

OPINION

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Can We Really Predict Who Will Win the PGA Championship?

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The PGA Championship this week will bring together the very best golfers in the world, including members of both the PGA and LIV tours. Predictions of who will win this coveted major often spark interest long before the first round.

As a data scientist interested in sports analytics, I know that finding the right mix of factors that can predict the winner is akin to finding needles in a haystack. Peering into a crystal ball is never an exact science. Data is informative and can certainly provide trends and indicators for success.

Yet, golf is not played on a computer; it is played on a course with numerous uncertainties that can make predictions highly unreliable. A gust of wind at an inopportune time, or heavy rains prior to the start of the tournament, adds more haze to an already inexact forecast.

With that being said, I looked back at the odds available for the 2022, 2021 and 2020 PGA Championships to assess the accuracy of the predictions made. Predicting the exact winner is exceedingly challenging. So, I took the six golfers with the best odds of winning and did some analysis on them. The results may surprise you.

In 2022, the forecasts were remarkably good. The top six golfers with the best odds of winning were (in order) Will Zalatoris, Justin Thomas, Mito Pereira, Rory McIlroy, Bubba Watson and Cameron Smith. This group played exceptionally well, with Thomas beating Zalatoris in a playoff, Pereira and Smith tied for third, while McIlroy tied for eighth. Only Watson did not place in the top 10, finishing tied for 30th. By all measures, these forecasts were spot on.

Yet, just as a broken clock is right twice each day, in data analysis, reversion to the mean suggests that extreme results are often followed or preceded by less extreme ones. The results from 2021 and 2020 exemplify this effect.

As good as 2022 was for the forecasters, that is how bad 2021 was for them. The top six golfers with the best odds of winning were (in order) McIlroy, Thomas, Jon Rahm, Jordan Spieth, Bryson DeChambeau and Dustin Johnson. The eventual winner was Phil Michelson. Overall, the anticipated top six golfers played poorly, with just Rahm eking out a top 10 finish, tying for eighth. Both Thomas and Johnson did not make the cut, while McIlroy tied for 49th, Spieth tied for 30th, and DeChambeau tied for 38th. By all measures, these forecasts missed the mark.

In 2020, it was a mixed bag. The top six golfers with the best odds of winning were (in order) Brooks Koepka, Thomas, DeChambeau, McIlroy, Rahm and Johnson. The eventual winner was Colin Morikawa. Overall, the projected top six played quite well, with DeChambeau tied for fourth and Johnson tied for second. The other four all made the cut, finishing between tied for 13th and tied for 37th.

The results and forecasts for 2019 were a cross between 2020 and 2021. Two of the forecasted top six missed the cut, with the others finishing first, second, tied for eighth and tied for 38th.

So, what is the takeaway from such an analysis?

Predicting who will win any major golf championship is exceedingly difficult. Golf can be a cruel game. A single bad hole can undo 17 exceptional ones.

Data is also useful, yet with sports, it can be like looking in a rearview mirror. This means that if we do that too much, we are liable to crash.

Will the precision of 2022 forecasters, or their miss in 2021, be what we will see in 2023?

The top six golfers forecasted with the best odds of winning in 2023 are Rahm, McIlroy, Scottie Scheffler, Thomas, Spieth and Koepka. If history is a reliable predictor, one or two of them will miss the cut, and two or three will finish in the top 10. One may even win the tournament.

Can Michelson, Morikawa or someone else not amongst the top group surprise the field? Will Rahm, the reigning No. 1 ranked golfer, impose his dominance on yet another field of elite golfers? No one knows. What is certain is that someone will win, perhaps even surprisingly, and a new PGA Champion will be crowned. The data can predict that with absolute certainty.

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