

Watson: PGA went back on promise in Koepka return

BY DEREK HARPER
Field Level Media

AUGUSTA, GA.

Tom Watson didn't mince words when asked his thoughts on the special conditions the PGA Tour created in order for Brooks Koepka to make an immediate return to the tour this year after leaving LIV Golf.

"The Tour made a decision to renege on what they promised when the players left for LIV. They felt that the compensation that he's paid is good enough," Watson said on Thursday after serving as an honorary starter for the 90th Masters Tournament.



KATIE GOODALE | Magn Images

Honorary starter Tom Watson reacts after teeing off on the first hole during Thursday's first round of the Masters.

ment.

"I thought the LIV players, when they left, they were supposed to be

banned for life. If I was commissioner, that's what I would do. I'd say if you're finished with your

contract with LIV Golf, if you want to play the PGA Tour again, you come back, and you must play the Korn Ferry Tour for a year to qualify for it."

Koepka's return came via the PGA Tour's hastily created Returning Member Program in January. As part of the conditions for his immediate reinstatement, Koepka agreed to a five-year forfeiture of participation in the player equity program that PGA Tour CEO Brian Rolapp said could amount to a \$50-85 million penalty. Koepka also has agreed to make a \$5 million charity donation and must play his way into signature events.

Other LIV players such as Bryson DeChambeau, Jon Rahm and Cameron Smith turned down the highly polarizing offer from the tour. Wyndham Clark and Hideki Matsuyama, two players who

reportedly turned down lucrative offers to join LIV Golf, were among those who admitted feeling conflicted by Koepka's return.

Clark said in January that he was torn by the decision, feeling like Koepka was "able to get the cake and also eat it." Matsuyama told Golf Digest Japan that he was "shocked" by Koepka's return and that while he admired his courage for making the decision, he was also puzzled by the tour's lack of communication around the situation.

Watson's view comes outside of the ropes and financial decisions that were made by individuals. A winner of 39 PGA Tour events, including eight majors, who joined the tour in 1971, Watson can't look past what he views as the most negative impact

players had by signing with the Saudi-backed league beginning in 2022.

"When the players left, they violated the No. 1 rule that we really had out here, which is to protect the sponsors," he said. "Sponsors need players. They need the names to be able to promote their tournaments. If the players play wherever they want to play without a conflicting-event rule -- where you had to seek the permission of the PGA Tour to play in a tournament opposite of a PGA Tour tournament -- the sponsors would be hurt by that. I think we all understood that.

"When the players left for LIV, I think it was basically over. They chose to go for the money, which is fine. But to return to the tour, I thought, was a non-starter. But apparently it's not."

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