

2026 Open Championship: Statistical Favorites at Royal Birkdale

A statistical model predicting the winner of the 2026 Open Championship, built with SQL, Data Golf strokes-gained data, and Royal Birkdale course-history analysis

By Seymour Thomas · USC Marshall School of Business · July 2026

I. Executive Summary

The Open Championship returns to Royal Birkdale Golf Club July 16–19, 2026, for the first time since 2017. This analysis uses a custom-built SQLite relational database — populated with Data Golf skill rankings, 2026 season Strokes Gained data across the PGA Tour, DP World Tour, and LIV Golf, and actual Royal Birkdale results from the 2008 and 2017 Opens — to answer one question: who is statistically most likely to win?

The model combines three factors into a single composite score: a player's skill rank (Data Golf's own predictive rating), their current-season form (Strokes Gained: Total, Bayesian-shrunk to correct for small sample sizes), and a Royal Birkdale course-history bonus built from real finishing positions the last two times The Open visited this course.

The core finding is that only one player in the 156-man field checks all three boxes — elite skill rank, red-hot current form over a full season, and a proven result at Royal Birkdale. That player is Rory McIlroy. Behind him, Jon Rahm and Tyrrell Hatton round out the top three on current form alone, and one course-history specialist — Alex Noren — stands out as a longshot worth watching.

II. Royal Birkdale: What the Course Actually Rewards

Pulled from Data Golf's Course Insights for the two most recent Opens held at Royal Birkdale — nine seasons apart, but telling a consistent story.

Metric	2008	2017
Scoring average	74.89 (+4.89)	71.28 (+1.28)
Score std. deviation	3.18 (high variance)	2.90 (typical PGA Tour variance)
Skill separation (slope vs. 1.0 = normal tour)	0.60	0.72
Player type favoured	Strongly favoured accurate drivers	Favoured accurate drivers

Key finding: Royal Birkdale rewards accuracy off the tee over raw distance, and skill separates less than usual here (slope 0.60–0.72 vs. 1.0) — meaning the best players in the world beat the field by less than they would elsewhere. This doesn't override the skill/form model — it tempers it. A pure bomber with no Birkdale pedigree should be discounted slightly; a proven accurate ball-striker with course history should get a bump.

III. Adding Course History to the Model

Cross-referencing the 2008 and 2017 Open leaderboards against the current 156-player field turned up 10 players still competing who have real Royal Birkdale results on record.

Player	Best Birkdale Finish	Years
Padraig Harrington	Winner, 2008	2008
Henrik Stenson	T3 (2008), T11 (2017)	2008, 2017
Alex Noren	T6 (2017), T19 (2008)	2008, 2017
Rory McIlroy	T4 (2017)	2017
Brooks Koepka	T6 (2017)	2017
Matthew Southgate	T6 (2017)	2017
Hideki Matsuyama	T14 (2017)	2017
Xander Schauffele	T20 (2017)	2017
Adam Scott	T16 (2008), T22 (2017)	2008, 2017
Rickie Fowler	T22 (2017)	2017

IV. The Model

Data was loaded into SQLite across five tables: the 156-player Open field (with each player's Data Golf rank, OWGR, and tour rank), three Strokes Gained leaderboards (PGA Tour, DP World Tour, LIV Golf), and the Royal Birkdale course-history table above. Players were matched across tables by surname, with first-initial disambiguation for common names (Fitzpatrick, Kim, Hojgaard, Smith, Scott, Noren).

For each player, three factors were computed: a skill score derived from dg_rank (Data Golf's own predictive rank, which already blends long-term skill with recent form), a form score — current-season Strokes Gained: Total, normalized per round — and a course-history score, points awarded for Royal Birkdale finish (Win = 10, top-3 = 8, top-6 = 6, top-15 = 2–4, top-25 = 1) summed across 2008 and 2017. Because a hot stretch over just 18 rounds is far noisier than one over 60+, Bayesian shrinkage was applied to the Strokes Gained figures so a short hot streak can't outrank a full season of proven form.

```
-- simplified core of the ranking query
SELECT f.player_name, f.dg_rank, f.owgr_rank,
       COALESCE(p.total/p.rnds, d.total/d.rnds, l.total/l.rnds) AS sg_per_round
FROM field f
LEFT JOIN pga_stats p ON f.last_name = p.surname
LEFT JOIN dpwt_stats d ON f.last_name = d.surname
LEFT JOIN liv_stats l ON f.last_name = l.surname
ORDER BY composite_score DESC;
```

Final composite: 70% skill rank + 30% shrunk current-season form, blended 88/12 with the Royal Birkdale course-history score. The 12% weight is deliberately modest — two tournaments is a small history sample, so it acts as a tiebreaker/booster rather than a dominant factor.

V. Top 15 Contenders (Course-History Adjusted)

The direct output of the composite-score ranking query, expanded with additional PGA Tour and DP World Tour stat coverage.

Rk	Player	DG Rk	Tour (SG/rd)	Birkdale Hist.	Note
1	Rory McIlroy	2	PGA (+0.067)	T4, 2017	Elite skill + hottest form + real Birkdale pedigree
2	Jon Rahm	5	LIV (+0.067)	none	Matches McIlroy's SG/rd over a full 36-round season
3	Tyrrell Hatton	23	DPWT (+0.104)	none	Highest raw SG/rd — only 18 rounds of data
4	Scottie Scheffler	1	PGA (+0.049)	none	#1 skill rank, but no Birkdale history
5	Collin Morikawa	8	PGA (+0.043)	none	
6	Alex Fitzpatrick	28	PGA (+0.060)	none	Elite current form
7	Matt Fitzpatrick	3	PGA (+0.033)	none	
8	Tommy Fleetwood	4	PGA (+0.033)	none	Home-soil pick, no Birkdale history on record
9	Cameron Young	9	PGA (+0.035)	none	
10	Xander Schauffele	15	PGA (+0.029)	T20, 2017	Moves up on Birkdale pedigree
11	Sam Burns	6	PGA (+0.030)	none	
12	Russell Henley	11	PGA (+0.030)	none	
13	Ludvig Åberg	13	PGA (+0.029)	none	
14	Wyndham Clark	7	PGA (+0.026)	none	
15	Bryson DeChambeau	24	LIV (+0.039)	none	

Full ranking (all 156 players) and raw SQL tables are available as a separate download alongside this memo.

VI. Three Most Likely Winners

Pick 1 — Rory McIlroy | Favorite



Rory McIlroy · Photograph: Charlie Crowhurst/R&A/Getty Images

Tops every layer of the model: elite skill rank (#2), the hottest full-season Strokes Gained pace in the field (38 rounds, not a hot streak), and real Royal Birkdale pedigree (T4 in 2017). No one else in the 156-player field checks all three boxes.

Pick 2 — Jon Rahm | Co-Favorite



Jon Rahm · Photo by Manuel Velasquez/Getty Images

Statistically even with McIlroy on SG/round, sustained across a full 36-round LIV season — this isn't a short-sample fluke. No recorded Birkdale history, so he's leaning entirely on current form and skill rank (#5), and it's enough to hold the #2 spot on its own.

Pick 3 — Tyrrell Hatton | Form Play



Tyrrell Hatton · Photo by Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images

The highest raw SG/round figure in the entire field. The honest caveat stands — it's built on only 18 DP World Tour rounds, and Bayesian shrinkage pulled his score down accordingly — but even after that correction he's still #3. Worth taking seriously, not just as a value bet.

VII. Surprise Pick

Alex Noren | The Course-History Longshot



Alex Noren · (David Cannon/Getty Images)

Ranked 21st overall — well outside the “favorite” tier — but he’s the strongest Royal Birkdale course-history match of anyone in the field who isn’t already a top-3 pick: T6 in 2017 and T19 in 2008, the only player besides Stenson and Scott with a real result in both editions. His current Data Golf rank (45th) and season form are solid-but-unspectacular, which is exactly why the model buries him — but “accurate, experienced ball-striker with two good finishes at a course that specifically rewards accuracy” is precisely the profile Royal Birkdale has rewarded twice now.

Note on Scheffler: The world’s #1-ranked player sits 4th because he has no Royal Birkdale Open history in the data, and his 2026 SG pace — while strong across 58 rounds — hasn’t spiked the way McIlroy’s or Rahm’s has. Given the course’s history of favouring accurate drivers and compressing skill separation, this is a course where even an all-time great gets less of an automatic edge than usual.

VIII. Conclusion & Recommended Picks

Royal Birkdale’s history says this is not a course where the favorite dominates — it’s a course where accuracy, experience, and hot current form matter more than star power alone. Four names to watch:

1	Rory McIlroy — Favorite	Only player combining elite skill rank, full-season hot form, and real Birkdale pedigree.
2	Jon Rahm — Co-Favorite	Matches McIlroy’s SG/round pace over a full season, no course history needed.
3	Tyrrell Hatton — Form Play	Highest raw SG/round in the field, even after correcting for small sample size.
4	Alex Noren — Longshot	Best course-history profile outside the top 3; accuracy-first game fits Birkdale’s tendencies.

All four picks share a common thread: Royal Birkdale’s history rewards accuracy, current form, and proven course fit over star power alone — exactly the criteria this model was built to isolate.

Methodology: All rankings were produced by SQL queries joining the field, pga_stats, dpwt_stats, liv_stats, and birkdale_history tables in a custom-built SQLite database (open2026.db). Data sourced from Data Golf’s field rankings, season Strokes Gained tables, and Course Insights pages. Analysis conducted as part of a portfolio project at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business.