THE OPEN

IN-FORM GRAEME AMONG EARLY PACESETTERS

Major move by cool McDowell

NEIL SQUIRES
at Royal Birkdale

THE last time Graeme McDowell peered down nervously from the top of an Open leaderboard he was waiting to fall to earth; this time Europe's hottest player is fixing his co-ordinates on the stars.

On a day when the scoreboard, lashed by horizontal rain, dissolved into a sea of blue, McDowell was one of an elite trio to remain in the red alongside US Open runner-up Rocco Mediate and Australian Robert Allenby.

True, McDowell was helped by avoiding the worst of the filth which swept across Birkdale, but the crosswinds were still vicious enough to demand pinpoint accuracy. Hitting 13 greens in regulation was a statement of considerable intent.

A one-under-par 69 gave Northern Irishman McDowell, who will make his Ryder Cup debut in September after winning last week's Scottish Open, a share of the first round lead he held in 2006. At Hoylake he fell apart so badly he finished a distant 61st behind Tiger Woods; there is a lot more substance to his challenge this year.

"I felt like a rabbit in headlights a couple of years ago at Hoylake. I was thinking 'what's this all about?' I didn't really have a whole lot of belief in my game and it caught up with me on the weekend when Tiger left the field in his dust," said McDowell.

"I feel like a different player now. I've been showing more form and consistency over the past 12 months and stringing four rounds together. I have a lot more belief in what I'm doing and I'm certainly a lot more comfortable in this position than I would've been two years ago.

"This was a better round than Hoylake. I was really happy with my execution and without having putted the eyes out of it I got around in one under par. I'm pretty content with that.

"The Tiger effect goes without saying. Not having him in the field is a major boost to everyone – apart from the fans, the crowds and the tournament."

McDowell has the pedigree of an Open champion, having broken Woods' US college scoring record at the University of Alabama and played a key role in the 2001 Walker Cup. But after his brief time in the spotlight at Hoylake it is only this season he has begun to fulfil his potential.

Last week's Loch Lomond win was his second of the season on the European Tour and nailed down a Ryder Cup place. If he has the Midas touch at the moment then so does 45-year-old Mediate. Described on American television by Johnny Miller as looking like Woods's pool cleaner, he wisecracked his way around Torrey Pines to such effect he took the world No1 to a play-off.

He was still laughing yesterday despite the discomfort from a hip problem which left him sprawled out in the rough on the 11th having treatment from his physio. "I'd have been happy with 74 so I have no idea how that happened – pretty much every putt I could've made, I did," said Mediate.

If his round was the equal lowest of the day, Retief Goosen's 71, along with that of Mike Weir, was probably the performance of the day given the imbalance in the conditions. "I don't mind it tough. I almost feel half the field aren't trying anymore," said Goosen. That accusation could not be levelled at Ian Poulter, who shot a 72 in the morning tempest. American starlet Anthony Kim finished his first round of links golf alongside Poulter and European Open champion Ross Fisher.

The leading Englishmen were the unheralded Simon Wakefield and Anthony Wall, who both shot 71s very late in the day.

Justin Rose and Lee Westwood both managed to insert the crampons with their Open hopes threatening to slide away. Rose literally did so at the sixth after overbalancing on a slope and fluffing a chip shot out of the rough on the way to a double bogey. He turned four over but came back without any further damage despite being put on the clock for slow play as he tried to keep himself and his equipment from becoming waterlogged.

"I was a bit like Rafael Nadal drying myself before every shot," said Rose.

Westwood was one shot worse off after dropping five early shots including one at the fiendish sixth. He ended up chipping in for a bogey after his marked and replaced ball was blown off the green by the wind. "I splashed out to 18 inches and then holed out from 30 feet," he said.

Local boy Nick Dougherty also shot 75, but Paul Casey's bid is almost certainly over after a 78.

Picture: ANDY LYONS

'Not having Tiger is a major boost'

Now I think Sandy had right idea...

Oliver Wilson

ONLY IN THE DAILY EXPRESS

DAILY EXPRESS diarist Oliver Wilson battled through the wind and the rain to complete his first round of 77 but was left wondering why he bothered...

I GOT back to the house after my round and was surprised to see my housemate Sandy Lyle packing his bags already and heading back to Scotland.

He had given me a lot of tips about playing links golf during our practice round on Wednesday but none of them was, "If it's not going well by the 10th, give up and go home".

I know he has a lot of seniors events to worry about in the coming weeks and was only worried about injuring his back, but that might have been the best advice he could have given me to be honest.

It certainly wasn't much fun out there. The rain pounding down on the skylight of the house I am staying at in Ainsdale had woken me up at 2.30am and 4.30am. I lay in bed and thought, 'Here we go again'. It was the atrocious conditions that ruined my first Open at Carnoustie a year ago and now I had to go out into something similar to try to stay in contention.

'I couldn't wait to get away from Birkdale'

I have never worn more layers of clothing than I had on today – base layer, T-shirt, sweater and waterproof top – but still the best part of the day was when I finally got away from the course into the warm and could sit down to write this diary.

I double-bogeyed the sixth, then bogeyed the next three holes and although I played quite solidly on the back nine to finish seven over, I couldn't wait to get away from Birkdale.

I had a bit of a go with the putter because the ball is blowing around even on the greens. I need to get that settled down. Then I went back for a bit of physio work and to relax so that I could feel a little bit more positive about the day.

My girlfriend is up here for the week and my mum and dad have come across from Mansfield, so it is good to spend some time with them. I needed a little bit of time away from golf. I didn't even watch it much on TV – that was the last thing I wanted to do.

I haven't blown myself out of it completely but getting a good score today is just something that has to be done.

WHILE REIGN COULD FALL MOSTLY ON SPAIN

Garcia out to make it a hat-trick

NIALL HICKMAN
at Royal Birkdale

EVEN the weather knows this is the sporting summer of Spain as the elements eased off just as Sergio Garcia started his assault on the Open title.

'El Nino' didn't exactly blow a gale yesterday, more a light breeze, as he didn't even make a birdie until the 15th hole.

But popular Spaniard Garcia is tucked in just behind the leaders and well within range for the race to the Claret Jug.

With Spain having won the European Championships and Rafael Nadal conqueror supreme at both the French Open and Wimbledon, these are heady days for Garcia's nation.

Yesterday he started poorly with a missed three-foot putt at the first hole for a bogey and it got worse at the sixth as a sliced approach meant another dropped shot.

A mediocre putt at the 10th and Garcia was three over par, but a strong finish meant his challenge is now up and running.

He said: "I feel like I had to steady the ship from the first tee because I made a bogey on the first hole.

"I bogeyed the sixth with a bad shot and although I got a lucky break with the weather, it was still tough out there and very windy. I feel it was a decent round."

Garcia is still the bookmakers' favourite to land the £750,000 first prize following near misses in the last two years.

At Hoylake in 2006 Garcia and Tiger Woods were paired together on the final day, but a flurry of early bogeys meant their showdown was over before it had even started.

'It's tough out there but I got a lucky break'

Garcia carded a 73 to finish fifth, but last year at Carnoustie he went even closer to breaking his Major duck.

The Real Madrid fanatic cruised around the links and led the field for the first three days, only to be caught at the line in one of the most memorable Open finishes ever witnessed.

He had a putt from nine feet to win the most treasured prize in golf but his effort lipped out and in a play-off he was cruelly beaten by Padraig Harrington.

Garcia, 28, burst on to the scene when he finished as the runner-up in the US PGA in 1999 while aged just 19 and great things were expected of him, but so far he has been unable to deliver on the big occasions.

Earlier this summer he won the unofficial 'fifth' Major, the Players Championship, but it is the Open title he really wants and although yesterday he was way off his best, he is still in a threatening position.

Garcia said: "I am happy because a few players have shot themselves in the foot and are out of it and I am not. This is a course where things can go wrong very quickly and so I am satisfied that I am still in contention.

"I had some decent birdie chances which I didn't take but I kept trying and eventually I got a birdie at the 15th.

"I should have got another one at the 17th hole but I hit a poor putt.

"The important thing is I am up there, just three behind the leaders and that means I am in the competition.

"It was a very tough day to play and a lot of things could have gone wrong, but I played solid golf and sometimes you need that.

"I would have loved to have shot a par round today, but sometimes you have to accept that it is a difficult course, difficult weather and you are going to shoot something over par.

"I am only a few over par, but I am close to the leaders and that is what counts."

Garcia's Carnoustie play-off conqueror Harrington was remaining buoyant, despite bogeying his last two holes for a 74.

'I am still in contention for championship'

The defending champion was woken by his alarm at 4.55am for his early start yesterday uncertain as to whether his suspect wrist would hold out for 18 holes.

A pushed first tee shot into the right-hand rough immediately offered him the chance to assess whether the wrist, which had "twinged" two or three times on the practice range in an early morning fitness test, was ready for the most punishing part of Birkdale.

He said: "I was quite apprehensive about hitting out of the rough, but when it didn't hurt on the first I was a bit more relaxed with it and after seven or eight holes I wasn't thinking about it all.

"A couple of times I went to the shortest club I could, but the conditions were so bad you couldn't hit the ball far out of the rough anyway.

"If you got the wrong lie it could make the wrist worse, but I would think I still have a 95 per cent chance of completing the championship."

Picture: ADRIAN DENNIS

EARLY FIRST ROUND SCORES

(Gbr & Irl unless stated): **69** R Allenby (Aus), G McDowell, R Mediate (USA). **70** A Scott (Aus), G Norman (Aus), B Bryant (USA). **71** J Furyk (USA), R Goosen (Rsa), M Weir (Can), G Havret (Fra), F Jacobson (Swe), P Hanson (Swe), S Wakefield, A Wall. **72** K Stadler (USA), KJ Choi (Kor), I Poulter, J Overton (USA), A Kim (USA), MA Jiminez (Spa), S Garcia (Spa), S Appleby (Aus), B Snedeker (USA), R Fisher, A Noren (Swe). **73** Z Johnson (USA), P Waring, C Montgomerie, J Van de velde (Fra), D Duval (USA), H Slocum (USA), S Ames (Can), J Williamson (USA), J Rollins (USA). **74** T Watson (USA), T Hamilton (USA), B Jones (Aus), N O'Hern (Aus), J Rose, M O'Meara (USA), T Gillis (USA), P Harrington, D Horsey, T Immelman (Rsa), A Yana (Jap), T Lehman (USA), G Bourdy (Fra). **75** J-B Gonnet (Fra), M Campbell (Nzl), D Love III (USA), N Dougherty, M Kaymer (Ger), D Frost (Rsa), P Larrazabal (Spa), R Karlsson (Swe), A Baddeley (Aus), R Finch, P Archer, L Westwood, T Aiken (Rsa), S Cink (USA), S Hansen (Den), S O'Hair (USA), C Woods*, S Mccarron (USA), P Baker, M Wiegele. **76** D Smail (Nzl), D Howell, W Austin (USA), B Hume, P Edberg (Swe), H Tanihara (Jpn), G Storm, M Calcavecchia (USA), R Green (Aus), C Villegas (Col), H Stenson (Swe), D Chia (Mas), E Porter (Aus), A Cejka (Ger), T Clark (Rsa). **77** S Stricker (USA), A Romero (Arg), O Wilson, A Cabrera (Arg), G Ogilvy (Aus), S Khan, G Boyd, J Leonard (USA), T Sherreard, P Goydos (USA), P Lawrie, P Walton, C Parry (Aus), S Verplank (USA), W C Lian (Chi), R Pampling (Aus), R Imada (Jap)J Kingston (Rsa), P Marksaeng (Tha). **78** A Tampion (Aus), M Letzig (USA), A Hansen (Den), L Glover (USA), B Curtis (USA), R Blizard (Aus), J Bevan, P Casey, J Elson, A Canete (Arg), R Sterne (Rsa), J Edfors (Swe), D Labelle II (USA). **79** R Sabbatini (Rsa), H Otto (Rsa), S Webster, D McGrane, J Quinney (USA), J Cunliffe (Rsa), M Kuchar (USA), P Mickelson (USA), J.B. Holmes (USA), N Fasth (Swe), C Barlow (USA), B Hebert (Fra). **80** J Daly (USA), H Mahan (USA), V Singh (Fij), E Els (Rsa), B Weekley (USA), R Saxton (Ned), S Kai (Jpn). **81** S Kjeldsen (Den), A Blyth (Aus). **82** M Matsumura (Jpn), P Perez (USA), T Petrovic (USA), D Fichardt (Rsa), P Fowler (Aus), S Dyson. **83** J Kelly (USA). **84** S Strange (Aus). **85** J Howarth, B Lamb (Aus).

MEDIATE: Top form

TODAY'S TEE TIMES

(Gbr & Irl unless stated): **0630** J Van de Velde (Fra), S Webster, A Tampion (Aus). **0641** P Walton, D Smail (Nzl), M Letzig (USA). **0652** P Waring, H Otto (Rsa), K Stadler (USA). **0703** P Lawrie, R Mediate (USA), A Cabrera (Arg) **0714** Niclas Fasth (Swe), M O'Meara (USA), M Campbell (Nzl). **0725** G McDowell, R Sabbatini (Rsa), T Hamilton (USA). **0736** J Furyk (USA), N Dougherty, C Villegas (Col) **0747** R Karlsson (Swe), G Norman (Aus), W Austin (USA). **0758** R Allenby (Aus), S Stricker (USA), B Hebert (Fra). **0809** A Scott (Aus), Z Johnson (USA), P Larrazabal (Spa). **0820** G Havret (Fra), T Clark (Rsa), S Cink (USA). **0831** W-C Liang (Chn), F Jacobson (Swe), J Overton (USA). **0842** S Hansen (Den), T Immelman (Rsa), A Kim (USA). **0858** MA Jimenez (Spa), S Ames (Can), C Howell III (USA). **0909** P Hanson (Swe), B Bryant (USA), R Pampling (Aus). **0920** S Garcia (Spa), R Imada (Jpn), S O'Hair (USA). **0931** B Snedeker (USA), S Appleby (Aus), R Fisher. **0942** Azuma Yano (Jpn), J Edfors (Swe), T Lehman (USA). **0953** J Williamson (USA), S Wakefield, J Kingston (Rsa). **1004** D Chia (Mal), G Bourdy (Fra), J Rollins (USA). **1015** C Wood, P Marksaeng (Tha), S McCarron (USA). **1026** A Noren (Swe), A Wall, E Porter (Aus). **1037** H Iwata (Jpn), P Baker, A Cejka (Ger). **1048** D Labelle (USA), C-B Lam (Sin), J-F Lima (Por). **1059** M Wiegele (Aut), A Que (Phi), D McGuigan. **1110** Y Tsukada (Jpn), J Lomas, P Appleyard. **1141** L Glover (USA), C Parry (Aus), S Dyson. **1152** J-B Gonnet (Fra), P Perez (USA), P Fowler (Aus). **1203** S Kjeldsen (Den), B Jones (Aus), M Kuchar (USA). **1214** J Kelly (USA), D Fichardt (Rsa), D McGrane. **1225** G Storm, S Strange (Aus). **1236** R Green (Aus), M Calcavecchia (USA), A Hansen (Den). **1247** T Watson (USA), J Rose, A Baddeley (Aus). **1258** G Ogilvy (Aus), O Wilson, D Love III (USA). **1309** R Goosen (Rsa), P Harrington, J Leonard (USA). **1320** R Sterne (Rsa), H Stenson (Swe), J Quinney (USA). **1331** H Mahan (USA), V Singh (Fij), R Saxton (Ned) **1342** M Kaymer (Ger), S Verplank (USA), E Els (Rsa). **1353** D Howell, J.B. Holmes (USA), A Romero (Arg), S Ames (Can), C Howell III (USA), **1409** L Westwood, KJ Choi (Kor), B Curtis (USA). **1420** N O'Horn (Aus), I Poulter, P Goydos (USA). **1431** H Tanihara (Jpn), P Mickelson (USA), P Casey. **1442** C Montgomerie, B Weekley (USA), M Weir (Can). **1453** R Finch, J Daly (USA). **1504** S Khan, D Duval (USA), D Frost (Rsa). **1515** P Edberg (Swe), T Sherreard. **1526** T Gillis (USA), M Matsumura (Jpn), B Hume **1537** T Petrovic (USA), S Kai (Jpn), D Horsey. **1548** C Barlow (USA), A Canete (Arg), P Archer. **1559** J Elson, R Blizard (Aus), J Bevan. **1610** A Blyth (Aus), J Howarth, J Cunliffe (Rsa). **1621** G Boyd, T Aiken (Rsa), B Lamb (Aus).

Tee placings cause storm

THE R&A came under fire yesterday for making Royal Birkdale "unplayable" by putting the tee boxes too far back in the strong winds that blew around the course.

A number of players struggled to carry the rough between the tee and the fairway on each of the sixth, 11th and 16th holes, with flailing English golfers Simon Dyson and Graeme Storm leading the criticism.

Dyson, above, who saw the worst of the wind and the rain in the very first group out yesterday morning, finished with a 12-over-par 82.

"It's nearly unplayable," he said. "A four-handicapper would shoot 100 and that's no exaggeration. I can't believe they didn't put the tees forward and I think they'll come under fire to be honest." The appropriately named Storm was not far behind, though the North-east based player carded a more respectable 76.

"A couple of tees could have been pushed forward just to make it a bit more fair really," he said.

"Hopefully they will do that if it stays like this tomorrow."

However, R&A chief executive Peter Dawson was unbowed by the criticism.

"I just don't see an issue with Hole 6 at all," he said. "I talked to a lot of players and 16 was not degarded by any of them as nearly as tough as 11."

And former champion Greg Norman said: "This is the best Open I have ever played in – I think the golf course has been set up by the R&A as the toughest and the fairest I have seen."

MATTHEW DUNN