

U.S. Senior Open Championship

Wednesday, July 7, 2021

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Omaha Country Club

Ernie Els

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: It's my pleasure to welcome Ernie Els here into the interview room. Ernie, a two-time U.S. Open champion. Ernie, competing in your first U.S. Senior Open Championship this year. You've obviously had a lot of success in the USGA championships, ten top ten finishes in the U.S. Open, including those wins in 1994 and 1997.

Based on what you've seen and heard thus far, do you expect the challenge of a U.S. Senior Open to be pretty similar to what you faced in a U.S. Open?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, I think so. I played nine holes yesterday. I'm going to play nine holes this afternoon here at this golf course. Yeah, the bones are there of a USGA event. The rough is up. It's in very good shape, but if you come here with not much game, you're not going to have a great week. I found that in all the other U.S. Opens I've played, you've got to have some game because the test is so that they want to identify the best player in the field, and if you're not quite on your game, you're going to have a pretty tough time scoring eventually. You might get away with it with one or two rounds, but over four rounds, you've got to have some game.

This course is exactly the same setup. I wouldn't say the rough is as bad as I've ever seen it, but it's at least a half a shot if you go in there. You've got to be pretty accurate and have a good game plan.

THE MODERATOR: Talking about your game in more recent past, you had a strong finish in the Senior PLAYERS, a runner-up finish last week in New York. How are you feeling about your game heading into this Thursday?

ERNIE ELS: It's running around nicely. I'm coming around. I worked on quite a few things for a couple of weeks there. Bridgestone, I started seeing good signs. Last week I had a really good couple of rounds, and then I was very slow on Sunday. You've got to give it to Kevin Cameron. He played a great round, but I had a lot of



chances to maybe sneak a win there.

I'm not too disappointed because we've got some big events coming up this week for me at the U.S. Senior, and then I'm playing next week at The Open, and then the Senior British. So big events. I'm trying to time it just right. Hopefully, I'm timing it going into this week.

THE MODERATOR: Peaking at the right time.

ERNIE ELS: Yes, peaking.

THE MODERATOR: Phil Mickelson recently won the PGA Championship at age 50. Bernhard Langer has been competitive out here well into his mid-60s. Does that give you some additional inspiration in the coming years as you transition into what we'll call the next phase of your career?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, it's just incredible what Phil's done to win at the age of 50, 51 almost, a major on the regular TOUR. That's incredible. Just shows you what can be done. I read that Phil got a lot of inspiration from what he saw Tom Brady do in the NFL, and that's just phenomenal in itself to have a man of that talent and play at 43 in the NFL. To me, it's hard to even think about it.

But these guys are doing it, and they're really paving the way for other guys to follow suit. It depends on how you look after yourself, how you approach the game mentally, but if you're physically there, you've got to just get yourself in a really good mental frame. Bernhard, as you say, is showing it. Also, he's 63 years of age. He's third on the money list. He's struggling a little bit with the knee injury a little bit, but he's won in every single year for 14 years out here.

Those three guys have really shown a lot of the guys the way forward, I think.

Q. You used to be able to prepare for four majors a year. The seniors have five, and you're still playing some on the regular Tour. How now do you have to prepare for all these major tests?

ERNIE ELS: For me, it's a blessing to play in tournaments that I'm really committed to mentally. A lot of times in the last four or five years on the regular Tour, I just didn't have quite the energy to really pick myself up in some of those



events, and now I feel that there's a different energy with me. I feel I can compete.

I use a lot of the regular events to work on my game, hone my game, and try to get ready for kind of the big ones for us. So that's kind of been my game plan so far. I've played quite well in majors, but I haven't won one, but I've been in contention. So just got to keep building on that and see where it takes us.

Q. You'll have three in a row now. What's that going to be like?

ERNIE ELS: I don't know. I played BC last week. I tried some different putters and stuff just to get myself to where I feel comfortable in competition play with the things I'm trying. I feel I've done that work, and it will come through now in the next couple of weeks. This one's huge. Next week is huge and we've got to travel, and then the British Seniors. It's kind of a new frontier for me, but I'm up for the challenge to see where it goes.

Q. You mentioned it has the bones of a USGA event. The rough is tough. With that in mind, what specifically do you have to do throughout the weekend to have a chance on Sunday?

ERNIE ELS: You've just got to play. You've got to play good golf. You don't need to hit every shot perfect, but you want to stay away from big mistakes and just keep grinding. Who knows what the scoring is going to be like this week? The greens are holding and so forth, so people who are on their games can shoot a good round. What they do for four days is going to be the challenge, I think.

So it's just staying in the game, whether you have a tough start on the first day, just not play yourself out of it and just kind of try to be within reach if you don't quite have it going your way.

It's a marathon this week. Every U.S. Open I've ever played, you don't win it on the first day, but you don't want to lose it on the first day either. You just want to kind of stay in there.

Q. When discussing the distance debate this past year, you said, if anything the game needs, it's more of a premium on accuracy. That's a big part of what U.S. Open championships and USGA setups demand from the players. When you come to a course like Omaha, for championships that need premium accuracy, do you prepare any differently in terms of adjusting strategy or changing mentality for that particular week?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, I think it's all said there. I think it's great to have distance and accuracy, but the more distance you get, the less accurate you're going to become. That's just kind of part of the game. If you can figure that one out, you're going to win a lot of tournaments if you're the longest and straightest out there.

I think you've got to go accordingly. There are some holes here that you need that length. There's some really big par 4s out here, and hopefully with the length, you get it in the fairway, and then the hole's a lot easier. If you sacrifice the distance and for accuracy on some of these long holes, you're going to come in with very long second shots.

You've got to adjust accordingly to your strategy, and that's why it's U.S. Open, USGA golf course. It's a par-70, normally played as a par-72. So some of the really long par-4s we play here this week are really par-5s. So you've got to adjust your strategy and go accordingly. There's some holes we can really be aggressive and go with the driver, even miss it in bunkers or around the green with the driver, but for the most part what I've seen, keep it in the fairway in a USGA event, you're going to be okay.

Q. In general, why have you liked USGA events over the years?

ERNIE ELS: It's just a test of the discipline that you need, your strategy, as we just talked about. We go to very different venues. We go to venues that are linksy. This week it's more parkland with different grasses. But every single time, they want to see what you're all about. The game of golf is more about misses than really great shots. Through the week is how you manage yourself, how you prepare yourself going into the event, and then mentally just staying in it as hard as you can.

It's four hard days, and that's why sometimes in practice you don't want to exhaust yourself too much. I'm getting ready for tomorrow.

Q. When you come to a course wherever it's at for the first time, how do you attack that?

ERNIE ELS: You've just got to go with your eyes open. Keep your eyes open. Yesterday I played nine holes, and I knew I was playing nine holes yesterday, so I really took a lot of time to look around, see where I could miss a shot, where I could get the ball up and down from, out of the tees, where's a safe area to play too, where can you not go, and really get those -- get your strategy really going, should I say. Which holes you can attack.

We've got three par-3s on the front nine, three really tough holes. The greens are really undulating. So just seeing

where I want to try and get my ball where I can score. That's what I'll do on the back nine today is really go and take a lot of time and really take it in and then get going.

The most important thing is keeping your body in shape, knowing that you're hitting the ball solidly. So you want to keep that going, so on the range is very important the work you put in so that you can just have your best game starting tomorrow.

Q. Going back to what you just said earlier, is there anything besides fitness and equipment for the older players doing what they're doing to stay competitive at this age? And what distance -- obviously, we know how you can get off the tee, but for DeChambeau and some of the guys to get to the next level, is there something besides fitness and equipment that goes along with this?

ERNIE ELS: I'm in that physio truck every day. 15 years ago, if you'd asked me about fitness, I would have laughed at you. Now we're a little bit older and trying to eat better and do things a little bit differently. That's definitely helped. I think just looking after yourself as a whole a little bit better, I think is key because, if you can turn, if you can make a full turn both ways, backswing and follow through, you can get the ball out there without equipment, as you say.

I'm averaging over 296 this year on the Champions Tour, and that is two yards longer than I was in my prime, back when I was in my 50s. But at 294 -- or 296, which was kind of top ten back in 2003, it's probably in the bottom third of where the guys are now. So that's where the game's gone, and that's just the way it is.

I remember when I was in my prime, some of my mentors, Nick Price and these type of guys were kind of fading out, and they were complaining exactly about the same stuff I'm complaining about right now. He was averaging a 270-something, which put him in the top 20, but in my heyday, he was 20 yards out of that league. That's where we are right now, I'm probably 20, 30 yards behind the other guys.

So that's just the way the game progresses through the years. Every generation just adds a little bit onto the game. It is what it is.

Q. Yesterday, Bernhard Langer talked about the greens here at Omaha Country Club, and he described the slope part as being comparable to Augusta National. Do you agree with that assessment?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, I do. This whole terrain here, the

whole golf course is very sloped. If you walk up to the lower tees, play down to fairways, go up to greens. A lot of greens slope from back to front, and then they've got some undulation on the side, and that's one of the things I'm trying to figure out is which hole can you really go at? Is there going to be a little bit of a back stop? Is the ball going to move away? The slope is incredible. It's a very hilly site.

I'm sure you heard the players say it's the most hilly site we've ever walked, and that's saying a lot. So you're going to have greens on a site like that, very natural greens are going to be very sloped.

Q. In a different subject, you're going through this three-week period where it's all golf, but you have to break away from it at some point. What are some of the things that you might do to relax that's non-golf during a stretch like this?

ERNIE ELS: We're going to be flying a lot. So we're going to be sitting on an airplane Sunday night. I'm flying with Darren Clarke and Alison and my wife and myself and my son. We still have a house in England, so through the Open Championship, I think the quarantine will be fine. I can stay at the house, which is really two miles from Sunningdale. It's at Wentworth.

We're going to have a lot to do there. We'll do some barbecues, do some family stuff. The summer is a great time in England. So really looking forward to that. It's going to feel like the golf is quite serious, but it's going to feel like really a family holiday in many ways.

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