

Talented field leaves Masters wide open

[Neil Johnston](#) casts his eye over the contenders for golf's first major of the year

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Tiger Woods is the pre-tournament favourite,
Image: Keith Allison via flickr Creative Commons

On Thursday the world's top golfers will take to the lush fairways of Augusta National for the first major of the year. While The Masters has provided a few surprises over the years there are several contenders who are likely to be near the top of the leaderboard come Sunday afternoon.

Tiger Woods is favourite to win after his recent victory at Bay Hill. The former world No.1 will be hoping to follow up his first PGA Tour win since 2009 with a return to major success. Putting injuries and revelations of his activities off the golf course behind him, the 36 year old showed he is back to winning ways again.

With only a one shot advantage going into the final round at Bay Hill, Woods showed his class and shrugged off a formidable challenge from Graeme McDowell to win by five shots. This is not the 14-time major winner's only strong performance this season, having achieved two top five finishes on both tours.

While questions remain over whether he can pull off another major victory so soon, anyone doubting Woods' ability to win should just look at his record at Augusta.

While he has not won there since 2005 he has an incredible record at the tournament, finishing in the top six every year since then. This record makes a Woods victory more likely than any other player, even if he is not playing his absolute best.

With a largely American field there are too many others from the USA to look at in detail, but Phil Mickelson could always pull out a good performance this week. Although he has not been on brilliant form this season he has a great knowledge of Augusta, winning the tournament three times.

Rory McIlroy is the best European hope of victory, and the most likely to win other than Woods. The Northern Irishman proved last year that he was able to navigate his way around Augusta until he collapsed on the back nine in the final round.

However McIlroy has proved he now has the mental stability to win the tournament. He showed his brilliance by bouncing back to win the US Open in an emphatic manner that reminded the world of a young Woods.

Furthermore, the World No.2 has continued his form this year, winning the Honda Classic and since the start of the year he has not finished outside the top five in any tournament. McIlroy looks likely to be a major contender at Augusta and if he keep a level head he could be wearing the Green Jacket next week.

With three Englishmen in the world's top ten there is more than a chance of a British winner other than McIlroy. The world No.1 Luke Donald may not be quite as consistent as last year but has still notched up one tour win along, with two other top ten finishes and his ball striking and accuracy mean he will always pose a threat at Augusta. Expect him to make a good effort at improving on last year's fourth place finish.

Another player synonymous with consistency, Lee Westwood, will also be hoping to get his major breakthrough this week. The player has a mixed record at the Masters but will be confident after his performances over the last two years finishing 11th in 2011 and 2nd in 2010. So far this season he is yet to win but has had two top ten finishes on the PGA tour and a second place finish in the Dubai Desert Classic. If he can keep control of his short game he will never be too far from the top of the leaderboard.

While last year's Masters Champion, Charl Schwartzel, has not won since his major breakthrough he remains in steady form with several top ten finishes this season. The memories of Augusta could spur the South African on to play well at the right time, as Pádraig Harrington did in 2008 to defend the Open Championship.

With so many possible contenders this year's Masters is really wide open and the first major of the year looks set to be an exciting spectacle.



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