

U.S. Senior Open Championship

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SentryWorld

Justin Leonard

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Please join us in welcoming Justin Leonard. Justin, you spent some time on this side of the desk. Now you're kind of back in the ring a bit. Talk about the decision to kind of jump back into golf.

JUSTIN LEONARD: Yeah, it was a decision that I really didn't make as far as where I am here today, just playing, and I'll do one event for NBC at the Ryder Cup.

Until really last fall I was still doing kind of my normal television schedule, played four times. I was eligible to play in the U.S. Senior Open last year, but I knew my game wasn't ready. I figured that would not be maybe the kindest way to kind of reinsert myself into my playing days.

Great to be here, but yeah, after playing a couple times last year, not that my results were anything to brag about, but I felt like if I could give this my full attention playing, I could have some success.

So kind of decided back in the fall that I was just going to focus on playing. It's been a fun and interesting process. I realized that my hands had gotten very soft just from typing and I don't have to hold a microphone because it's attached to my head. So redeveloping calluses. They started out as blisters, and now they're calluses.

A lot of practice, a lot of work, kind of discovering some new things and trying to apply new things I learned watching the best players in the world while kind of making some of that my own. That's been the process that I've really enjoyed. It's been fun. I've had some good moments, some moments where I've had to reflect on and go, okay, I don't want to keep making the same mistakes, those kinds of things.

THE MODERATOR: When did you arrive on site this week, and what's your experience with the golf course so far?

JUSTIN LEONARD: I got here Monday afternoon late,



played -- I walked nine holes Monday, no clubs. I played yesterday, and I'll go play nine holes today.

Golf course is in beautiful condition. It's perfect. It's challenging. Fairways are at a premium. There's some length. I feel like there's a few places where there's decisions to be made off the tees. You'll see some guys will hit drivers on certain holes, and other guys will kind of lay back.

Just a very well-rounded golf course. Enough trouble to really keep your attention for sure.

Q. It seems to be beautiful, very tough rough. How similar is this course to regular U.S. Open venues on the regular TOUR?

JUSTIN LEONARD: I would say obviously the length isn't there for the regular TOUR, but for us, 7200 yards, par 71, I believe, it's plenty long. And there is a nice mix. There's longer holes, shorter holes, a couple of par-3s, and then medium length. It's a pretty well-balanced venue.

And as far as the condition of it, yes, it certainly reminds me of a typical USGA setup that I've played, if there is such. Just that it's going to be hard. There's a premium to put the ball in the fairway, and you've got to avoid big mistakes.

Q. With your adjustment to the PGA TOUR Champions and the 54-hole setups most weeks, what does it mean to go back to 72 this week and in a major of this nature? Advantage? Disadvantage? What is your opinion on being able to play four rounds in a senior event?

JUSTIN LEONARD: Well, I think we've had a couple majors already, and if anything, there's a little bit of breathing room, I feel like, in that you can -- in three-day events you've got to have three pretty darn good days or at least two really good days.

In a four-day event I feel like you can -- there's a little more room to breathe because you know you've got 72 holes. That being said, on a very difficult golf course, I don't know how much you can ease your way into it.

There's a different cadence and everything, and because



the week is a day longer, and especially like this at a venue where I haven't seen it and very few have, I think I still try to manage kind of my energy and how much I practice and those things just knowing that it is a longer week than what we're accustomed to.

Playing a couple majors here in the last few weeks certainly kind of gotten used to that kind of cadence.

Q. Justin, you spent a number of years in television. You're watching all these great players play and you're talking about it. When did you kind of get that itch, I want to get back into the arena, kind of like a football coach who goes into TV for a few years and gets back into coaching? Is there a moment, an event that you're at where you thought, hey, I want to get back into this?

JUSTIN LEONARD: It wasn't really a moment or an event. I was about to turn 49 and I kind of decided -- look, I didn't have a plan two or three years ago that, hey, I'm going to wait till I'm 50 and then go play. I tend to kind of -- I do my best when I'm really focused on one thing.

But I was about to turn 49. We were living in Colorado. And I thought, you know what? If I am going to play, I need to start getting back into this. I say summer, but late spring, summer of '21, I started really kind of getting back into it and changing my workouts to be more golf specific and those things, and so really started then just knowing it was a possibility.

My -- now he's 16, but he was really just kind of getting into golf, and so it was fun because now we were kind of practicing and working on it together.

Really it wasn't -- and I tried to fit in some events around my TV schedule. I played four times last year. We've moved to Florida about a year ago, and that was part of the decision was, okay, if I am going to play, certainly need to be in a more conducive climate than at 8,000 feet in a ski town.

So that's been a great transition and pretty easy for our kids and everything. The nice thing is I've got the full support of my family. I'm not gone more than I was when I was doing television. It's about the same schedule. The nice thing is I can really choose my own schedule.

I'll play 18 to 20 events this year, very few back to back, where I come out and play and put all my energy into it, and then I'm home for a week or two. Do the things I need to do there and get to see plenty of Lacrosse games and some junior golf tournaments and volleyball and soccer for my girls.

So it's been nice. I wouldn't say it's been an easy transition, but it's one that I've enjoyed. And again, having the support of my family to do this really helps.

Q. The name of your son that you play golf with?

JUSTIN LEONARD: Luke.

Q. And what part of your golf game really fits this kind of golf course to be in contention on Sunday? Then the last three winners of this event have been first-time players just like you. Does that give you any sort of confidence going into the week?

JUSTIN LEONARD: I didn't know that, but I'm going to grasp on everything I can. I'm pretty good at hitting fairways, get the ball in play. I think that's going to be very important this week.

Just I'm a little bit more of a cerebral strategy guy. I'm not going to overpower anything. There's some chances guys can take and overpower a little bit, but I think there's plenty of room for a guy like me who hits it more just kind of average length to kind of grind it out on a golf course like this.

I think that's what I've done well over my career. Par is a good score around here, and I'm looking forward to that because a lot of weeks you've got to be shooting 5 or 6-under every day, and I don't think that's going to be necessary this week.

Q. Just to go back to the rough for one second, would you rather be 160 out in the middle of the fairway or 110 out in the rough? How difficult is it to control the spin and distance even with a wedge from 110 or 120?

JUSTIN LEONARD: Oh, I'd rather be 160 out of the fairway. It's -- you know, there's -- we found a few spots where we can get a lie and get a ball up near the green. We also found a few spots where, if there wasn't a marshal up there looking for the ball already for a couple minutes, I'm not sure we would have found them.

It is, it's hard to control.

Again, there are some spots, but for the most part, you're going to pay a pretty good penalty being in the rough around this place.

Q. You mentioned that there were a couple of holes where decisions were needed to come into play. Is 9 one of them, or is there another hole out there that's really maybe a head scratcher as we get ready for Thursday?

JUSTIN LEONARD: No, I think 9 -- I know they're probably going to play an up tee there a couple days. I don't think there's really a decision to make for me there. I think the 4th hole, whether to lay back of the bunker or kind of take it on, and then 13 with a bunker there in the middle of the fairway. I think you'll see guys do some different things on those two holes.

Certainly 13, I think, presents maybe the biggest kind of question of do you want to try and get over the left side where there's a little more space, keep it short of the bunker, send it up the right, and try and get it past, those kind of things.

So 13's probably the biggest decision-maker.

But 11 with the tee placement, you'll see some different clubs there.

I think 9's pretty straightforward. The longer players, when the tee's up, probably will hit 3-wood, but I think that's probably just a driver hole regardless for me.

Q. Was there anything working as a broadcaster that can assist you as a competitor that you saw?

JUSTIN LEONARD: Yeah, a lot of things. In all the rounds that I saw, I never saw a perfect one. Even the guys who were winning tournaments in contention, because that's what you see most of on the weekend. The guys that tend to stay up near the top throughout the week don't make a lot of big mistakes. They'll make some little ones. Then letting go and moving past those things, that kind of thing.

Also, just practice. I'm fortunate now in South Florida, I play at a place a lot of PGA pros play, a couple of LPGA players, and getting to watch them practice and what they work on and those things and occasionally ask a question or two, and I always tell them it's not on the record.

It's been an advantage, and it's helped me kind of think a little differently, and using a launch monitor and when and how to use it and those kinds of things.

Yeah, but from a course management standpoint, the game's changed a lot over the last five to ten years. Really so many times and all the data says to push it down there as far as you can. I think at a place like this, sometimes you've got to pick your spots, certainly when the rough's like this.

A normal week, I think, if this rough was 2 1/2 inches, which is what we play most weeks, I believe, I think you'd see some different strategy more of that.

But I think a week like this where the rough is so penal, you'll see guys tend to pull back a little bit more than you might otherwise.

So those kind of things, balancing those things, but really just mindset. Again, there's no such thing as a perfect round of golf, so don't try and be that way. I have been guilty of that certainly in the past.

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