

'It feels corny to complain when people are losing their jobs'

Henrik Stenson, whose coach has tested positive for coronavirus, knows he will be off the course for some time

Ewan Murray

As Henrik Stenson spent Thursday evening on the Sawgrass range, the frustrations of a 74 to begin the Players Championship dominating his thoughts, he knew nothing of impending shutdown. The PGA Tour's flagship event lasted 18 holes on 12 March, with coronavirus sharply halting golf at the top level. Stenson has not had any notion to strike a ball since.

"I don't feel the rush to practise and play," the Swede says. "Five weeks out is when I'll start digging in hard because I'll have something on the horizon. I want to be ready and prepared when we get the go-ahead because this is going to impact so many things in this sport."

But out from when? The Masters is postponed, as is the US PGA Championship. The staging of the US Open in June remains a long-shot and the Open a month later is shrouded in doubt.

"Once we started the Players I expected us to finish but everything happened so quickly," Stenson says. "You only need one person to be sick at a tournament and you have all sorts of implications. I have no issues at all with the decision."

"If I am going to find some small positive, I have to go back to 2003-2004 for the last time I had a nine-10 week off season. This one is obviously not intended but I have to try to use the time as best I can. I'll focus on workouts and doing some fun stuff you don't

get to do otherwise; cleaning the garage, cleaning closets. There's always things to do and things to accomplish, right?"

Stenson cherished golf's return to the Olympic scene as he collected silver in Rio. If postponement of the Tokyo Games was inevitable, it still stung the 43-year-old.

"Both as an experience but also as my last chance to get another or a better medal," he says. "The Olympics and Ryder Cup were highlights looking at 2020."

At least the Olympic scenario is relatively clear cut. "I have played two full tournaments in the PGA Tour season so what about the FedEx Cup and qualifying for the play-offs?" Stenson asks. "Some guys have played 15 events. How do you tackle all that if you start playing in June or July? I am exempt through next year on the PGA Tour, so it doesn't really matter for playing privileges, but for some guys that's a big thing."

Could the Ryder Cup become the sole domain of picks? "No matter what you do there, it's going to be unfair to some. Tyrrell Hatton who won in Turkey and won at Bay Hill. Can you go to picks and - this is hypothetical, clearly - a captain feels he doesn't fit into the 12? Someone could go from a lock to not in the team."

Stenson is a former Open champion, a past recipient of the FedEx Cup's \$10m bonus and a Ryder Cup stalwart. It is something of cliché to suggest sportspeople of his level are out of touch with reality and, in Stenson's case, completely unfair. He acknowledges the gravity of this pandemic.

"There's a lot of fun stuff available for the kids and for us here [at the family home in Florida] but I'm not sure I should mention that when you have someone locked in an apartment and can't go outside,"



◀Henrik Stenson at the Scandinavian Invitation in his native Sweden in August last year
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Stenson says. "It's disastrous on a global level from people being really sick to losing their lives, to the world economy plummeting. Anyone who lives paycheck to paycheck is going to feel this. Everyone will to a degree but it feels corny if I am going to complain when people are losing their jobs."

"They say you might have no or very mild symptoms but who wants to roll the dice on that? I've had normal flu three times and felt like garbage by a multiple of 10. Once was before the 2014 Masters, I was in bed for nine days with a high fever. On a hot first day at Augusta, I almost fell into Rae's Creek walking off the 13th green. My caddie had to steer me by the arm towards the tee. Another time I was in an emergency room, convinced I was going to die. If you can feel even worse from this, it won't be a fun ride at all. People are in grave danger. This is nasty."

Stenson's coach, Pete Cowen, tested positive after returning from the Players. "He picked it up on his travels, from what I understand," Stenson says. "I hope and believe he wasn't contagious when I last saw him. I think he will get through it but he has been feeling pretty bad."

That Rory McIlroy, Brooks Koepka and Jon Rahm have dismissed the breakaway Premier Golf League spells the end to some but Stenson suggests tales of PGL's demise are premature.

"They are still here, trying to make what they believe is the best product for golf," he says. "For as long as I can remember, people complain the fields aren't strong enough. You can't have the top 30 guys on each tour playing 44 times in a year, it just isn't doable."

"There are a number of things I like about this concept, one is the best players competing against each other on a much more regular basis. I also think golf would really benefit from a proper off-season, without feeling when you have your own time off that you are missing out because others are playing."

"Whether we end up there in the short-term or long-term I couldn't tell you but I wouldn't be surprised if we end up there at one point."

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