

The Sentry

Tuesday, January 2, 2024

Kapalua, Maui, Hawaii, USA

Plantation Course at Kapalua

Mackenzie Hughes

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Mackenzie Hughes to the interview room here at The Sentry. Mackenzie is making his fourth start here on Maui. Can you talk about how special it is to be here this week?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Yeah, this one is one of our, I think the players' favorites. Definitely one of mine. It seems like a bit of a, I hate to use the word celebration, but like you've had a great year, and this is kind of where you get to start. Obviously, it feels a bit different being that the criteria for this tournament has changed. I've been here now twice with different criteria. I've been here once for the COVID year, making East Lake, and then the top 50 this year.

So, yeah, I guess it still feels really special, even though we've changed a couple things in the criteria, but, yeah, just starting here is like the best way to kick your season off. Now that this is like the true kickoff of the calendar year. It's pretty exciting.

THE MODERATOR: In an Olympics year as well as a Presidents Cup being held in your home country, can you talk about how important it is now that you're eligible for all the signature events.

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Yeah, it makes the task that much easier. Still going to require some great golf, but I guess the great golf I hopefully play will be in these big events, and then that's going to help my case towards Montreal and obviously Paris. So, those are two really big goals of mine this year, so they're just dangling there waiting for me to go get 'em. So, yeah, hopefully it's a great year.

THE MODERATOR: Perfect. Thank you. Open it up for questions.

Q. How much do you feel like you had to reshuffle your 2024 schedule?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Yeah, I would say the early part of December and after RSM I was kind of trying to lay out

what I might play in the beginning part of the year. I probably was going to start Palm Springs or Torrey Pines and kind of just go from there.

Then I got into all these events, and I sort of had to quickly start gearing up for here, and then, yeah, just kind of trying to now lay out the schedule became a lot easier because I was, like, not wondering if I was going to qualify for these events, it's like, hey, I can write these in and then build around that. So, that was really nice. Obviously, it wasn't for the circumstances I would have liked to have been here for, but we are here nonetheless, and I'm hopefully going to try and take advantage of the opportunities.

Q. What were you going to be doing this week originally?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: I just, I would have been actually right this moment I would have been probably in the Dominican Republic. I had planned a family vacation to go there from like the 27th through the 3rd. So I would have been there. Then I would have been in Charlotte after that. So, I kind of rerouted everyone in my family to come here to Maui instead of going to the Dominican. So, I think it's as nice if not nicer here, so I think it's a fair ask. So, they were all very happy to come here instead. It worked out.

Q. Was it just immediate family?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Extended family. Well, immediate -- so my family is here, and then my mom, two sisters, her husband, their kids. So it was a lot of people to kind of rearrange, but we got here. Good problem to have.

Q. Sounds expensive.

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Yeah, it was a little expensive, but I felt better about it now that I had these starts all lined up.

Q. When you, as often as you've been kicked in the gut, because you play golf for a living, what was the devastation level of the weekend at Memphis and just missing out, and at what point when Rahm went over to LIV did it start to dawn on you that this could put



you into the 50 spot?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: I think -- so, the first part of your question, yeah, Memphis hurt because, well, that was the only part of the season that I wasn't in the top 50 was the final week, the week that they had the cut off. To finish 51st, you know, it was my fault, and I didn't play very well in the summer, so it was just, yeah, it was a tough pill to swallow. I pretty much was upset for 24 hours, and then I was, when I was home I was pretty determined to try and find my way into those events, and to play great in the fall, just to work my way towards those.

Obviously, I had a pretty good fall where I did maintain my position, and was able to kind of get my way into a couple of those events. So, that was big for me. I felt like I gained a lot of positive momentum. I'm not sure I would have had that if I had finished top 50, because I may not have played as much. It might have been the best thing for me.

The second part of your question, what was that again, sorry?

Q. With all the attention on, OMG, Rahm has gone to LIV, at what point did it kick on that, hang on here?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Oh. I think the seed was first planted kind of around the RSM. I had heard some rumblings of that discussion, I guess. Not necessarily his name, but just people that were thinking about maybe going. Then it was kind of, yeah, planted in my head that if someone was to go, like just one person, that the FedExCup standings would reflect that, like they were before when guys left the previous year.

So, it started to dawn on me that there was a possibility. Obviously, being the 51st guy I just needed one guy to go, I didn't need 12 guys and a mass exodus, so I definitely thought there was a chance there, but that wasn't really on my mind until I got home after RSM, and I was home for Thanksgiving. I heard the Rahm stuff start to circulate on Twitter. I would say for that, I don't know how long it was, but it seemed like a long time those rumors were flying around for awhile, and we never really heard what was happening one way or the other.

Then he finally announced it. I knew before, well before he announced that he was going, what was going to happen if he did go. I knew that that was sort of what was going to happen, it was just a matter of how fast the TOUR could make all of that stuff, I guess, fall into place. But, I think, I mean, I'm appreciative of them, I guess, changing some of their policies, because in the past it had been, okay, if you hit a shot in competition on LIV or you resign your membership, we're going to remove you from the

FedExCup points list. But now I felt like the situation with Rahm was different, in that he went on national television and basically signed a letter of intent, if you will, and made a --

Q. With a jacket.

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Letterman jacket, made a big show of it. So, I felt like, okay, he's clearly made his intentions known, so why are we waiting around until February to make this. So, they were pretty good about that. I found out a few days later that I was going to be playing all these events.

Q. You mentioned this week feels like a celebration of sorts. Is it hard, given the comfortable confines and nice scenery, to get yourself in a tournament mindset once Thursday rolls around?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: I would say once Thursday hits everyone clicks in, but I definitely think that these first few days are, they feel a lot different than most. Because you're riding around in a cart, it just seems very -- it's very relaxed here. I think everyone's still trying to get their work in, but everyone also just seems like really happy right now to be here. So, that's nice. When you're walking around the range, everyone just seems generally pretty happy. At a lot of other TOUR events it's not always like that. Everyone has kind of got their head down and really focused on what they're doing. So, I think there's a bit more like looking around on the putting green, like, Oh, a whale just jumped over there, that's pretty cool. A lot of things to get your, kind of attention away from the golf. I think once Thursday rolls around everyone clicks in and realizes the magnitude of the tournament we're playing in.

Q. You talked on Twitter about being worried that the fans were getting lost in sort of the shuffle of professional golf. I'm wondering what inspired you to speak out on that?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: I'm of the belief that golf in, like -- well, in 2019, to me was like the peak of, like, professional golf. Since then -- I mean, we had, you know, I think we did really well through COVID. We were one of the first sports back. I think that was a highlight, for sure. It was still COVID, so how do you have a highlight through a pandemic? It was kind of tough.

2019 was, like, all about golf, you know? Our economic model was sustainable. The LIV threat came along and all of a sudden we started to double the purses, and we're asking sponsors to double their investment, and we're giving them the same product. Fans also, I think, are left wondering, like, do guys even love playing golf anymore, or

are they all just concerned about money. All these guys going to LIV have made it pretty clear that it's all about money. I mean, growing the game, but also money. So, to me, that's disappointing, because, like, I don't play -- like, in 2019 I didn't pick a schedule based on a purse. But now that I'm qualified for these events, I mean, obviously it would be silly for me not to play in these events. They are great opportunities. But, like, I just don't think it's right. I don't think that -- again, we have the same product that we had in 2019, yet we want this, like, increased investment, not just increased, but increased in a big way.

I just think that the product, I mean, while I think it's great, it's the same product. I just think fans are kind of left scratching their head thinking, like, what is going on.

They also don't know where certain guys are playing and there's spats between the LIV and the PGA TOUR, and it's not unified in any way, shape, or form. There's negotiations going on that are unclear, they have been dragged on for a long time.

The fan just wants to watch golf. I think you watch sports for an escape from other nonsense, but I think golf has brought a lot of nonsense onto its plate, and now you don't get just golf, you get a lot of other stuff going on. It's a bit of a circus.

So, I just felt compelled to kind of speak on it that, like, not everyone out here is just thinking like, Oh, like, let's make these purses three million dollars, that sounds great. No, it doesn't, because in two years the PGA TOUR will have no one sponsoring any tournaments, because no one wants to pay these prices. So, it's a fine line.

I think that also there's a lot of guys that feel entitled out here. Like, you start to see all these big amounts of money flying around and this offer and that offer and people think, Oh, well I stayed loyal, like, where's my money? And it's like, you're not entitled to play the PGA TOUR. You have the right and you have a privilege to play out here and it's an opportunity, but it's not like anyone owes you anything. No one's, you know, forcing your hand. You don't have to stay, you can go play over there if you want.

So, this whole, the-TOUR-owes-me-something attitude, I don't like either. So, kind of a long round about way of answering your question, but I, yeah, I just felt compelled to speak on it. I feel pretty strongly about it, and just wanted maybe the casual fan or a fan to realize that it's just not what everyone's thinking about, so...

Q. Is there an outcome that you are rooting for at this point?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: See, the hard part there is that there is an outcome I root for, but I don't know how we get there. I'm sure that's what the TOUR is wrestling with as well, is, how do you get to that point. So, the outcome I hope for is that, like, I don't see LIV going away any time soon. So, the outcome I hope for is that there is a way for the tours to obviously co-exist, and there's some sort of unity, and there's not a huge rift between 'em. There's like some way that there's, not a pathway, but there's just sort of a little more of a free flowing pass back and forth. Not for everybody. Not everyone on LIV is exempt to play on the PGA TOUR. So, it's not like everyone on LIV should be able to play a TOUR event whenever they want. But, you know, the TOUR obviously misses guys like Brooks Koepka, Phil, DJ, Cam Smith, like there's no doubt that the TOUR is stronger with those guys playing. So, I think that I would love to see a way for those guys to play again, but how do you justify to a guy like, like, I'm sure the Spieths, and the JTs and the Rorys and Scotties and Will Zalatorises, who were offered major amounts of money and decided not to go and stayed, and then the guys that left, and they maybe played two years of LIV, and then you make your way back to the TOUR, and it's like all things are good again? I think those are the guys you have to worry about making the most upset.

Like, if Brooks came back tomorrow, I would be, like, all right. Because I wasn't, you know, offered a huge amount of money to go play on LIV, and nor was I interested. But there were other guys that seriously entertained it and were probably told, Hey, like, stay put. Like, it's going to be fine over here. This is where you should be. Then now we're doing a deal with the PIF and it's, like, maybe those guys should have just done it. I don't know. So, I don't know how you make those guys feel as though, like, this is the right thing to do. I think deep down they would know it's best for the game they should be back over here, but how do you justify to them, like, Okay, they made 150 million, and now they're going to come back and play on your TOUR like nothing ever happened. So, I just don't know how that gets navigated. Maybe they will have to just kind of take it on the chin and just suck it up. But that's outcome I hope for, is that those guys eventually find their way back here, and play consistently out here, and we find a way to coexist as LIV and PGA TOUR and it goes, kind of that bitterness and that rivalry and that divisiveness in golf goes away, and it becomes about who is playing the best golf, who is playing the best golf in the biggest tournaments, and you start talking about major moments in golf, not just major moments in the headlines or on Fox News when Jon Rahm says he's going to LIV Golf. I'm just tired of talking about that stuff. So, that's the outcome I hope we get to some day, but who knows when.

Q. Do you get the sense that other people feel this

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way, that you're kind of speaking out for a bunch of guys that you spend time with on TOUR, or is this something you guys talk about a lot, or is this just Mackenzie?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: I mean, I would like to think that there are guys that would think the way I do, certainly, but I'm sure there are guys that are in a very opposite camp to me. Guys that would say, Those guys are gone, never let 'em back ever. But that doesn't seem realistic or in the best interests of the game. To me, as much as I love my position here on the PGA TOUR, I wouldn't feel threatened by those guys coming back. I would feel like this TOUR would just become stronger if we had the best players in the world playing here. But, yes, I would say, like, I talk about it a little bit with guys, but it's not something that, like, if I'm at dinner, we're not talking about, like, you know, where the game's at and where it needs to go from here. I certainly think a lot of guys do feel like the way I do. But, like I said, I know there are guys that are strongly opposed to what I would be saying and say, screw those guys, you know?

So, again, how do you make everyone happy? You can't. The way forward I hope is smoother, but I know it will be messy before it gets smooth again.

Q. You mentioned your worry for the fans throughout this process. Has this, the past two years, has it done anything to make you question how you feel about the game at all? I know this is your profession and it's fans' passion, but what type of effect has it had on just your kind of love for what you do?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Are you speaking more to like the LIV stuff or like just like?

Q. Just especially just the last year, that, all this stuff's kind of outside the confines of competition.

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Yeah, I think for a large part of this summer it kind of took away a lot of my focus from just the game itself. It seemed like every day that you woke up there was some news, or some random headline, or Patrick Cantlay's trying to take over the TOUR, you know, it's like every day you're like, what is going on. It's like living in like fantasy land. It's just every day something was new, it was new headline, new story.

There was never just, like, about the golf. Wyndham Clark wins the U.S. Open and has this incredible performance, but that was the week that Jay had taken his leave, and there was lots of talk about Patrick Cantlay, and these different rumors. There was just like side noise, and it was just, like -- that's all it was, was just noise. Just, yeah, it

takes a way from the purity of the competition of just the game and those major moments.

So, I don't know if it took away any of my joy, but it definitely took away a lot of my focus. I think in the last few months I've really taken more of an approach of, like, those guys are on it, those board members are going to handle it the best way they know how, and I'm going to trust that those guys have the best interests of the TOUR at heart. I'm just going to go play golf and I'm going to go play where they tell me to play and work on my own game. If that stuff gets resolved, great. Hopefully, it's somewhat quickly. But worrying about it day-to-day does me no good, because I have no say. They haven't asked me to go to one meeting yet. I don't think I'm going to any meetings coming up. So, talking about it, thinking about it day after day is just not going to help me or get me anywhere. So, it's definitely been nicer the last few months to kind of just get back into golf.

Q. Have you ever been on the PAC?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: I'm on the PAC.

Q. Now?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Currently.

Q. Do you feel like the voice is heard?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: I feel like they're trying. It's been a very weird year to be on the PAC. I've heard this from other guys that have been on the PAC before, that with the way the TOUR moved this year, and the way it reacted to certain different threats, they had to move so quick that they almost, I don't think they could ever fully get everyone's, sort of, opinion or talk about these things in meetings thoroughly enough where everyone felt like they were getting their chance to say things, because they had to move quickly, and they had to make these decisions quickly, because they, you know, were being threatened by LIV. I think that they felt that urgency to react and to make those moves.

I think there were a lot of times that we sat in those meetings thinking that we were having good, meaningful discussions, and then a month later something would happen and you would be like, Wait, we didn't even really decide on this yet, and we're just, the TOUR is just going ahead. Like, we're just going to go ahead and do it anyways, even though we had no real unanimous sort of buy-in to an idea.

Like, I know the elevated event idea, for an example, limited fields, was in a topic of discussion at the Farmers

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last January. We discussed it and, of all the guys on the PAC, I mean, it was a 50/50 split, probably. I mean, guys were all over on their opinions on it. The TOUR was pretty steadfast in that in saying that they felt their data and their research backed up the fact that these were going to be better events, better products for the TOUR to sell going forward, but there was just not buy-in across the board for guys in that meeting.

Then we got to Bay Hill, and I remember it was, like, I think it was a Tuesday or Wednesday at Bay Hill, and it came out that, oh, we have eight new signature events for 2024, and they're going to be limited field events with no cut. Everyone on the PAC was like, Wait, what? We talked about this a month and a half ago, and there was no discussion or no real final decision on that. Then, all of a sudden, out of the blue, we just have this final outcome.

So, I know I expressed my frustration at the time, and talked to the TOUR about that, I'm like, Well, why am I on the PAC if I'm not going to be a part of any of these decisions in the first place. Like, I'm not going to just spend two hours of my time in San Diego at the Farmers in a meeting if it's for nothing. If I'm not being heard, then I'm just not going to be -- I'm not going to speak.

So, it's gotten better. But these PIF negotiations, I mean, I have no idea. I have no idea what's going on. I have no idea what they're trying to accomplish. Maybe it's not my job to know that.

Q. Should you know?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: I'm told that, you know, it can't happen that way. I'm told that the negotiations are just going to be slowed down by that. Like, if the TOUR members know, obviously it's more than the TOUR members now, because people talk. I would like to know. I would like to know what the specifics of, like, what is the final outcome that they're after. I don't know what that is. I don't know what they want from the PIF. I don't know what they want in regards to how does LIV coexist after this deal gets done. What do they want LIV to be. I don't know what Jay wants for those players. Does Jay want Brooks back, does Jay not? PGA TOUR Enterprises is a for-profit business. So, if I'm a for-profit business, I want the best product, and the best product is now including Brooks, Cam Smith, Bryson, all those guys help create the best product. So, now is that part of the goal? I don't know. So I just -- I don't know.

Q. Do you feel as involved or even influential, and players like you, who were left out of the Delaware meeting? Did that affect your outlook on things?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: I think that definitely told me whose opinion mattered. I mean, there was 70 PGA TOUR players there and they thought only 25 or 30 of them were good enough for that meeting? Bit of a slap in the face. You got 70 of the best players on the PGA TOUR that season, and you're going to tell me I can't sit in that meeting and at least listen? You can just put me in the back and say, Hey, Mac, don't speak, but you can at least listen to what we're saying. It was like this closed doors meeting for the who's who of the TOUR.

I'm not saying that you should make a decision based on what I think, but it would be nice to even just to put your two cents in or to hear what's going on, to be involved, to feel like you're part of it. Because it's not -- I'm not going to say -- I'm not a star of the PGA TOUR, but I'm not a slump either. I don't have like a, you know, but anyways, it's kind of the way it is right now. I get it, to an extent. Like, I get the fact that you have to listen to your top guys right now in a threat like this, where you feel like, Hey, this guy might leave if we don't listen to what he's saying. But they don't care if Mackenzie Hughes probably -- like, if I'm not playing the PGA TOUR tomorrow, it doesn't matter to the PGA TOUR probably -- not -- I shouldn't say that, but like, you know what I mean? Like, if Scottie Scheffler went, obviously it's a bigger impact than if I go. So, it's like, they're listening to those guys because of where we are, right, and they're making accommodations and doing things based on what these guys want. I get it, but -- I don't love it, but I get it.

Q. If you got to pick one place to be this year, Paris or Montreal, what's more meaningful to you?

MACKENZIE HUGHES: Montreal.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much, Mackenzie.

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