

Signature Event features 80-player field, no cut and enhanced stature, money and FedExCup points

PEBBLE BEACH, Calif. – Neither fans nor TV cameras tracked Rory McIlroy on the back nine at Pebble Beach on Tuesday. He played with Tommy Fleetwood, Nicolai Højgaard and Beau Hossler as the waves crashed, seagulls squawked and fog rolled in. It was only a practice round, but the serene moment – pure golf on a pristine property, no pretense – seemed good for the soul.

There is a different quality to this week's AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am, but that's probably an understatement. The season's second Signature Event features an elite, 80-player field as opposed to 156. That means 76 fewer professionals, 76 fewer amateurs. Add caddies and it amounts to a staggering 300 fewer people on the course. Justin Thomas recalls playing a nine-hole round here in 2014 that took three and a half hours.

"I know the practice rounds are a lot better," said Thomas, who returns to the AT&T Pebble Beach for the first time in a decade. "(Rickie Fowler) and I went and played 18 yesterday in about four and a half and we chipped and putted every hole and hit some extra shots. It's more enjoyable for everybody that's here. ... It's going to help with the flow of everything and also gets all the best golfers in the world together at a beautiful place."

Amateurs will only play the first two rounds as opposed to three (four for those who made the cut). Other changes this year include no cut for the pros; 700 FedExCup points to the winner; and only two courses (Pebble, Spyglass Hill) in the rotation (no Monterey Peninsula Country Club). It's a completely reimagined tournament.

That could be helpful **given the potentially inclement weather this time of year.** The traditionalist's AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am, once hosted by the entertainer Bing Crosby, could be a logistical challenge, and last year's tournament required a Monday finish. It was canceled after 36 holes in 1996, and the final round in '98 was delayed more than six months, with more than 30 players not bothering to return for Round 3.

"It was fun and unique in the way that it was, but it has the feel of closer to a major (this week)," said AT&T ambassador Jordan Spieth, who won here in 2017. "... It's a lot less people. Without the entertainment stuff it certainly has a different feel in that regard off the course.

"On the course I'm only seeing – I'm playing practice rounds with guys who played the U.S. Open here and that's the last time they were here and it's pretty cool to see them out here."

Thomas, whose last trip to Pebble was for the 2019 U.S. Open (where he missed the cut), joked that he's excited to make his first cut here. Scottie Scheffler is playing in the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am for the first time. So is Collin Morikawa, who went to Cal-Berkeley, just two and a half hours north, and finished T35 at the 2019 U.S. Open at Pebble.

Then there's world No. 2 McIlroy, who is making his first start of the 2024 PGA TOUR season. He missed the cut at the 2018 AT&T, then tied for ninth at the 2019 U.S. Open.

"It's good to be back," said McIlroy, who is enjoying a career-best run of 10 straight top-10 finishes on TOUR (including a win at the Genesis Scottish Open). "It's a different format and having most of the best players in the world here is a really good thing for the tournament."