

## Contenders prepare for Muirfield test

[Neil Johnston](#) makes his predictions ahead of the Open Championship at Muirfield this week

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US Open winner Justin Rose. Image: ImagopixATL.

Tomorrow the links of Muirfield will welcome golf's finest as the East Lothian course hosts the 142nd Open Championship. In the true nature of links golf there will be many surprises, and with the prospect of sunny conditions the tournament is wide open. But who is most likely to lead the scoring on Sunday afternoon?

As always Tiger Woods is the bookies favourite. But this time there is more than just past successes to merit this optimism. This is the first major – and Open Championship – he will play in as world No.1 since the world of Woods imploded a few years ago.

It's now five years since he battled injury to win that gruelling play-off at Torey Pines and his last major to date. This week he is also dealing with injury, but despite an aggravated elbow he assures us he is "good to go". And who could doubt him – four wins this year, and a narrow miss at the Masters after a two stroke penalty that possibly cost him the green jacket, make him most likely to win.

But if Tiger doesn't perform who else will be contending? Will his old rival Phil Mickelson finally step up for golf's most sought after trophy?

Links golf has always been his weakness, but you wouldn't have thought it last week, as Mickelson's flop shots helped him to victory at Castle Stuart to win the Scottish Open. But that shouldn't fool anyone, he was one of the highest ranked in the field and this week he will face tougher opponents and the added test of Muirfield.

Be under no illusions last week's winning score of 17 under will not be replicated, but he did prove that he knows how to negotiate a links course, which he described as the biggest challenge in golf. If he continues to play well and can cope with the Muirfield rough then he is another American that could be in contention come Sunday.

What about the Europeans though? Well there are plenty that could have success. Amongst the likes of Rory McIlroy, Graeme McDowell and others, Justin Rose looks the most likely European to win. The Englishman came back to win at the US Open earlier in the year, edging out Mickelson for the title.



Ernie Els is the defending champion. Image: myophoyto.

His form at The Open hasn't been great since finishing fourth as an amateur, but he has the class and ability to overcome this. And with the weather looking good for the week, the traditional challenges of links golf may be somewhat compromised.

Four top tens, including a second place, on top of his major success mean he has been consistent this year and one to watch.

Defending champion Ernie Els could have a real chance at victory too. The South African, who triumphed as Adam Scott crumbled last year, also achieved his first Open victory at Muirfield back in 2002. Throw into the mix the steady head of Els and his form this year – a win at the BMW International Open and several top tens – and the thought of a Els defending his crown becomes a tempting prospect. Despite a poor performance at last week's event, Els won't let go of the Claret Jug easily.

Finally, at 100/1 perhaps Martin Laird wouldn't be bad bet. The Scot has won once this year on the PGA Tour and finished fifth in the Players Championship. While normally playing in the US, he adjusted to links golf superbly at Castle Stuart last week, finishing tied fifth, and with the additional boost of home support don't rule him out.



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