The Washington Post

Mickelson Embraces Support, Tries to Stay Focused

By Barry Svrluga Washington Post June 18, 2009

FARMINGDALE, N.Y., June 17 — There are certainly enough distractions, more than enough presented by the Black Course at Bethpage State Park itself. The U.S. Open is annually the toughest test golf has to offer, and if the length of the layout and the dire weather forecasts and the stakes themselves aren't enough to rattle a player, then maybe the speed of the greens or the taunting of the galleries or the thickness of the rough will be.

Into this environment steps Phil Mickelson, whose list of concerns trumps all of those items by such a wide margin they become frivolous. Mickelson is annually considered a contender at the U.S. Open, both because he is one of the world's best players and because he has been the runner-up in the event four times. Now, though, Mickelson must deal with an athletic paradox. He must concentrate when he is intrinsically distracted.

Mickelson's wife, Amy, had breast cancer diagnosed last month. Mickelson, then, must contend with the monstrosity of Bethpage Black and its 7,426 yards while temporarily — over each shot, perhaps 68 or 70 or 75 times a day — putting Amy out of his mind.

"Everywhere you go, people are reminding you of it, and you can't get away from it," said Tiger Woods, the world's No. 1 player and defending Open champion, who dealt publicly with his father's death prior to the Open in 2006. "And you think that the golf course would be your escape, but it's not.

"You're surrounded by people wishing you well the entire time and hope everything works out. But then again, they keep reminding you of the same circumstance you're dealing with on a daily basis, and you just can't get away from it. It's hard."

Mickelson has his own reminders of Amy's condition, most visibly the pink ribbon on the side of the white cap he wore during his morning practice round Wednesday, the only round he played here this week. Amy's mere absence is enough of a reminder, because she would normally be here, an encouraging and supportive presence on the course and off it. Mickelson said Wednesday that Amy's prognosis is better than originally feared; she will have surgery on July 1 and begin treatments shortly thereafter, allowing him to play with his mind — relatively, at least — at ease.

"I'm more excited that the reason I'm able to play is we've had some good news that has not rushed treatment," Mickelson said, "it has given us the time [and] an opportunity to see some test results and give us better direction on what we should do to not just cure her, but prevent it from coming back in the future."

Any notion, though, that the course would be a sanctuary for Mickelson this week was dismissed Wednesday morning. Mickelson began his practice round at 9:12 a.m. on the 10th tee, perhaps the farthest spot on the course from the hub of clubhouse. Still, the galleries quickly grew to the thousands, bellowing, over and over, "Phil!"

Mickelson did nothing to ignore it. Instead, he embraced it. Constantly, as he walked between holes, he looked well-wishers in the eye, thanked them for their support and gave a thumbs-up sign when he wasn't within earshot. He is here, he said, not just to play, but to contend. He said he's "most likely" to skip the British Open next month, but could return to more regular play in August.

"I'm putting everything I have into this week, because I don't anticipate being able to play for a little while,"

he said. "And the fact that my normal support system, Amy and the kids and so forth, aren't going to make the trip this week, I'm kind of hoping to . . . feel the support to kind of help me through the week."

There is, players and experts say, no blueprint for how to deal with such a situation, nothing that can be uniformly transferred from one player to the next. Mickelson said both he and Amy were thankful for the outpouring of support the couple has received since the diagnosis — including a "pink out" at the PGA Tour event in Dallas, in which players and caddies and television announcers wore pink to promote awareness of breast cancer research. But there is a public aspect to this private issue that Mickelson said he finds difficult, even as he seemed at ease updating a packed news conference on Amy's condition and his own mind-set Wednesday.

"It is a difficult thing to explain your emotions," said three-time major winner Padraig Harrington, who struggled with the death of his father in 2005. "Certainly I felt I didn't have the experience to be open in front of the world media explaining things like that. I would assume for him it would be better on the golf course, definitely."

That, though, depends on the person. Not everyone can separate the personal from the professional on a golf course.

"Phil, I think, is really good at compartmentalizing," said Julie Elion, a Bethesda-based mental coach who works with several players on the PGA and LPGA tours, as well as players in the NBA and tennis. "I think he's such a master of what he does, and he's so real out here, that though he might compartmentalize, he's so genuine that he feels it."

So he comes here with a genuine dilemma: How to balance embracing the support of the crowd, focusing on his golf, and keeping Amy in his thoughts? Mickelson was asked if he was ready for such a task.

"I'm not sure," he said.

His wife, though, might be. Mickelson made his return to tournament play last week in Memphis, a physical tuneup for the Open, but also a mental test to see how he would fair. He finished tied for 59th, and he did so knowing Amy not only permitted him to play there, and here at the Open, but encouraged him.

"She's left me a number of little notes, texts, cards, hints that she would like to have a silver trophy in her hospital room," he said, "so I'm going to try to accommodate that."