



form labs

The 2017 US Open

Last year, Dustin Johnson finally broke his major duck to win at the tried and tested Oakmont Country Club. The USGA have reverted to a traditional US Open venue after a few years of breaking the mould. In 2013 they returned to the logistically challenging Merion Golf Club (after a 32 year absence) while in 2015, it was the brand-new venue of Chambers Bay. The powers that be came under plenty of criticism for that choice after it remained open to the public until a month before the event, but they have not made the same mistake with another brand-new venue – Erin Hills in Wisconsin – which has been closed for 10 months in preparation for this year's US Open.

COURSE DETAIL

Erin Hills, Par 72 – 7,692 yards

The total yardage will vary over the four days with a maximum length of 7,900 yards, a daunting number at first glance. However, this extra length can be part explained by the course being a **par 72** and the availability of **four par 5s**; the first time this has happened at a US Open since **1992**. Only designed in 2006, the course is a bit of an unknown entity having yet to host a PGA Tour event, though it did stage the 2011 US Amateur. Mike Davis, Executive Director of the USGA, is the man in charge of setting up US Open courses and below is his summary of Erin Hills and what **unique properties** we should be looking out for.

What can we expect from Erin Hills?

It's not a links, but certainly has **links-type connotations**, with golden fescue surrounding each hole and plenty of contours and bunkers. The Wisconsin course is a **windswept property** which provides a **firm playing surface** that **plays shorter than its length** on the scorecard. The one area in which the bombers will have an advantage, is the four par 5s, which all measure over 600 yards and offer the best opportunity for scoring.

It is worth keeping an eye on the weather as Mother Nature will no doubt have a role to play this week, as the **wind can blow** from any direction. As a result, the **fairways are generous in width**, especially compared to normal US Open tracks like Oakmont, Pebble Beach and Winged Foot. However, the wind is not its only defence with contoured fairways making for **very few flat lies** and several **semi-blind and blind shots**. Good **course management** will be required; it is going to take some homework on the part of the players.

In addition to the wind and blind shots, the **bunkers at Erin Hills are true hazards**; the devilish sand-traps, which can be penal for the wayward, hold plenty of potential for **card-wreckers**. These

bunkers surround many of the greens, along with **shaved run-off areas**. Rather than seeing players chipping out of thick rough if they miss the dance floor, they will instead be left with a choice of putting, playing a bump and run or pitching. The only US Open course in recent memory that was reminiscent of this was **Pinehurst no.2** (2014), but for those who can't picture the North Carolina course, think of the surroundings of the **Augusta** greens.

After coming in for much abuse for the 'cauliflower' greens at Chambers Bay, the USGA insists there will be no repeat at Erin Hills where the greens are a hybrid bentgrass. They will be slick surfaces that run true with many raised or multi-tiered.

In summary, superior **ball-striking** skills will be rewarded this week, particularly for those who drive the ball well from the tee. **Shot-making** ability, **playing well in the wind** and **liking firm surfaces** are all a plus and an **imaginative short-game** will be crucial.

KEY STATS

Being long certainly looks to be an advantage but not essential, although **Driving Distance** stats will be far more important than Driving Accuracy over the week. Big hitters often taste success on US Open tracks, with eight of the last 11 winners ranking in the top-eight for DD during the week of their success. As previously mentioned, the longer holes are going to be integral to a player's success so it is worth noting who has ranked highly on **par 5 scoring average** this season and who can therefore cash in on the extra two par 5s.

A high **Greens in Regulation** percentage will be key and is usually the case year-in year-out at this major. The US Open invariably boils down to a missed putt here or a key putt there, but in order to be in contention on Sunday, a player needs to be hitting plenty of greens. The average GIR rank for every champion this century is just **7.6**. However, with plenty of exciting second-shots expected at Erin Hills, it will favour those with a **bit of flair** and those who are comfortable shaping the ball both ways, meaning **strokes gained approaching the green** will be a telling stat.

The slick greens will suit **aggressive putters**, but form with the short-stick is part and parcel of doing well in most tournaments. Salvaging pars from wayward approaches will be challenging this week, making **Scrambling** a key stat to consider, with a certain amount of **creativity** required. Martin Kaymer – who won in 2014 at Pinehurst no.2 with similar green surroundings – ranked first for scrambling.

It's a brute of a course to walk; checking out at around six miles with undulations and steep strolls between holes. This will certainly **favour the younger generation** and the more athletic golfer. Although not a stat as such, the challenging course will require a **cool temperament**, necessary for calmly dealing with all that Erin Hills will undoubtedly throw at this year's challengers.

PAST WINNERS

Last 10 Winners

2016 - Dustin Johnson -4
2015 - Jordan Spieth -5
2014 - Martin Kaymer -9
2013 - Justin Rose +1

2012 - Webb Simpson +1
2011 - Rory McIlroy -16
2010 - Graeme McDowell E
2009 - Lucas Glover -4
2008 - Tiger Woods -1 (playoff)
2007 - Angel Cabrera +5

Although played at different venues each year, the US Open is generally set up to be a tough examination. A Par 72 should offer **more scoring opportunities** and it is a course that will reward **aggressive iron-play**.

Many established names have been crowned US Open champion and in the last six years the cream has really risen to the top. Only Kaymer has been ranked outside the **top-15 in the world** before winning, but the German had shown his quality by picking up a PGA Championship in 2010.

FORM IS PARAMOUNT

Season Form

Last year, DJ continued the trend of recent **US Open winners having excellent seasons** prior to their title. He had not won before his triumph but he had registered eight top-15 finishes from 11 events. As a result, every winner since the turn of the century has now recorded at least one top-five finish prior to their success, with nine winning at least once. The last seven winners, in particular, have all hit top form, with six registering at least four top-10 finishes that year prior to their success (the exception was Kaymer, who still had two, one of which was winning at TPC Sawgrass). It's not a tournament for a player to be arriving in search of their 'A' game, so **current form is paramount**.

Tournament form

Although the course differs every year, **previous US Open form looks a big plus**. In the last 20 or so years Retief Goosen, Ernie Els, Lee Janzen and Payne Stewart have all become dual champions, whilst Tiger Woods is a three-time winner. Moreover, despite never winning, Phil Mickelson and Colin Montgomerie finished runner-up on numerous occasions. DJ continued this trend after winning just a year on from the heartbreak of Chambers Bay, as well as 4th in 2014 and 8th in 2010. This means that 19 of the 27 winners since 1990 had **previously recorded a top-10 finish**. More recently, 6 of the last 10 winners had previously had a top-eight finish, while superstars McIlroy and Spieth won on just their third attempt, but had already come 10th and 17th respectively. It is worth looking out for the guys who will **embrace the challenge** of a US Open.

THE BIG THREE

Dustin Johnson – 8.0

Since winning the US Open 12 months ago, the big American has dominated world golf, becoming a serial winner. He has been victorious five times from 19 tournaments since Oakmont, along with 12 top-10 finishes. In theory, the course looks tailor-made for DJ with his power and ball-striking ability, in addition to his skills as a fantastic wind exponent. However, there are **a few question marks** over his form since the **freak back injury** that kept him out of the Masters, going just 2-12-13-MC since. Furthermore, history is against him, with Tiger the only world no.1 since 1989 to win this

tournament. Given his single-figure price and the unknowns surrounding him, we're happy to leave DJ alone this week.

Rory McIlroy – 15.0

Injury and personal commitments have meant McIlroy has played just 20 competitive stroke-play rounds in 2017, and while he's finished in the top-10 for four of these, he's never really been in contention coming down the stretch on Sunday. Except for his record-breaking runaway victory at rain-softened Congressional in 2011, his tournament record is a fairly uninspiring 10-MC-1-MC-41-23-9-MC. The likely **firm conditions won't play to his strengths** and coming off the back of another lay-off, there are many unknown entities and Rory looks **too risky to back**.

Jordan Spieth – 13.0

Spieth has now failed to register a top-10 finish in his last four majors and at times this season he has been shoddy. He's missed three cuts in his last seven tournaments, his putting has not been at its deadly best and he ranks just 124th for scrambling. However, he does have six top-10s overall and he leads the way for strokes gained when approaching the greens and is fourth in par 5 scoring average. Moreover, he **holds an ace up his sleeve** having played well around Erin Hills in the 2011 US Amateur, where he reached the quarter-finals. That extra course knowledge could be vital, so Spieth is certainly one for the shortlist.

BEST OF THE REST

Jason Day (15.0) has a fantastic US Open record without ever winning, landing five top-10s in his last six appearances. He clearly enjoys the challenge, but he's had a very disrupted season and although there are signs his game is returning to the form that saw him go off as favourite 12 months ago, he's not won since the Players last May. **Justin Rose** (26.0) is a former champion and is unlucky not to be coming here with a Green Jacket to his name. The Englishman's victory in 2013 is his only significant US Open performance in recent times though, with 21-12-27-MC his other efforts since 2012. His consistent driving of the ball and fantastic iron-play should give him a chance, but as always with Justin it is whether enough putts will drop. Rose lost that Green Jacket to **Sergio Garcia** (29.0), who's impeccable ball-striking could see him go well here, but the Spaniard has failed to hit the heights of his Masters performance since returning.

The course should suit the power game of **Justin Thomas** (34.0) and **Hideki Matsuyama** (31.0) and both men were sensational in the early part of the season, but while the man from Japan has not registered a top-10 since February, two of Thomas' seven this season have come in his last three events. **Rickie Fowler** (23.0) has all the attributes to go well around Erin Hills and is enjoying his most consistent season to date with five top-10s already, including victory at the Honda Classic.

TEAM EUROPE

Traditionally a major dominated by the host nation, in more recent years the European's have spoiled the party, triumphing in four of the last seven editions. Rose is once again leading the charge but is closely followed by 2017's rising star **John Rahm** (23.0), who along with Justin Thomas has more top-10s than anyone on the PGA Tour this season. Usually his price would look a little skinny given his lack of experience, but with Erin Hills only 10 years old and Thursday being many players' first experience of it, Rahm won't be at much of a disadvantage this week. The same case can be made

for **Thomas Pieters** (51.0) who at the Ryder Cup last year and during his fourth-placed finish at Augusta in April has shown an appetite to thrive on the big stage.

One of the more seasoned Europeans is former champion **Martin Kaymer** (81.0) and his rout in 2014 at Pinehurst No.2 bodes well for him this week. Contrary to usual US Open winners, Kaymer can win slightly out of the blue and his consistent season to date suggests a big performance could be around the corner. Finally, there is probably no European playing with as much confidence as **Alex Noren** (61.0). In the last 12 months, he's tasted success five times but each have come on the European Tour and he still has plenty to prove on the other side of the pond. In the Swede's nine appearances in majors on American soil his best finish is 34th with five missed cuts.

FROM THE ROUGH

Less-fancied Webb Simpson, Lucas Glover and Angel Cabrera have all won in recent memory so it could be worth chancing a few at bigger prices. **Jason Dufner** (67.0) comes in fresh off a victory at the Memorial, reward for a consistent season which has seen him register 10 top-25 finishes from 14 events. He came eighth last year at Oakmont and has another two top-five finishes in his last five appearances. **Bubba Watson** (81.0) came fifth back in 2007, but has never really taken to the US Open with 32nd his best result since. Traditionally, the narrow fairways don't suit his style, but the set-up of Erin Hills should favour his game, given his ability to move the ball around corners. The worry is whether Bubba can handle the gusty conditions, while his short-game has been poor throughout 2017.

Kevin Kisner (67.0) is one of the form players on tour, landing six top-10s this season, including a recent win at the Dean & DeLuca Invitational. He has a solid all-round game, but question marks remain as to whether he has the firepower to tame Erin Hills. **Brooks Koepka** (41.0) has power in abundance and has to be one of the most dependable long-drivers on tour. He's added consistency to his game in recent months with five top-20 finishes in his last eight events, while he has a respectable 4-18-13 record at this major.

Louis Oosthuizen (67.0) is enjoying a consistent season, making the cut in all 11 events he's played in so far, including a second-place finish recently at the Players. The South African has a good track record on contoured courses, finishing runner-up at Chambers Bay in 2015, as well as mastering the Old Course at St Andrews.

SELECTIONS

Rickie Fowler's US Open record is mixed as he's missed the last two cuts but he was 10th in 2013 and more significantly **second at Pinehurst No.2** in 2014. His missed cut at the St Jude's Classic was disappointing, but it won't have done any harm to his price and his overall form this season suggests he's ready to claim his first major. He's been driving fantastically and has been one of the best scorers on par 5s. He's also a **fabulous scrambler** and should thrive in the blustery conditions.

It's very much been feast or famine for **Justin Thomas** this season with three missed cuts accompanying his two victories and four top-10s. He's **powerful** with the big stick and his ball striking from the fairway, where he's fourth for strokes gained approaching the green, should provide the American plenty of scoring opportunities this week. Combine this with his quality on the greens, where he ranks **first for putting average**, and there's every chance Thomas could go well.

Although around half the price, our preference is for **Jon Rahm** over Thomas Pieters. The Spaniard has just been more consistent than the Belgian and is worthy of the skinnier price. He's the only player in the world's top 30 golfers to feature **in the top-20 for three key stats**: strokes gained when approaching the green, scrambling and par 5 scoring average. He's also a fantastic driver of the ball and will be looking to make it two out of two for the Spaniards in this year's majors.

Brooks Koepka had an encouraging first two rounds last week in Memphis before fading slightly over the weekend. We hope he was leaving a little in the tank for this week and his game looks in good order to tackle Erin Hills. Bombers tend to fare well at the US Open and he ranks fifth for driving distance and third for par 5 scoring average this season. The man from Florida seems to **save his best golf for the majors** as well, going 18-10-5-21-13-4-11 in his last seven starts.

South African's have historically done well at the US Open, with Els and Goosen multiple winners and in more recent times both Branden Grace and **Louis Oosthuizen** have been near the top of the leaderboard. Our final choice is the easy on the eye Oosty after an encouraging season to date. The conditions shouldn't trouble the 2010 Open Champion who is a brilliant links player, always **strikes the ball purely** and is a decent scrambler. He looks a bit of value at 67.0.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RICKIE FOWLER 23.0 each-way, Various (6, 1/4)

JOHN RAHM 23.0 each-way, Various (6, 1/4)

JUSTIN THOMAS 34.0 each-way, Paddy Power (8, 1/5)

BROOKS KOEPKA 41.0 each-way, Paddy Power (8, 1/5)

LOUIS OOSTHUIZEN 67.0 each-way, Sky Bet (8, 1/5)

APPENDIX: PGA Tour

SG Approaching the Green		Scrambling		Par 5 Scoring Average	
1	Jordan Spieth	1	Brendan Steele	1	Hideki Matsuyama
2	Francesco Molinari	2	Steve Wheatcroft	2	Dustin Johnson
3	Paul Casey	3	John Huh	3	Brooks Koepka
4	Justin Thomas	4	Chad Campbell	T4	Rickie Fowler
5	Kyle Stanley	5	Paul Casey	T4	Phil Mickelson
6	Jon Rahm	6	Charles Howell III	T4	Jordan Spieth
7	Ian Poulter	7	Adam Hadwin	T7	Luke List
8	Bud Cauley	8	Zac Blair	T7	Pat Perez
9	Kevin Kisner	9	Ian Poulter	9	Sergio Garcia
10	Phil Mickelson	10	Matt Kuchar	10	Greg Owen
11	Webb Simpson	11	Matt Jones	T11	Jon Rahm
12	Dustin Johnson	12	Tim Wilkinson	T11	Kyle Stanley
13	Rickie Fowler	13	Webb Simpson	T11	Nick Taylor
14	Stewart Cink	T14	John Peterson	T14	Charles Howell III
T15	Byeong Hun An	T14	John Senden	T14	Whee Kim
T15	Adam Scott	16	Bill Haas	T14	Francesco Molinari
17	Jimmy Walker	17	Wesley Bryan	T14	Seamus Power
18	Wesley Bryan	18	Louis Oosthuizen	T14	Charl Schwartzel
19	Jason Dufner	19	Jon Rahm	T19	Brandon Hagy
20	D.A. Points	20	Bob Estes	T19	Russell Henley
				T19	Ryan Moore
				T19	Justin Rose
				T19	Hudson Swafford
				T19	Justin Thomas