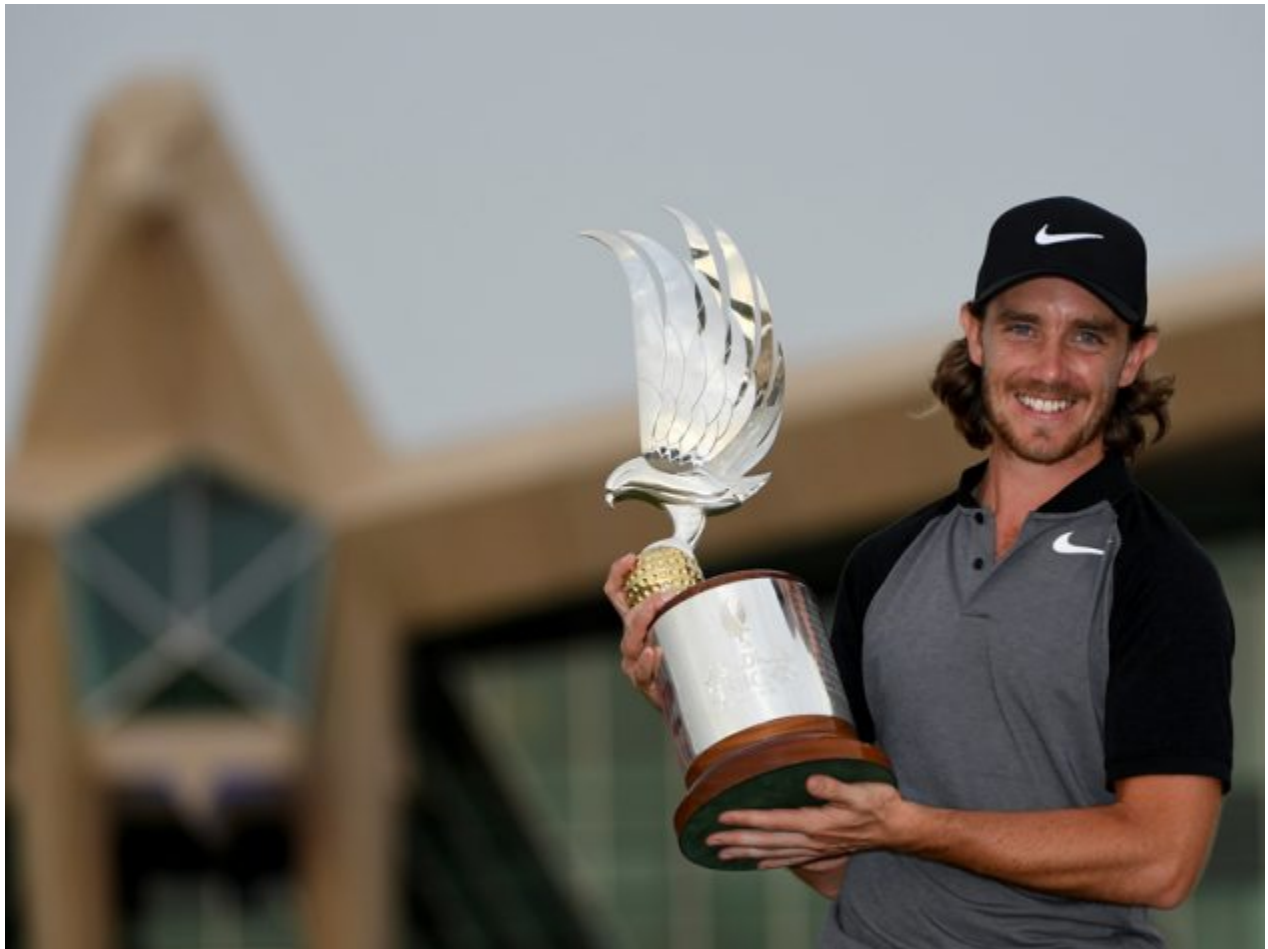


Tommy Fleetwood defends Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship

The European Tour heads for the Middle East this week where Tommy Fleetwood will defend the Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship presented by EGA against a strong field containing World Number 1 Dustin Johnson.



Tommy Fleetwood defends Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship Credit: Getty Images

There's a star-studded line-up for this, the 13th running of the Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship presented by EGA. World Number 1 Dustin Johnson will start following his victory in the Sentry Tournament of Champions two weeks ago. Rory McIlroy is back in action and European stars like Justin Rose, Henrik Stenson, Paul Casey and defending champ Tommy Fleetwood will also play.

McIlroy returns from injury and is looking forward to the season ahead.

"I am looking for a strong start in 2018 and Abu Dhabi is the perfect place to open my season's campaign," he said. "Having come really close here on more than one occasion, I will be completely focused on trying to win the coveted Falcon Trophy and getting myself back into the winners' circle – that would be a real confidence boost to start the New Year."

Dustin Johnson finished runner-up to Tommy Fleetwood in 2017 and will be looking to go one better this time out. "Hopefully Abu Dhabi will serve as the perfect springboard for me in 2018," he said.

First contested in 2006, this is an event that was dominated by two players in the tournament's early years – Martin Kaymer and Paul Casey. The Englishman won in 2007 and 2009 while the German has been the champion three times – 2008, 2010 and 2011.

Rickie Fowler triumphed in 2016 and Tommy Fleetwood took the title last season. The one-stroke victory over Dustin Johnson kick-started the English player's season and he went on to finish the year as European Tour Number 1.

Designed by renowned desert course architect **Peter Harradine**, the course at Abu Dhabi Golf Club is long and challenging with plenty of water hazards to negotiate. Stretched now to almost 7,600 yards, it's a venue that suits the power hitters.

The weather looks to be settled with temperatures not too high. Scoring should be good.

Venue: Abu Dhabi GC, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Date: Jan 18-21

Course stats: par 72, 7,583 yards

Purse: €2,452,000

Defending champion: Tommy Fleetwood (-17)

Player Watch:

Dustin Johnson – A winner in his last start in Hawaii, DJ was runner-up in this event last year. He'll be tough to beat.

Paul Casey – Twice a winner here and a supremely consistent performer, Casey will be looking to get back in the winner's circle this week.

Branden Grace – He has two top-five finishes in this event and comes into the week on good form – he was second last week in the BMW SA Open.

Key hole: 18th. Played directly towards the iconic Falcon shaped clubhouse, the final hole is a par-5 that's been extended over the years and now measures 562 yards. It's still reachable in two for the longest hitters and that means the tournament could swing at the death.