

# Spieth stays in home state for Masters warmup

**BY TOM LAMARRE**  
THE SPORTS XCHANGE

Landing on the PGA Tour schedule a week before a major championship isn't always the best thing for a tournament because many of the top golfers in the world spent that time resting and practicing.

The Shell Houston Open, which will be played this week at the Golf Club of Houston ahead of the Masters, doesn't have that problem.

The tournament lined up a field that includes Jordan Spieth, Phil Mickelson, Rickie Fowler, Dustin Johnson, Patrick Reed, Steve Stricker, Keegan Bradley, Jimmy Walker, Brooks Koepka and defending champion J.B. Holmes.

A strong international contingent will compete, too, including Ernie Els, Louis Oosthuizen and Charl Schwartzel of South Africa, Henrik Stenson of Sweden, Lee Westwood of England, Sergio Garcia and Rafa Cabrera Bello of Spain, K.J. Choi of South Korea, Padraig Harrington and Shane Lowry of Ireland, Stuart Appleby and Robert Allenby of Australia, Vijay Singh of Fiji and Thongchai Jaidee of Thailand.

There are 33 players in the field who will play in the Masters.

Even though he is pleased with the entire field, tournament director Steve Timms is particularly happy that Spieth, a native of Dallas and a former All-American at the University of Texas, is playing.

Spieth lost his No. 1 rank-

ing last week, but he could get it back this week in Houston or next when he defends his title in the Masters.

"It's exciting to have Jordan back with us," said Timms, who knows Spieth probably would love to get to Augusta National early.

"Not only is he the world's No. 1 player (at the time), he's such a solid young man."

The Houston Open, with Shell celebrating its 25th year as title sponsor, is one of the oldest events on the PGA Tour. It was first played in 1946 at River Oaks Country Club.

Texas legend Byron Nelson won the inaugural event one year after he captured 11 consecutive tournaments en route 18 victories in the greatest season in PGA Tour history.

Singh and Curtis Strange won the tournament three times, while Arnold Palmer, Cary Middlecoff, Jack Burke Jr., Mike Souchak, Bobby Nichols and Australians Appleby and Bruce Crampton each claimed the title twice.

Other notable winners in Houston include Mickelson, Gary Player of South Africa, Gene Littler, Adam Scott of Australia, Fred Couples, Payne Stewart, Corey Pavin and Raymond Floyd.

"It's challenging, this course, because there's a lot of trouble, a lot of water off the tees into the greens," said Mickelson, who won the 2011 Shell Houston Open by three strokes over Chris Kirk and Scott Verplank.

"What I like about it is around the greens, there's very soft movement.

"You hit a good shot in-



ERICH SCHLEGEL | USA TODAY  
Jordan Spieth of the United States misses his putt to lose to Louis Oosthuizen of South Africa on the 16th hole in round four of the World Golf Championship-Dell Match Play at the Austin Country Club on Saturday.

side 20 feet, you're rewarded with a realistic chance to make a putt, unlike on a lot of other modern-day greens that get very contoury (sic), it's tough to make birdie putts and be rewarded for great shots. Here you get rewarded for great shots."

Mickelson almost always plays the week before a major because he says he feels rusty early in tournament weeks of the Grand Slam events if he does not. He will be playing in Houston for the ninth consecu-

tive year and the 11th time overall.

He tied for fourth as defending champion in 2012 and finished in the top 20 in each of the past five years.

Spieth is playing Houston for the fourth consecutive year. He lost to Holmes last year in a playoff that also included Johnson Wagner, a week before Spieth won his first major championship.

"As a native Texan, I always like playing the Texas events," said Spieth, who has yet to win in the Lone

Star State as a pro. "I enjoy being able to drive my own car to these tournaments. I get to see a lot of friends and family who I don't get to see a lot of the year. And then, at the same time, get ready for the Masters on a challenging track.

"I played a junior tournament here when it was Redstone (Golf Club). I want to say, shoot, that must have been almost six, seven years ago. ... I think I got seventh (place). I wasn't long enough to reach 17 and 18 in two

## English shooting guard commits to UMaine

**BY PETE WARNER**  
BDN STAFF

The University of Maine appears to have added the next piece of the puzzle in rebuilding the men's basketball program.

Danny Evans, a native of England who served as a captain last winter at Phillips Andover Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, made a verbal commitment on Monday to join the Black Bears in the fall, according to both New England Recruiting Report and Verbal Commits.

Evans, a 6-foot-4 point guard, averaged more than

17 points per game and shot 45 percent from the field in helping lead the Big Blue to an 8-7 New England Preparatory School Athletic Council record. His efforts earned him a spot on the All-NEPSAC Class A Second Team.

UMaine head coach Bob Walsh is prohibited by NCAA rules from discussing a recruit until after he has signed a National Letter of Intent. The late signing period begins on April 15.

Judging from his highlight video, Evans possesses the ability to score from long range with his preferred fall-away 3-point shot.

He spent the summer playing for the United Kingdom's 18-and-under team, where he averaged 3.1 points and three rebounds in 18 minutes per game at the Division B European Championships.

Evans reportedly garnered several scholarship offers at the Division I and II levels, including an initial offer from Bryant University in Smithfield, Rhode Island.

As a bigger guard more similar to UMaine's Lavar Harewood, Evans should provide a complement to the Black Bears' assortment of smaller guards such as

Kevin Little, Aaron Calixte and Ryan Bernstein.

UMaine is looking to replace two departing seniors, guard Shaun Lawton and post player Till Gloger.

In December, before returning from spending Christmas break in England, Evans told Hoopsfix, "The biggest difference for me compared to back in the UK was having college coaches coming in and out of the gym to look at you so often."

According to Hoopsfix, Evans also received interest from the likes of Holy Cross, Vermont, Brown and Columbia.

## Ko increases lead in Rolex Rankings

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

New Zealand teenager Lydia Ko, who captured the Kia Classic over the weekend, increased her hold as No. 1 in the world in the Rolex Women's World Golf Rankings released Monday.

The 18-year-old Ko fired a 5-under-par 67 on Sunday to finish at 19-under 269 to win the tournament in Carlsbad, Calif., by four strokes over second-ranked Inbee Park of South Korea.

Ko won her 11th LPGA title and first this season. She took home the \$255,000 first-place check and remained No. 1 in the rankings for the 23rd consecutive week.

Ko (12.55-point average) is comfortably ahead of Park (9.71) in the rankings.

Lexi Thompson (7.29) remains No. 3 over fellow American Stacy Lewis (6.77) and South Korea's Sei Young Kim (6.18).

On Sunday, the 18-year-old Ko held a three-stroke lead after three rounds, and she kept the lead throughout the fourth round despite carding bogeys on the sixth and 10th holes at Aviara Golf Club.

She countered the bogeys with seven birdies, including birdies on each of the final three holes, to capture her 11th LPGA title and first this season.

Ko takes home the \$255,000 first-place check. With the win, Ko moved into a tie for 41st place on the

LPGA all-time wins list with Stacy Lewis, Jiyai Shin, Shirley Englehorn, Ruth Jessen, Jane Geddes, and Clifford Ann Creed.

The win puts Ko in good position heading into next week's ANA Inspiration, the first major of the year.

"A lot of confidence," Ko said, "but like I said, who knows what's going to happen tomorrow. But I've been playing consistently well, so I'm really happy about that."

South Korea's Inbee Park finished alone in second place at 15-under 273 after shooting a 5-under-par 67 on Sunday. She had birdies three of her first eight holes Sunday to put some pressure on Ko.

"I took a peek at the leaderboard and saw that Inbee was making a lot of birdies, and, you know, Inbee was doing her Inbee thing," Ko said. "I knew that I had to focus until the last moment. Fortunately, I made some birdies down the stretch, and that really helped."

Japan's Ai Miyazato shot a 6-under 66 in the final round to finish in third place at 276, while two South Koreans, Sung Hyun Park and Jenny Shin, finished tied for fourth at 277 after both shot even par on the final day.

Four players tied for sixth at 10-under 278: Gerina Pill-er, China's Shanshan Feng, Jessica Korda and South Korea's Hyo Joo Kim.

## Law that threatened Super Bowl vetoed

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

The governor of Georgia, under increasing pressure from major corporations and sports leagues including the NFL, has vetoed the controversial "religious liberty" bill that could have cost Atlanta's hope to host a Super Bowl.

Gov. Nathan Deal, a two-term Republican, announced his decision Monday after the state received criticism from gay rights groups and business leaders from throughout the country.

House Bill 757 would have given faith-based organizations in Georgia the option to deny services and jobs to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Supporters said the measure was meant to protect religious freedom, while opponents described the bill as anti-LGBT.

The bill was denounced by the NFL, Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur Blank and local business owners.

"This is about the character of our state and the character of its people," Deal said Monday morning. "Georgia is a welcoming state filled with warm, friendly and loving people.

Our cities and countryside are populated with people who worship God in a myriad of ways and in very diverse settings. Our people work side by side without regard to the color of our skin, or the religion we adhere to. We are working to make life better for our families and our communities. That is the character of Georgia. I intend to do my part to keep it that way. For that reason, I will veto HB 757."

Atlanta is one of the finalists for the next two Super Bowls to be awarded in 2019 or 2020, which would be held in the new \$1.4 billion stadium that is set to open in the summer of 2017.

The NFL released a statement this month suggesting that the law, if signed, could cost the state the Super Bowl.

"NFL policies emphasize tolerance and inclusiveness, and prohibit discrimination based on age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, or any other improper standard," the NFL's statement said on March 18. "Whether the laws and regulations of a state and local community are consistent with these policies would be one of many factors NFL owners



BOB ANDRES | ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION | TNS

Nathan Deal announces his decision to veto religious liberty legislation at a news conference on Monday in the ceremonial office in Atlanta. He did not answer questions.

may use to evaluate potential Super Bowl host sites."

Blank also had urged the governor not to sign the bill approved by the Georgia Legislature.

"I strongly believe a diverse, inclusive and welcoming Georgia is critical to our citizens and the millions of visitors coming to enjoy all that our great state has to offer," Blank said in his statement earlier this month. "House Bill 757 undermines these principles and would have long-lasting negative impact on our state and the people of Georgia."

Meanwhile, a new North Carolina law removing protections for gay and transgender individuals is drawing a backlash from the sports world.

In a special session of the

North Carolina legislature last Wednesday, a bill was passed that wiped out local statutes allowing LGBT individuals to use the bathroom corresponding to the gender with which they identify. North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory signed the bill into law.

The NBA, Charlotte Hornets, Google, PayPal, American Airlines and Wells Fargo have expressed their displeasure with the new North Carolina law.

Last year ahead of the Final Four in Indiana, the NCAA, which is headquartered in Indianapolis, expressed serious concerns about a religious freedom law that granted businesses the right to refuse service to gay and lesbian couples. The law was amended.

## Format

*Continued from Page B5*

Ten (fifth), and No. 14 Stephen F. Austin of the Southland Conference (29th) defeated No. 3 West Virginia of the Big 12 (first). No. 12 Yale of the Ivy League (16th) eliminated No. 5 Baylor of the Big 12 (second), and No. 12 Arkansas Little Rock of the Sun Belt Conference (17th) beat No. 2 Purdue of

the Big Ten (fifth).

Unfortunately, even the intelligent Ivy league will change its current format and will have a tourney with its top four teams next season, with the tourney champ getting the automatic NCAA. That means all 32 conferences will have the unfair format next season.

The upsets that many fans relish happen more in the opening round of the NCAA tourney. This year, there were eight in the opening

round and only two in the second round. The seedings or rankings of teams and their conferences is the RPI (Rating Percentage Index). It is the NCAA's version of the Maine Heal point system for high school basketball as it is not truly fair unless teams play identical schedules.

That is another compelling reason why the regular season conference champs should get the automatic bid instead of the tourney champs.

With the NCAA tourney coming to a close with next weekend's Final Four, this is my last column of the basketball season. It's been another enjoyable season, and I appreciate your comments — positive and negative — and look forward to returning next season.

Have a safe and happy spring and summer!

**Bob Cimbollek is a retired high school basketball coach and athletic director.**

## Angell Open set for Portland

PORTLAND — Tennis players will be competing for \$2,000 in prize money in the Angell Open April 9-10 at the Racket and Fitness Center.

The tourney has drawn over 100 players in past events as top men's and women's players from New England compete.

Elvi Serrot of Trenton and former Hampden Academy standout Eliot Potvin of Marlborough, Massachusetts, are expected to defend their singles titles.

In addition to open singles and doubles, prize money also will be available to winners in the mixed doubles, men's age-group divisions of 45, 55 and 65.

Players from as far away as Georgia and Michigan have competed in past years.

The tournament is named for the late Chris Angell, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at an early age but still went on to achieve a high level of performance to become Maine's top ranked player.

The event is a USTA New England sanctioned tourney and a fund-raiser for mental health support and advocacy.

The first rounds begin on Saturday, April 9 with the finals for both the men's and women's singles and doubles on Sunday.

There is no admission charge.

Players can register at [www.usta.com](http://www.usta.com) or call tourney director Devi Maganti at 775-6128.