

U.S. Open Championship 2020

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Mamaroneck, New York, USA

Winged Foot Golf Club

Gary Woodland

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are very pleased to welcome defending champion Gary Woodland to the 2020 U.S. Open interview area. Gary is making his 10th career U.S. Open start.

Q. How does it feel to be the defending champion, and can you tell us anywhere fun that you took the trophy?

GARY WOODLAND: It feels great to be the defending champ, and it was nice to have that trophy I would say a little longer than normal after one win. Obviously the U.S. Open being postponed, I had it a couple extra months.

But with COVID in there, as well, you didn't get to travel too many places. But walking through New York City with that trophy for media day afterwards was pretty cool, taking it back home, taking it to a couple football games was pretty special. Any time you get to hold a piece of trophy that your name is etched on forever is pretty cool, and to share it more with my friends and family and my team just proves the hard work pays off, and that was very special for me.

Q. What's your comfort level on this course and what's the learning curve been like? A lot of people haven't really played here. There were 15 who played here in '06 that are in this field.

GARY WOODLAND: Yeah, the golf course is big. It's hard. But I think that's what you expect when you come to a major championship and especially a U.S. Open. I've heard a lot about Winged Foot. Obviously I've worked with Butch, been around Butch for a long time. His dad was the head pro here. My college coach was the assistant pro here for a long time as well under Butch's dad.

I've heard a lot about Winged Foot. I came up and played just over a year and a half ago to try and get familiar with it, and then I've been here since Saturday.

I don't know if you have too much to learn. I mean, the golf course is in front of you. There's no tricks to it. You've just got to step up and hit good shots. The key this week is you've got to drive the ball in the fairway. If you don't do

that, you're going to be wedging out and you're going to be trying to hit wedges close because you're not going to be able to advance it too far out of the rough.

For me this week and what I've kind of put an emphasis on the last couple weeks being home is driving the golf ball, and that's definitely going to be the key this week.

Q. What's the hardest thing to learn about the course? Is it the greens, just the subtleties of the breaks and everything?

GARY WOODLAND: Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of slopes in the greens. I think that's a huge advantage, if you know how to work into some of those pins. There's a lot of slope in these greens where there's not a ton of pin placements. And I don't think the USGA is going to get too crazy. The golf course is hard enough.

If you can be able to utilize those slopes, control your distance, control into those slopes, control the spin, that's going to be a massive advantage trying to save pars on a lot of these holes.

Q. Does your preparation change at all based on the previous U.S. Open and the high scores?

GARY WOODLAND: No. You know, for me personally, I came in at the same time I did last year, came in the weekend before, trying to get -- usually I come in the weekend before trying to beat the circus and beat the crowds on Monday, but obviously with no fans, it's not that big a deal.

But it was nice to get in here and get familiar with golf course, get some sight lines. I think it was a little slow over the weekend, they had some rain last week, and I anticipate that firming up a little bit.

But more than anything, it's just trying to get comfortable with my game, driving the golf ball in the fairway and trying to get it on the middle of the greens and attack from there.

Q. The U.S. Open used to be the major won by more of the short, accurate players, but in the past four years it's been yourself, DJ, Brooks and the longer athletic



guys. What's your theory as to why this has changed, and do you believe it will continue?

GARY WOODLAND: I mean, I think overall the game is kind of trending in that direction. You look at what DJ has done, I don't think Boston really set up too much for a long, long hitter, and DJ just overpowered the thing. It was impressive what he did.

And then you go to Chicago, which was a golf course I would say was a pretty good prep for this week there at Olympia Fields, big golf course, thick rough, you saw what DJ and Jon Rahm did that week. And then DJ goes to Atlanta, and that's the same thing, drive the golf ball in the fairway at that place.

The game has kind of trended that way. I don't think last year, being at Pebble Beach, was a long golf course by any means, but on a shorter golf course I didn't have to hit driver there, either. I was using my advantage with my iron play to my advantage and trying to attack that way.

This week it doesn't matter. I think if it firms up, some of the shorter hitters will be able to get the golf ball in play and play. But if it doesn't firm up, the golf course is so long, I would imagine some of the top long hitters are going to have a huge advantage.

Q. Following up on that question, is it two different tournaments from last year when you were able to go 13-under par, one of only four guys to be double digits under par, to this year where people are expecting it to be over par? And does this course, as long as it is, penalize the long hitters because of the rough?

GARY WOODLAND: No, I don't think the long hitters really ever get penalized because of rough because I think you're going to have a huge advantage any time you get the golf ball in the fairway, I'm going to be hitting wedges where guys are going to be hitting longer irons in there.

From that, I don't think so. If I can have a chance, maybe if I get a decent lie with a wedge, I want to have a chance to get it on the green, where a shorter hitter misses a fairway, and they're not going to be able to advance a 7-iron.

So I don't think that. The preparation is the same. The golf course you anticipate being even par to over par winning this golf tournament. You try to eliminate big numbers. If you get out of play, you try to wedge it back in and get it up-and-down with a wedge and take your bogey, and hopefully you can drive it in the fairway on the par-5s and make some birdies.

But you're trying to eliminate big numbers, knowing par is a

great score. So that becomes more of a mental test than anything, staying patient.

Bogeys are going to happen. Nobody is going to go bogey free I would imagine around this place. Taking your medicine when you can, and hopefully you're driving the golf ball and your game is on fire and you're driving the golf ball in the fairway and trying to get into greens and make some 4s.

Q. What's the worst lie you've dealt with this week, and what was it like?

GARY WOODLAND: I mean, I played on Saturday. I was chipping -- my caddie was throwing me balls back to me chipping and we lost a ball for about five minutes and it was right in front of me. We didn't find it until we stepped on it. The golf ball can disappear pretty quickly.

I was talking to USGA, I was glad they were bringing marshals out yesterday. There was talks of not having marshals the first couple practice rounds. The practice rounds would have been 10 hours out here trying to find golf balls.

The fact that we have marshals is going to help. Usually if you hit it outside the ropes too, you're hitting it in the crowds and you got some trampled down lies. We don't have the benefit of that this week. So you're going to have to drive the golf ball in play.

They do have progressive rough, but the progressive rough is so thick it drops to the bottom. So a huge key of keeping the golf ball out of that thick rough, and then when you do get in it, take your medicine, get wedged out and attack from the middle of the fairway.

Q. Quick question about Tiger, who's going to be speaking right after you: You played with him last time he won at ZOZO. What did you see that day at ZOZO, that week at ZOZO, that maybe has not quite been there since then?

GARY WOODLAND: I mean, that week of ZOZO, his distance control was what it's always been: The best in the game. His iron play, his misses are always pin high, and that this week is a huge advantage. We played 36 holes together there. I guess we went without fans one day there, as well, with the weather.

But his game there was sharp, top to bottom. Made some putts when he had to, never really got in trouble, kind of kept it in play, and it was impressive. I anticipate him doing pretty well this week.

We kind of have the same deal. He's never won a U.S. Open on a private golf course, so hopefully I can be the first one to beat him to that and talk a little bit to him about that. I was giving him a hard time at only winning two, but he reminded me he's won three, but they were all public golf courses.

This place is brutal, but distance control is going to be a massive deal with the slopes in these greens, and there's nobody better at that than him.

Q. The U.S. Open has a reputation of being a demanding test; how do you embrace a challenge like that?

GARY WOODLAND: You enjoy it. You look forward to it. It's not every week we see this. I think a lot of guys will be looking forward to getting back to some typical setups in the next coming weeks and making a lot of birdies.

But you look forward to the challenge. This isn't the norm. But you want to prove that whoever has the best game this week is going to win, and that's not every week that the best player wins. This week, top to bottom, whoever is playing the best is going to win this golf tournament. And you want that to be yourself. That's what you work for. That's what you strive for.

Hopefully my game is in a good spot and I can go out there and prove that that's me.

Q. Yesterday you played with your fellow Jayhawk Ryan Vermeer. A pretty decorated career there. What's it like to have another Jayhawk in the field? And assess his game.

GARY WOODLAND: It's awesome. Verm, he's probably the best college player to ever play at Kansas career-wise, and he's played I think four maybe of the last five PGA Championships. So we've played a lot of practice rounds together. When I was in school, he turned professional. He was still living in town. So I played with him a bunch back in the day.

It's great to have a former Jayhawk out here talking a little about how our football team is struggling and hopefully our basketball team is great again. His game is great. I think for him, it's believing he can play out here. He's obviously dominated the PGA section stuff, Player of the Year a year ago.

His game is good enough, it's just him believing that. Not trying to do too much, not trying to be something that he's not, keep the golf ball in play and use his iron play and his short game to his advantage.

Q. How long have you been working with Justin and how does he say things a little bit differently than someone else?

GARY WOODLAND: Yeah, Justin and I, that's been a big change for me. I've obviously struggled really since we've been back from COVID, and that was a big change for me because I work better -- you look about when I've had success, I work better getting my work done off-site before the golf tournament, so when I get here I can prepare.

And with Pete being overseas and with COVID and the travel restrictions, I just didn't get that. I went a long time without -- I don't think I'd seen -- maybe Phil Kenyon came over in February. I hadn't seen one of my coaches in an off week since then.

So I was practicing hard but just probably practicing the wrong things, and when you show up at a golf tournament, it's hard to work with a coach because you're trying to get ready for a golf course. That's just not me.

So bringing Justin in was a huge relief. He speaks like Butch. He worked around Butch for nine years. Butch is still in communication. I still talk to Butch a lot. I'm hearing a lot of the things I heard from Butch.

Justin came to my house last week. We got some work in, which was the first time we've worked outside of a golf tournament. That just kind of freed me up, kind of communications, back to similar stuff I was hearing before and just kind of freeing me up and getting some of the bad stuff out of my head and coming out here this week with a little bit more confidence for sure.

Q. How did that come about, you and Tiger talking about winning U.S. Opens on public golf courses?

GARY WOODLAND: I was helping Tiger, I was doing an outing for him in New York at Liberty National. He was wearing the green jacket at the dinner, I had the trophy with me, giving him a hard time that his name was only on there twice and he reminded me quickly that it's on there three times. Any time you can spend time with him and try to pick his brain, I was able to do that before the Presidents Cup, spending time with him, working out, training, practicing, there's nobody's better mind to pick than his.

Q. Does the atmosphere feel any different when you come to a Winged Foot versus a Pebble Beach or true public course like Torrey?

GARY WOODLAND: You know, I think for me more than anything without fans the last couple months, it's been --

when I haven't played great, it's tough sometimes to get energy and get things moving. Coming back here being defending champ, I have a lot of energy, a lot of good emotion, I think, that I've kind of struggled with the last couple months. I'm excited to be back here.

Obviously Pebble Beach is an iconic golf course. Anytime you can win a U.S. Open if you dream about it you might dream about winning at Pebble because we go there on a regular basis. That was special for me last year.

But this week I think I'm excited that being defending champ I have some emotion, I have some energy, and hopefully I can ride that.

Q. The risk-reward out here is huge, and when you're game planning, how much are you factoring that in, meaning driver versus 3-wood versus something else? And at what point do you have to maybe throw some of that away and just go with whatever?

GARY WOODLAND: A ton. DJ and I played yesterday and there's just a lot of holes we were hitting driver and 2-iron on the same holes that are 500 yards because it doesn't matter if you're not in the fairway. You're probably better off with a 4-iron from the middle of the fairway than you are a 7-iron from the rough because you're not going to be able to advance that 7-iron to the green.

Whatever works for you to get the golf ball in play is going to be a huge advantage, and if it does firm up like you anticipate, 2-irons and 3-woods are going to get out there plenty far, and we were playing the back edge of every tee box, which I don't anticipate it being tipped out, so whatever is more comfortable for you to get the golf ball in the fairway and working it into some of these slopes in the fairway because even the shorter holes there's a lot of slopes in these fairways that you've got to be able to work the golf ball. Even if you get a short hole, maybe driver is the play to get it up there next to the green so you can chip it on. There's a lot of game planning, and I think that's going to be the beauty around this place is there's options for you.

Q. I know DJ at one point I think at the PGA put a 7-wood in the bag. Do you have something other --

GARY WOODLAND: I've always carried a 5-wood for thick rough like this. Typically I would play a 5-wood. DJ and I both 2-iron in out play yesterday just from the standpoint you can't advance the wood out of the rough; it's too thick. Usually that's why you have a 7-wood in or the 5-wood is for me to chop it out of the rough and advance it. It's easier than an iron. It's too thick. You don't have that advantage this week.

Whatever you're going to hit more off the tee box, which I feel more comfortable hitting a 2-iron off the tee box, that's going to be the play this week for me.

Q. Jon Rahm was just saying that he thinks the weather this week is already better than it was at Pebble. How do you think a September U.S. Open is going to change things, if at all?

GARY WOODLAND: Yeah, I mean, I think the weather is going to change. It's supposed to be pretty chilly this weekend, so I think we'll get back to some of that weather we had and the cooler temperatures at Pebble last year for sure. It'll be warm on Thursday and then it'll be a little chilly this weekend. Lows are in the 40s, so you get an early tee time, the golf ball is not going to go very far and this golf course will probably play a little tougher.

All in all, I'm glad they just didn't cancel it. I'm glad they postponed it. The USGA was very resilient in that deal. Obviously coming to New York where we're in Westchester, which at one point was a big epicenter for COVID and they've done a great job turning things around, and I'm glad that -- I wish the members -- it's a great membership here and I wish the fans in New York City would be able to be out here, but hopefully we can put on a good show for them on TV.

Q. Yesterday when you and DJ teed off Mike was on the first tee. Did he say anything to you or did he just watch out of curiosity?

GARY WOODLAND: He said hello, it's good to see you again. Just hello. I hadn't seen him obviously since last year.

Q. During your time with Butch, did he give you any specific insight on Winged Foot?

GARY WOODLAND: Just how big and tough it is. I wish Butchy was here this week. Obviously a lot of history with his family, with his dad being the head pro, his brother. It's just Butchy has been very special to me. He's obviously very special to this place and this place has a big piece in his heart.

Like he always told me, there's no tricks to this place, you've just got to go out and hit good golf shots. He always told me it set up well for me, and I'm going to take that with me this week.

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