

Valspar Championship

Wednesday, April 28, 2021

Palm Harbor, Florida, USA

Innisbrook Resort (Copperhead)

Paul Casey

Press Conference

JOHN BUSH: We would like to welcome Paul Casey into the interview room here at the Valspar Championship. Our two-time champion, 2018 and 2019 and our defending champion. It probably feels like forever ago since you won here, but if we can get your comments on being back finally.

PAUL CASEY: It does feel like forever. Technically does that mean I remained it last year? I didn't lose it, did I?

JOHN BUSH: That's correct, you did not lose it. You are our defending champion.

PAUL CASEY: Yeah, it feels like an extraordinary amount of time. Last year was surreal. I really -- I was disappointed obviously not to be here, but I felt so bad for Tracy West, the Copperheads, Valspar, being the first event to be canceled right after THE PLAYERS.

You know, she probably took the hardest hit of anybody, having done maximum preparation, ready to go, and then have sort of the rug pulled out from under her. It was a weird thing.

I'm excited to be finally back, and I'm sure everybody else is, too. This has always been a great event. It's one that obviously I've won back to back, and I'm looking for a third, and I feel like my game is good.

But this is really one of the most -- for me one of the best tournaments on TOUR. It's a great golf course, great people. Everything about it. It's exciting that we're finally here. I'm going for a three-peat. I've never had a three-peat as a professional, and I feel like the pressure is not on me. We've got Justin Thomas and guys like that playing this week, and the focus is going to be on them, so I feel like I'm kind of in a sweet spot and raring to go.

JOHN BUSH: I know not the finish you wanted at the Heritage, but you just mentioned that the state of your game is good, so just elaborate a little bit on that for us, please.



PAUL CASEY: Yeah, the year has been pretty good. I won in Dubai on the European Tour. I had a bunch of top 10s to start the 2021 calendar year. Got off well on the PGA TOUR.

Hilton Head, I missed the cut at Hilton Head, but if you look at my results, I have never played that golf course well for whatever reason. I keep going back every few years to try and change that record, but it is what it is. There's a lot of things I still did very well that week, and if anything it's a nice sort of reset to sort of look at the game, see what I need to work on.

I feel very happy with the game. So you know, there's nothing I'm worried about. We're trying to peak every single week. This week is very important for me.

I've got a lot of great golf left ahead of me, great championships I want to try and win, so I feel good. I'm still incredibly motivated, still working as hard as I was right now, as I was at the beginning of the year, so yeah, ignore the blip a couple of weeks ago. It is what it is.

Q. What is it about your game that suits this course or vice versa? Why do you play so well here?

PAUL CASEY: I think, or I feel, that is -- look, you always have got to do a lot of things well, drive it well, chip and putt well to win tournaments, et cetera, et cetera, but there's a premium here on sort of medium to long irons into greens. This isn't the longest golf course. Quite a few guys hit irons and you're forced to hit irons off some of the tees. Guys hit irons off things like 2 and 3. But the par-3s are long and those approaches into -- the second shots into a lot of those par-4s are requiring 175 to 200 plus shots in, and I've always been very, very good in that area. A lot of spin control, the trajectory of those shots that I hit.

Without question -- when I say ball striker's course, it can mean anything, it can drive driving, it can mean wedges, but in this particular instance, this golf course is kind of a 175 to 200 plus golf course. That's where the premium is, and that's what I do well.

Q. I think there's been eight instances of a player

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winning three times in a row on the PGA TOUR --

PAUL CASEY: Tiger, Tiger, Tiger?

Q. I think Tiger has got six of the eight. Steve Stricker has got one. I can't think off the top of my head who the other one is. What would it mean to do that, to win the same event three times in a row?

PAUL CASEY: I haven't thought about it. It would just be extremely cool, flat out. I think even more so with the gap, as well, with the one year sort of hiatus. Yeah, it would just be very cool. I have done it but in amateur golf, three Pac-10s, now Pac-12s, but three Pac-10s. It's elite company. There's a lot of -- I've been in the game long enough, but there's numerous things that I still want to win and wish I had won, et cetera, et cetera, so just to add something to the fabric of everything would be very, very cool.

I'll tell you on Sunday how it feels.

Q. I had a quick question about the player impact program. Do you think you are among the top 10, and if not, what will it take for you to get there? And are you envious of those who are?

PAUL CASEY: That's a lot of questions.

Q. That's one question, it's just a lot of words.

PAUL CASEY: I don't spend too much time thinking whether I'm in that top 10 or not. I don't think I am.

What would it take? Playing great golf. I think it would take me winning probably a couple of times this year to garner the level of media attention, social media hits, column inches, that kind of stuff, to get me into that top 10.

Am I envious? Worry about playing good golf and getting my kids to football practice on time. It's not going to change my life. So I don't know. I'm not sure I've answered that for you.

Q. Are you better at playing golf or getting your kids to practice on time?

PAUL CASEY: Ooh, yeah, I've never missed a tee time, but I'll tell you what, I'm not very good at turning up on time when taking them to practice and stuff like that. It is what it is.

Q. Is there much difference turf-wise or anything else from going mid-March to the end of April, early May?

PAUL CASEY: Yeah, I'm still learning a little bit this week. Johnny was late arriving. That's a whole long story which we might get into this week. Depends if he wants to talk about it, but he's all good and everything. No, he doesn't have COVID.

I have yet to see the back nine, so look, it's a little later -- I think it's a little softer. What does that mean? I actually think that means it's probably a little easier. It's a little bit more receptive than it used to be, or usually is, just based on the timings. There's got to be a little bit more water on the golf course. It should just affect scores just slightly, and the fact that it may be just slightly easier, maybe three, four, five shots easier.

Q. I'm curious where you stand on the vaccine policy the TOUR has put in place and the ability to forego testing down the road here once people are vaccinated? Are you good with what they're doing here or is there another way, and what do you sense is the vibe among your peers?

PAUL CASEY: It's interesting, I just walked through a room a minute ago where Phil Marburger was talking to a bunch of players about the vaccine. I think microchips might have been mentioned in that conversation, I'm not sure.

I have been vaccinated, for the record. It hasn't been 14 days since my second shot, so this week was -- I still had to be tested. But in another few days then I will be out of that testing requirement and able to just get my lanyard and then cruise on to the property.

Look, I was happy to plow on and get the vaccine. In fact my wife volunteered her time in Arizona so she could get it early, or as early as possible, and Arizona was quite speedy in opening up the vaccine, Governor Ducey, to get it to as many people as possible, so hence I noticed like the UK have just opened it up to 44 and older. I'm 43, so if I was in the UK right now I wouldn't even have the opportunity to get it.

I'm happy with it. I'm somebody who's -- I believe in vaccines, although I've still got my nice Porsche mask I wear, as well. As much as I love them, I will be happy the day that disappears, as well.

What's my answer to this? I'm sure there's costs involved with this. I'd like to know how much the PGA TOUR has spent on their whole COVID program. I'm sure the costs are not small. How much does it cost to have a lab out every single week? But then you've got to weigh that off with keeping everybody safe, and I don't know that straight off, and that's not my pay grade, so I can't really answer

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that for you. All I can tell you is -- yeah, I don't know. I know what I feel and I don't know what the general consensus is on the TOUR in terms of guys wanting to get vaccinated, guys who don't, conspiracy theories. I don't know. All I know is that I think like a lot of people out there like the general public, we're kind of getting to the point, we just want to crack on with things and get back to normal.

Q. We just had four players this week test positive, all who were in New Orleans last week. It's still a thing, obviously. But if they had been fully vaccinated, obviously there's been timing issues with this, the schedule, getting eligible, but in theory they wouldn't have to be tested. There's this evidence to suggest they won't even transmit it. Isn't that the way forward not only for you guys but for everybody?

PAUL CASEY: I think so. I mean, how else are you going to get out of a pandemic? Either you need everybody to have had it -- which again, my understanding, what I read at the beginning, and you don't know what's right or wrong, but my reading at the beginning was we can't -- we're not going to get rid of this thing straight away. It was, let's mask up, let's distance so that they won't overwhelm our health services. But we have no way of killing this thing.

You know, when like Shackelford is writing this morning and almost calling out those guys who have had COVID, I think that's out of order. You know, a lot of guys still don't know -- guys who have had it and I've had friends who have had it, I've not had it but guys who have had it who are my friends, they don't know how they got it, genuinely don't know how they got it and have been adhering to protocols, so I'm disappointed that Geoff would do that.

Touch wood they didn't pass it on to anybody else and didn't affect anybody else, and it seems like we've not had anybody on TOUR who's been seriously adversely affected. I know there's a couple of media personnel, people in the media who have dealt with it badly or have had adverse effect, but yeah, look, I would try to preach as much as I can. I don't want to get up on a soapbox and kind of scream it, but we all want to get through this, and how else are we going to get through it unless everybody has got antibodies or we get vaccinated.

I'm still worried about international travel coming up. I've got to go play Porsche in a few weeks and then the Open Championship, and I want to go on holiday with my mates. I usually go to Italy and that's not going to happen again for another year. So I'm sick of it, and I'm willing to do the things necessary to get through it.

Q. What do you remember from -- you mentioned three-peating at the Pac-12s. What was that week like?

What was that experience like, the pressure?

PAUL CASEY: I'm gutted first of all because Arizona just won the Pac-12s yesterday and beat my Arizona State, which is not cool.

What do I remember? Golly, I just walked past Joel Kribel yesterday and I beat Joel Kribel in one of those at the Broadmoor and Joel Kribel was leading by eight going into the final round and he shot 70, and I shot 60 and beat him by two, and I don't think he's ever forgiven me, so I just saw Joel Kribel yesterday.

I'd never done anything like -- I'd won back-to-back English Amateur titles, but I'd never won anything three in a row. There was talk about it back then, having won one and then won the second one and then talking about the third.

I remember a little bit like now, I wasn't really that nervous. There was a level of expectation, but it was overwhelmed by actually I felt like there was no pressure because nobody is expecting me to do it, which is a little bit the same case this week.

You know, I had fewer guys to beat back then than I do on the PGA TOUR. And then when I did pull it off, it was just the coolest feeling ever because it always is when you play college golf and you've got your teammates, and Pac-10s back then was six guys playing counting five, I think, so we had a bigger number of guys on the team. It was good stuff.

It's funny how you -- those college memories, and we've got a Walker Cup coming up in like a week's time, those amateur days you actually think -- you can't wait to get through it and turn pro and get out here and you kind of think it's not that important, but the amateur stuff is so important you realize once you get out on TOUR.

I hope I've got another one of those cool memories.

Q. Which of the three in a row that you won did you shoot the 60 to beat Kribel?

PAUL CASEY: I've got to look that up. Can you guys look that up? Somebody is going to look that up. That's terrible isn't it because one of them was ASU -- no, regionals were ASU. It's been too long. It's been like 20 something years.

Q. What's your fondest memory from each of your two wins here at Valspar?

PAUL CASEY: I think just -- I honestly think the tap-in in 2019 from literally a few inches -- 2018 obviously there was Tiger and there was Patrick Reed and stuff like that, but

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because I'd finished 45 minutes, an hour before the leaders, it wasn't -- it was exciting for me, but it didn't have that climax to it.

2019, playing with DJ, world No. 1, I think I might have been one ahead teeing off -- second of three was the 60 at Broadmoor?

So 2019 with DJ, everybody favored him, but I was incredibly relaxed and confident. I played great golf.

It was the poor drive on 18 up in the right into the face of the bunker, the great 9-iron out of it and a treacherous 15-, 16-, 17-foot putt which I could have putted off the green and I didn't, that was the most satisfying feeling, halfway through knowing that ball was the perfect weight, and it didn't drop in, which didn't matter.

I've actually rarely had a nice little tap-in to win a tournament by one in all my victories around the world. So that was -- yeah, my other two victories on the PGA TOUR were not that way. It was the playoff in Houston and then obviously the Valspar the year before that. That's just a cool feeling.

Q. This course you say suits you, obviously suits you really well. Should this course suit Dustin Johnson really well?

PAUL CASEY: Yeah. Yes. He does everything brilliantly. But as I said to Phil Casey -- I've said this is a ball striker's golf course, but it's a long -- it's a medium to long iron ball striker's golf course. There's no question Dustin can blast it over some of the bunkers down here. There's a bunker on 1 that he can clear, there's a bunker on 5 that he can clear. But then there's holes which are incredibly narrow like 11. It's one of the narrowest tee shots on TOUR, and I doubt there will be many people hit the fairway four times in a row. To be honest you hit the fairway there 50 percent of the time you're doing pretty well.

And Dustin might do that, but there's a chance that he won't, four days in a row, but he's got great iron play and long iron play. That's why he's going to do well.

Look, he was in the final group with me in 2019, so he's got all the assets. I think he's been, without question, the best player in the world for two, three years. When he's on song -- I always thought Rory in full flow is an amazing thing to watch, but Dustin has been so dialed in with his golf game that -- yeah, what golf course doesn't suit Dustin Johnson?

Q. Back to the player impact program, I wonder what your thoughts are. It's been a little bit of a mixed

reaction because some people say the players who are the most highly compensated will benefit the most, but others say, well, they deserve it because these are the guys that are driving most of the fan interest and sponsorship interest. What are your thoughts on that?

PAUL CASEY: I feel for No. 11 and No. 12 and No. 13. Everybody -- you guys know it, you want me to say something. Everybody brings value, plain and simple. That value is varied, but everybody brings value.

Is this the best way of compensating guys? I don't know. Yeah, I don't know.

I feel like, look, we're always trying to put -- the TOUR's job is to -- the TOUR's job of lots of things, but one of those things is to build the purses and obviously the amount of money that we play for, that's one of the things they do. That's the commissioner's kind of -- that's why he's there, amongst other things.

How to distribute those riches? Yeah, it's probably not the way I would have played it. I'm not sure what else to say.

Q. Any suggestions how you might think you might have played it?

PAUL CASEY: Yeah, I've got a lot of ideas, but that wasn't it. Yeah, and I sit on the PAC, so I hear all these ideas and get to discuss them and vote on them and move them up to the next level where they get eventually decided on.

What would I have done? There's a lot of ideas that I would have probably implemented. I'm not going to say them here because that's unfair.

Q. Obviously you have special memories here and that's no secret, but coming back to Innisbrook, you just mentioned obviously the impact it had on Tracy West last year and everything that she went through, everything that everyone around the course went through last year. What were kind of the thoughts and emotions getting back here this week and just being back here for the first time since your last championship here?

PAUL CASEY: I can see the excitement in everybody. It kind of brings home how hard everybody works on every aspect of what goes into a tournament and how much that would have hurt last year when they got the news that it wasn't going to happen. Look, a lot of people lost. It would have cost a lot of money to pull the plug. The most significant impact is obviously charities locally and within the state. That's who suffers the most.

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You can see it in kind of people's faces and eyes and Tracy and the team and the interns who were working and the Copperheads. There's this excitement but also kind of a sense of relief to kind of finally have their championship. As players I think most guys, we're kind of back in the hamster wheel. We're kind of going again. Sometimes tournaments sort of just blend into one another and you're out there trying to do your thing. A lot of guys are focusing on their golf game or trying to win or trying to play well. I think I've seen this one a little bit more because I've been involved with it through the years, media days and talking to Tracy a lot. I kind of see behind the curtain a little bit this week, and I can see that relief and excitement. There's a whole bunch of emotions that are going on, which kind of just adds the fuel to sort of my fire to play well for them this week and try and do three in a row.

Q. I know you were just talking about how well Dustin Johnson is playing. I was curious how does this feel compared to years past for you? I know it's going to be competitive this year but I wasn't sure where it stands with you.

PAUL CASEY: To be honest I can't remember the quality of fields in 2018 and '19. I continued not to look -- I don't get out the list and look down there and see who's playing. Look, as soon as you see like Dustin and J.T. and guys like that, you know it's going to be tough. But then it's been -- Tiger was here in '18, Dustin was here in '19. It's always been tough.

You know, I try and take care of myself. And to be honest, that's what you want as a player. You want to have as good a field as you possibly can and go up against those guys. You know, when it's all said and done, the times you do win and you've been playing against those guys and the world No. 1 was in the field or when I won Houston I think we had eight of the top 10 of the world were there that week, that's pretty cool to be able to say that. So I want the field and you guys want the field to be as good as it can be. I want the field to be as good as it can be. It's more World Ranking points for me if I play well and that prestige or cache of playing the best guys.

JOHN BUSH: Paul, thank you for your time and best of luck as you go for win No. 3 here at the Valspar.

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