

Juggling family and golf, Mickelson leads US Open

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By JOSEPH WHITE

The Associated Press

ARDMORE, Pa. — So much for getting a good night's sleep.

Phil Mickelson arrived at Merion Golf Club about four hours before his 7:11 a.m. tee time and still managed to shoot a 3-under 67 for the clubhouse lead at Thursday's opening round of the U.S. Open.

"I might have used just a little caffeine booster at the turn just to keep me sharp," Mickelson said. "But that was our ninth hole or so, and I just wanted to make sure I had enough energy."

Mickelson flew overnight from San Diego after watching his oldest daughter's eighth-grade graduation, where she was one of the featured speakers. At first, he was a little shaky but after rolling a birdie putt eight feet past his first hole and putting his tee shot in the rough at his second, he settled himself — helped by a little more sleep during a rain delay.

It was his lowest opening round since 1999 in a championship he's never won, even though he keeps coming close. He's been runner-up a record five times.

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"If I'm able — and I believe I will — if I'm able to ultimately win a U.S. Open, I would say that it's great. ... But if I never get that win, then it would be a bit heart-breaking," Mickelson said.

By the time Mickelson tapped in a par to complete his round, the sun had replaced clouds and putters had long replaced squeegees. Drenching storms caused a 3 1/2-hour delay, halting play less than two hours after it began.

The rains returned while the marquee group of Tiger Woods, Adam Scott and Rory McIlroy were on the front nine and play was stopped again at 6:11 p.m.

Woods was 1 over at the time and he winced and shook his left arm, staring at his wrist, after playing a shot out of the rough at No. 5. The horn sounded before the 3-time Open champion could finish the hole.

Meanwhile, Mickelson and Belgium's Nicolas Colsaerts (69) were the only players in the clubhouse under par.

Merion was as challenging as advertised, despite the onslaught of storms that softened the course during the past week. The slanting greens and heavy rough valued precision over power. Ian Poulter had quite the start, with only one par spaced among four birdies and three bogeys through nine holes on the way to a 71.

Sergio Garcia birdied the 102-yard par-3 13th but that was an aberration in a terrible start for the Spaniard, who has spent the lead-up to the tournament trying to make amends with Woods. Garcia had a quadruple bogey, double bogey and a bogey in his first five holes but later went birdie-eagle on the front nine on the way to a 73.

Garcia was greeted with mild applause and a few audible boos when he was introduced at the start of his round. He is playing his first tournament in the U.S. since a recent exchange with Woods hit a low point when Garcia said he would serve fried chicken if Woods came to dinner

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during the Open. Garcia has since apologized for the remark. He shook hands with Woods on the practice range this week and left a note in Woods' locker. He was also noticeably friendly to the gallery during Wednesday's practice round, stopping several times to sign autographs.

Garcia said he hasn't heard from Woods about the note and he acknowledged there were hecklers in his gallery.

"I think there were a couple here and there," he added. "But there was — I felt the people were very nice for the whole day. I think that they, almost all of them, were behind me and that was nice to see."

Cliff Kresge, a Floridian ranked No. 551 in the world, hit the first tee shot of the tournament at 6:45 a.m. The horn blew at 8:36 a.m. and thunder, lightning and downpours followed, sending everyone scurrying for cover.

Safety was a concern on a course that required fans to take long shuttle rides from remote parking lots. At a fan zone, where a replay of the limited action was on a jumbo screen, a worker used a microphone to implore an overflow crowd to move to the merchandise tent.

"We're not feeling safe having this many people in here," he told them. Many folks heeded his message and moved on.

Any major weather disruption to the championship would be a shame, given that the U.S. Open waited 32 years to return to the course where Olin Dutra overcame a serious stomach illness to win in 1934, where Ben Hogan hit the picture-perfect 1-iron approach to No. 18 before winning in a playoff in 1950, where Lee Trevino pulled a rubber snake out of his bag at the first hole of the playoff when he beat Jack Nicklaus for the title in 1971, and where David Graham became the first Australian to win the trophy in 1981.

Thought to be too small to host an Open anymore, Merion had been off the radar for so long that many of the top names in the field — including Woods — had never played it until recently. Organizers had to be creative with the placement of hospitality tents and parking lots on the

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club's relatively small footprint, and ticket sales were capped at 25,000 a day instead of the usual 40,000 or so for recent championships.

Tjaart Van der Walt leads at Saint-Omer

SAINT-OMER, France — South Africa's Tjaart Van der Walt shot a 4-under 67 in windy conditions Thursday to take a 1-stroke lead in the European Tour's Najeti Hotels Open.

France's Victor Riu was second after a birdie-birdie-eagle finish at Saint-Omer Golf Club.

England's Daniel Brooks opened with a 69 and Australia's Daniel Gaunt and France's Olivier Rozner shot 70.