most spectacular golfing terrain I've ever encountered; some may think it too wild in places, but the 13th hole in particular – a short par 4 with a green angled like the 10th at Riviera, only surrounded by tall dunes instead of bunkers – showcases the fun you can have along the way.

The original Machrihanish course remains one of the great coastal gems in Britain. From the opening tee shot, over a corner of North Atlantic beach, the first eight holes weave effortlessly through the dunes in an adrenaline rush of linksland ecstasy. From the ninth, the course leaves the coastline and becomes more refined, but no less interesting; only on the green of the par 5 12th have I ever intentionally bashed a putt 20 feet past the hole, trusting the steep slope behind to apply a boomerang effect. (It did.) Only its

final two holes are mundane; the first 16 are memorable.

Those are the two heavyweights, but Dunaverty – at the southern tip of Kintyre – is a sporty bantamweight. Would you normally play a 4,800-yard par 66 on a golfing holiday? Probably not...but for Dunaverty, you should make an exception. You'll never play a better collection of driveable par 4s (five of them, to be precise); the 7th may be the best par 3 in Argyll; you'll never see par 3s like the 4th and 10th anywhere else; and the views, across Sanda Island to Ireland on a clear day, can be mind-blowing. Check your preconceptions at the door, and you'll be happy you did. ★

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